First Edition

FOR SHMUEL, THE TEACHER, WHO KEPT ASKING, "WHY?"

contents

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Veda was sick that day. She woke up at seven, as always, but her joints ached, and even a cup of hot tea did not ease the queasy feeling. She waited till almost eight, so as not to wake anyone, then wrapped herself from collarbone to bony ankles in an ancient blanket bathrobe and made a labored descent to the telephone in the hall. She felt her way along the windowless stair well, feverishly angry at the landlady's refusal to light the landing during the day.

Ordinarily Veda was inclined to be, as she put it herself, "tolerant to a fault," so the poisonous black hatred for Mrs. Kovan shocked her and confirmed her judgment in staying home that day. She called the Mitchell home, and the Missus answered right away.

Mrs. Mitchell was sincere in her sympathy. Her voice sounded sleepy and warm, and Veda could hear one of the kids yelling from another room. It made her f eel bad about staying out.

"Now don't you touch the washin', Missus," she said plaintively. "I kin manage that fine tomorrer."

"Don't be silly, Veda. You take care of yourself, and don't worry about anything. And don't suffocate yourself in that room of yours, hear me?"

Veda hung up and climbed back to her room, smiling in spite of the dark landings and the ache in her joints. Missus Mitchell was

\d fine woman, but she had a lot of foolish notions. Veda inspected the windows and weather stripping in her room, and stuffed an old stocking in the only crack she could find.

She brewed more tea in the curtained kitchenette and pulled the extra comforter over her bed. Then she checked the bolt on the door. She never could get to sleep in a public rooming house with-out making sure her door was locked shut.

Sealed off from the world, she took two pills from an old green bottle and pulled another stocking—a woolen one—over her head, to cover her ears. Finally she

climbed in under the double com-forter to sweat out the poisons. She had no way of knowing she had just saved a life.

ONE

Gladys Mitchell left the phone, and could not repress a small sigh. In the dining room Ginny was clamoring for break-fast. Upstairs Jon was loudly demanding some clean socks. Veda, she reflected, was a good worker and a fine person; but she did have her ailments, and there was no way out of it.

"Barbie," Gladys called over the noise, "see what Ginny wants, will you?" She passed the hall mirror and frowned into it; there ought to be some way to turn the thing off in the morning. She called up to Jon and told him where to find the socks, then listened

to his footsteps as he followed her instructions. Ginny had stopped yelling, but that was not necessarily good. Gladys walked swiftly into the dining room and found the five-year-old contentedly stuff-ing herself with hot oatmeal.

Barbara came through the swinging door from the kitchen. She set down her own oatmeal and gave Gladys a cup of steaming cof-fee. "Everything was ready on the stove, so I just dished it out." She was defiant about it. At fifteen, she knew she ought to hate housework.

Touched, Gladys squeezed her daughter's arm and sipped grate-fully from the hot cup. She thought of Veda, alone in the dark little boardinghouse room, and she looked from her two daughters to Tom's picture on the lowboy—a freckle-faced boy grinning out of an open-necked khaki shirt, his R.O.T.C. cap pushed back on his head, the world in his hands. He had sent it home from school two months before, proud testimonial to his homemade photo enlarger. Her eyes wandered on to the window and the big maple tree outside. Then Jon came in and dropped a kiss on the top of her head before he crossed to the other end of the table.

He surveyed the uneven edges of his grapefruit and asked with the first mouthful, "Veda out again?" He picked up his paper. "Maybe you ought to get someone else, Glad?"

He hid his smile behind the raised newspaper as three feminine voices answered immediately and firmly. He knew how they felt about Veda.

"I ought to do the wash," Gladys was thinking out loud, "but there's that luncheon today . . ."

"Oh, Mother! Isn't the laundry done yet? I've got to have those things for tonight."

Gladys surveyed her older daughter absently. "What's to-night?"

"The class! I don't see how you can forget it every time. And I gave you the jackets a week ago . . ."

"You gave them to me Monday night," Gladys pointed out. "We only do laundry once a week around here, you know."

"1 can iron 'em myself when I get back from school," Barbie pleaded, "but they've got to be starched and everything—they have to be washed this morning, Mom."

She still calls me "Mom" when she wants something, Gladys noted with amused satisfaction. "Mother" had come into use some months back as part of Barbara's

campaign to convince the whole family, and primarily herself, that she was now fully mature.

"Are we taking in wash now?" Jon looked up from his paper.

"Oh, Daddy, I told you all about it. It's the white jackets for the baby sitters, and I got them at a sale, and they were all dirty. I'd never have got the kids to use them if they weren't so cheap."

"I don't know which is worse," Jon grumbled contentedly. "First it was Tom trying to blow the house up with a basement lab, and now you've got us running rings around a batch of baby sitters. Who started that club anyhow? And why in the name of all that's holy do baby sitters need white jackets?"

"I did," Barbie said defiantly. "And I already collected the money for the jackets, so I don't see what good it does to argue about that. I've just got to have them, that's all."

"Well, I ought to do the laundry anyhow. I think I can manage if you drive them to school. . . ." Gladys looked inquiringly at her husband. "You could take the car right into town. Barbie'll have to come straight home from school anyhow, so she could bring tinny home on the bus."

"Okay." Jon nodded and went back to his paper. The headlines jumped at him, bearing threats of war and disaster; in the shaded" room the warnings were ludicrous. He half heard Ginny babbling something about a loose tooth, and Barbara assuring her that she would have to wait at least another year. The news the paper spoke of existed in another world, not in his home. Gladys never even read the front page; maybe she had the right idea. He gulped his coffee and called to the girls to hurry up if they were going with him.

"Mommy . . . Mommy, I can't find Pallo." Ginny stood in the center of the living room, fighting back tears, and waiting, appar

ently, for the favorite horse to detach itself from the surroundings and walk up to her.

Gladys rescued the battered blue plush pony from behind the armchair. "If you'd ever remember where you put things--any of you!"

She pressed the toy into her daughter's arms, wiped away a lonely tear track, kissed the dry cheek, and propelled the child gently toward the door.

Jon's hat and brief case waited, as always, on the hall table, but she forestalled the inevitable question and held them ready for him as he strode through the dining room, shrugging into his jacket and straightening his tie.

"Busybody!" He grinned at her, planting a quick kiss to stop her retort. By the time she caught her breath and opened her mouth he was out the front door, racing Ginny to the gate. Barbara, sedate with a new ladylike pace she had read about in a magazine the week before, trailed after them. Gladys watched from the open window, torn by her older daughter's desperate reaching for ma-turity, and warmed again with tenderness as Jon slowed to let Ginny reach the car first.

"I won, Daddy—I'm the leader, I won, I won!" Then the car door slammed to shut out their voices.

She ought to get the laundry started, first thing, if she was going to make that luncheon. The bedrooms could wait, but, surveying the damage wreaked by the family tornado on its way out, she decided she'd have to tidy up downstairs first.

In the living room she made do with a swift straightening up: a pile of things to be taken upstairs later and put away—Ginny's toys . . . Jon's necktie, pulled off last night . . . Barbie's "Sit-Kit," designed to take a baby sitter through any emergency, small or large, just finished last night and brought down for display, and of course never put away again. The dust rag and broom took care of the more conspicuous spots; she could vacuum later, or if she missed it altogether today it wouldn't matter so much. The room looked clean, whether it really was or not. The dining room waslittered with the breakfast dishes, last night's newspapers, some of Barbie's schoolbooks. The girl was getting more careless every day. She was so busy telling other people how to take care of other people's babies and get along in other people's houses that she didn't even have time to pick up after herself any more. That would have to stop. It had seemed like a good thing when Barbara first organized the baby sitters' club, but even a good thing could be carried too far.

Gladys piled things up and put them away—dirty dishes in the kitchen, pencils and papers in the desk drawer; the knitting she was trying—for the fourth time—to learn, she stuffed regretfully into the sideboard. There wouldn't be any time for that today.

Washing up the breakfast dishes, she opened the casement win-dow over the sink. She could never look out this way, across the clean green sweep of the broad back yards, hers and her neighbor's, without a sharp contrasting memory of crowded dim-lit fiats and furnished rooms in the city. There had been a time when Tom and Barbie were young, and before they were born, when Jon was not "Mitchell Associates, Consultants in Civil Engineering," but a junior partner in a small struggling firm; when every penny that wasn't spent for necessities went into clean shirts and ties for Jon, or into the bank, to build the dreams that had since come true . . . this house among them. Now, looking up over the breakfast dishes, she could see out across the lawns, where the bread wagon was working its way along between the double row of houses. The un-named road was too pretty, with its white gravel set against green lawns, to be called an alley. She could see the Grahams' three-year-old boy playing across the way, digging a hole smack in the middle of the early garden his father had been planting. How was Annie Graham going to explain *that* one tonight? And if she kept on ex-plaining things away to Tod, Sr., what was going to become of the child anyway?

Impatiently she cut off the train of thought and moved her eyes past the play pen in the next yard, letting them linger on the baby buggy out back of the Turners'. Peggy had finally had the baby she

wanted; after three years of trying, and four solid months flat on her back, she'd done it. Now with little Meg already six weeks old, Peggy wasn't out of bed yet, and so far there was no sign that she would be. But with Jim back from the most recent of his "business trips," things should be easier for Peggy. . . .

Annoyed at herself again, Gladys bent sternly over the dishes; other people's troubles were easy to think about, she told herself, when you had none of your own. Everything's almost too good. That was superstitious and silly, she knew, but she couldn't help it. How long could things go on, getting better all the time?

Scouring the last pot, she thought she heard her name called. Across the yard her next-door neighbor, Edie Crowell, was clipping the hedge against the budding of the

first spring leaves, a tall grace-ful figure in tailored slacks, floppy hat, and worn gardening gloves, perfectly in place in the well-planned flower garden back of the big white colonial house.

"Good morning," Edie called across. Her polished voice carried clearly across the grass and arrived pleasant and well modulated, as if she were carrying on a tea-table conversation. By comparison, Gladys' own hearty hail always sounded to her like a fishwife's cry. But she couldn't go out; she wasn't dressed yet. She waved a reply to the greeting and Edie promptly left her hedge and started over.

Groaning inwardly and apologizing out loud for the wrapper she still wore, Gladys opened the kitchen door and stood talking to her neighbor on the back porch.

"I was just wondering," Edie explained, "if you'd mind terribly going to the luncheon alone. I'll be there of course, but Phil didn't get back last night, and I have to go to the bank this morning. I could come back, of course, but . . . well, the bank is so close to the Cortlands' . . . of course if you can get away early enough you could come along with me . . ."

Gladys explained rapidly about Veda and the laundry. It was going to be hard to get ready on time, let alone early.

Edie listened sympathetically, but of course she couldn't reallyunderstand. "You won't be late, will you? I've *reserved a* place for you."

Gladys was stung by the implied rebuke. She had an errant impulse to leave the laundry after all. The luncheon was something she'd been looking forward to for days—actually for months, but the invitation had not been forthcoming until two weeks ago. The luncheon was a monthly affair held at a different woman's home every time, and the circle was limited. It was the first chance she had had to meet any of the Crowells' friends, and if she were late today it might be the last.

But she couldn't let Barbie down. And Ginny really needed some clean socks. And Jon's field trip—was it tomorrow or Wednesday? He didn't have any clean khakis. If it was tomorrow, then they had to be done today. If she had to do that much she might just as well do all of it. Defiantly she thought that she had done more than that in a day's work before—with two small babies on her hands and no washing machine.

Just a shade too sweetly she promised Edie that she'd be on time, and dashed off to answer the ringing of the telephone. Somebody wanted to speak to Miss Barbara Mitchell. Gladys took the woman's name and telephone number, jotted them down, and ex-plained that the sitting service's hours were before eight-thirty and after three-thirty. Miss Mitchell, she said, would call back.

She finished up in the kitchen without any more dawdling and started downstairs. Of course this had to be the morning that she would get a splinter groping along the rough board for the cellar light. The switch was just too far out of reach, and the stairs too precarious to manage in the dark. Jon had promised a hundred times to fix the switch—but now she had to take time out to remove the splinter and patch up her finger.

By the time she got down to the laundry she was saving seconds. She sorted things out swiftly, stuffed the first washing of white things into the machine, and let it run while she went back upstairs to tear through the bedrooms, whirling sheets, blankets, duster, and broom in a tornado of determined energy. Still, when she

passed

through the kitchen again on her way back downstairs, the toy clock on the wall told her it was after ten-thirty. She pulled towels and underwear out of the machine, and filled it again with light-colored wash clothes, compromising with conscience by deciding to leave the flatwork for Veda to do when she got a chance. But by the time the first load was in the drier she realized there just weren't enough corners to cut. She couldn't bathe, dress, and get to the other side of town by twelve-thirty. She shouldn't have tried to do it all; she could have done Barbie's things, and Jon's, and let the rest go. But now she had started it, she couldn't very well leave it. And after the exchange with Edie this morning she would rather not go than risk being late.

It would be the better part of courtesy to let Edie know right away. She went upstairs to call but the Crowells' phone didn't answer. Of course—Edie was at the bank. Mrs. Cortland, luncheon hostess for the day, was formal and distant on the telephone. Ap-parently household emergencies did not come under the heading of acceptable excuses for these affairs.

With the polite phrases still lingering in her head, Gladys went back to the Iaundry and made a furious attack on the pieces that had to be done by hand. About to put the last load into the machine, she was suddenly ravenously hungry and went up to the kitchen for a sandwich. The phone rang again, but she ignored it. She didn't want to talk to Edie Crowell or to any of Barbie's babies' mothers. Dutifully swallowing a hated glass of milk, she tried to convince herself that she didn't really care about joining the Crowells' social circle. She finished eating, but stayed in her chair an extra moment to watch the painted porcelain figures parade out of the Swiss chalet on the toy clock, announcing that noon had come.

Even in the bitterness of the solitary lunch the clock made her feel good. She had had one like it in her room when she was a little girl, and had always wanted another. But Jon wouldn't have it; he said they were always breaking down and that there weren't any watchmakers any more who could repair the delicate oldmechanisms. He held out firmly, until the day Mitchell Associates got its first big commission—and then he never even told her the news till almost a week later, when he came home bearing a mysterious package which had to be unwrapped before he would tell his big secret. It was the clock, the one she had watched in a store window for months, afraid it would be sold before she could persuade Jon—and just as the outside had been carefully worked over, all the bright colors restored and the chipped spots repaired, so the insides had been taken out bodily and replaced with a new electric mechanism.

Gladys went back to work with renewed energy, only a part of it from the food she had eaten. But, piling the last load of heavy-duty clothing into the machine, she worked more slowly than she had in the morning, overcome by a nostalgia that brought its own solace to banish the memory of cultivated, condescending tones. Jon's last remaining set of G.I. khakis, reserved for basement and garden work, were a humble contrast to the new field outfit that went in right afterward. And they brought back grim pictures of the washbasin in a rooming house near Fort Bragg; Ginny's utilitarian overalls brought on a surge of memories even more remote, from the time before the war, when the depression had lifted to become merely a "recession"—a series of Manhattan walkups, each with its identical small dark

kitchen, each with the same stained double-duty sink, where Tom's and Barbie's well-worn corduroys had got their weekly scrubbings.

A factory whistle screamed in the distance and broke into her thoughts, setting her hands to flying faster and her head to clearing. One o'clock already? She stopped a moment, altogether, to listen more closely. It couldn't be a factory whistle; the sound had fitted perfectly into her memories, but it had no place in lower West-chester. Even as she listened the sound died away, too short-lived for a factory call. And the timbre of it was different. In spite of its shrillness it could almost have been mistaken for thunder, if the brilliant sunshine streaming through the high window hadn't just then redoubled in its intensity, bathing the whitewashed cellar

walls with a deluge of red-gold light. She shook her head and tried to dismiss the whole thing, but for some reason the sound, dead now in reality, lived on inside her head, eerie and almost fright-ening. Then, as if to fit her change of mood, the small window darkened and the reassuring brightness of the sun disappeared. Maybe it had been thunder after all, a freak electric storm, too early in the year.

Gladys snapped the light switch, and the glaring overhead bulb cleared away all kinds of shadows. She pulled fresh, sweet-smelling clothes out of the machine and sorted them rapidly for the drier, for the mangle, for starching.

Upstairs the phone was ringing, but she ignored it. One more inquiry about a baby sitter would be one too many. She stayed at the ironing board, trying to work out the strange mood that had descended on her. She had made up her mind to be through with this before the children came home. Veda would have been done long ago. The pile of flatwork, neglected in the corner, reproached her.

When she finished, finally, she was damp and disheveled, but triumphant; she still had more than half an hour to rest and change her clothes before the children got home. While she washed, up-stairs, the phone started in again. She dropped her towel to run and catch it, but got there just in time to hear the receiver on the other end click down in disappointment. And going back up, her tired feet and pounding heart protested and she had to take the stairs at a careful pace. Whatever she had been able to do ten years ago, she was out of practice now.

A little after three, she stood on the porch in a clean dress, washed and combed, and convinced that powder and lipstick hid the tired lines in her face. Her eyes were fixed on the corner where the streetcar stopped, watching to see the big girl and the little one get off together. Intent on the distance, she was startled when a car horn honked at the front gate. Ginny and Barbara tumbled out of opposite doors—the baby landing on the sidewalk, and Barbie forgetting to be sedate as she ran around from the street side.

Gladys recognized the car; it was that nice new teacher who some-times passed the house on her way home. Shc started down the walk, thinking, I ought to ask Miss Pollock in for a cup of tea—she's been so nice.

But before she could reach the gate Ginny piled on her, arms and legs flailing and small red lips puckered for a welcome kiss. By the time they were disentangled the motor was starting up again and Gladys caught only a few words over the noise of the starter, something Miss Pollock was saying about "awfully good of you."

Barbie was pouring out eager conversation. "Miss Pollock thought it was so sensible of you not to call. All the other mothers did and she said to thank you

specially." Dazed, Gladys realized that she never had spoken the invitation aloud and that the teach-er's polite thanks referred to something else entirely.

"Well, why would I call . . . ?"

"I don't *know!* Everybody did, though. *All* the mothers."

"I know, I know!" Ginny was dancing up and down. Gladys put her hand on the baby's bright hair, trying to quiet her a minute. But she was too tired to think about it, and Ginny would not be quieted. *"I do* know, Mommy. Listen to me." She stopped jumping and tugged at Gladys' skirt. "Please listen, Mommy."

"All right, baby." Gladys gave up trying to straighten out the conversational mix-up. "You tell me all about *everything* that hap-pened, Ginny."

"It was raining!"

Barbie gave a snort of disgust and stalked away, her shoulders set in studied contempt of Ginny's baby stories and of people who listened to them. "Maybe I can find out something on the radio," she flung over her shoulder, "if nobody else around here even *cares* when something important is happening."

"I don't know how important it is," Gladys called after her, "but there's a message for you on the phone pad. And I wish you'd tell those people what hours you're home. I'm getting tired of playing secretary for you."

Ginny was tugging at her impatiently. "Mommy, it was raining

on *one* side of the street," she reported ecstatically. "First there was a funny noise like thunder, only different, and then the sun was shining bright like a sunset, sort of, and then it was dark all of a sudden, only the cloud was far away, and then after a while it began to really rain, only it was raining across the street and not in the yard." She frowned. "Only Pallo wanted to know if it was really raining, and Teacher wouldn't let me out to see. It was all foggy on our side, but it was *raining* across the street."

Gladys struggled with a long buried memory—herself as a little girl, discovering that it didn't always rain every place at the same time. Maybe there had been some sort of freak storm after all. It was early in the year for an electric storm, but that could explain why people were calling the school. Maybe some lightning had struck near by. She laughed again and scooped Ginny up in her arms. "Since when," she asked, "does the sun shine bright at sun-set? Do you know what sunset is?"

Ginny managed to look very unconcerned. "Oh sure," she said, "yeah."

"Yes," Gladys corrected automatically. "I don't know where you pick these things up." Ginny squirmed in her arms and Gladys felt something cold and damp pushed against her. "What in the world . . . ? *How* did you get that horse so wet?" She let the child down and followed her through the open door.

"She won't even let go of him long enough to get washed." Standing at the phone, Barbie covered the mouthpiece with her hand to offer the comment.

"Well, give it to me now," Gladys told the little girl. "I'll put it up on the shelf in the kitchen till it's dry."

Looking excessively guilty, Ginny thumped up the stairs to her room. Listening, Gladys marveled again at the persistence of the phrase about the "pitter-patter" of little feet.

"That's funny." Barbie put the phone down with a puzzled air. "I dialed twice and I can't get her."

"Maybe the lines are down somewhere," Gladys suggested.

"I don't know—but something's certainly going on. I'll let youknow what I find out," Barbie offered generously, and followed Ginpy up the stairs.

Gladys started toward the kitchen, thinking of the roast that had to be put on, refusing to think about how tired she was after a half day's honest work.

She was shelling peas when Barbie called from upstairs.

There are all sorts of noises children make—some to be ignored, some to be thought about, some to be tended to, and one in par-ticular that must have immediate unhesitating attention. Gladys dropped the peas and took the stairs on the run.

Barbara's door was open and the girl sat huddled near her midget radio set, listening, not only with her ears, but with dilated eyes and outstretched hands; her whole body was curiously intent. She didn't turn as Gladys came in but one hand motioned rapidly, "Come here," while her lips pursed in a half-aspirated "sh-h."

Gladys knew, of course. She had lived through the one war already; no one who had would ever forget that pose of horrified fascination in front of a radio. She crossed the rag rug, every color in it distinctly visible, every pattern of light and shadow in the room sharp and clear, every step a century long, before she was within hearing range of the radio. She stood immobile next to the girl on the bed as the impossible words hurled themselves at her.

". . . one-fifteen P.m., Eastern Standard Time, this afternoon. It is almost certain that equal damage was sustained throughout the country. The cities outside the radius of two hundred miles, roughly, have not yet been heard from. Transcontinental wires are down and radiations appear to be interfering with radio communi-cations in all directions." Static crackled out of the set with every word. Listening was torture to the ears as to the mind.

"Flash! We have just received our first report, since the bombing, from Washington, D.C. The Capitol was hit by at least one bomb at about one-thirty today. The larger part of the governmental area has " The voice cut off abruptly, replaced by a chattering flow of noisy interference. "For security reasons," the same voice,

sounding less assured, returned, "it is necessary to condense the report from Washington, D.C. It is estimated that only one bomb exploded there.

"We repeat—we repeat, please don't leave your homes. If you are in a dangerous area you will receive orders for evacuation. Do not leave your homes. If you are near a bombed-out area you are

safe only indoors. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR HOMES.

"So far as we can determine, no damage has been done except in areas in and around the major cities. We do not yet know who the aggressor was. We do not . . ."

The bland professional voice edged upward, strident and shrill, through the last half-dozen words, and broke at last into a raucous scream of laughter. The radio went dead.

Another voice cut in. "You have just heard a report from Wash-ington, D.C., received by teletype from a relay station in the out-skirts of Philadelphia. For those who have just tuned in, we re-peat: several atomic bombs of unknown origin landed in and near the harbor of New York City this afternoon. The first explosion occurred

at about 1:15 P.M., Eastern Standard Time, and was fol-lowed by others over a period estimated to be approximately one half hour. It is known that no bombs were dropped after two o'clock. Eyewitnesses state that the first bomb exploded underwater at the mouth of the East River, affecting harbor shipping in New York and Brooklyn, and substantially damaging a large part of the lower tip of Manhattan Island. There is no official statement as yet..."

The words were clipped, staccato, rigidly controlled, shooting out of the little radio with penetrating, meaningless malevolence. "Al-though the attack was focused on Manhattan, bombs are known to have been dropped in outlying boroughs, and one at least in New Jersey. First reports from reconnaissance planes indicate that Man-hattan itself is almost completely destroyed from the Battery up as far as Ninety-sixth Street, with only a narrow strip of land west of Ninth Avenue, along the Hudson, apparently intact. This damage appears to be the result of two air-exploded bombs, both of whichwere aimed at targets on the east side. But everywhere, except at the target centers of the explosions, some buildings are still stand-ing, and it is believed that survivors will be found all over the bombed area."

. . . except at target centers. Gladys remembered a description, read and shuddered over, and set aside, she had thought, even from memory . . . the description of an atomic bomb landing at Twen-tieth Street and Third Avenue. . . . The El, Gramercy Park, the courthouse, the high school, City College, flattened, melted into a compound featureless surface, the buildings that had not gone up into thin air at the instant of explosion, reduced by inconceivable heat to a glassy expanse of poisoned wasteland.

The words kept coming, swarming at her out of the radio, sting-ing, biting, bitter. The words kept coming, but Gladys no longer heard them. She knew she should be listening—there were things she had to know—for the children, for herself, for Jon.

Jon was in the city all day!

Somewhere inside her she heard the beginnings of a scream and then her ears heard it, and it was Barbara, not herself at all. There was no time to think about Jon now. The incredible words were attacking Barbie too. There was no time for thinking at all; Gladys' reflexes acted for her. Rocking back and forth, she cradled the girl's head on her breast, patting the wild curls—crooning a little, calm-ing, soothing. And when that didn't work she pulled the girl's face up and slapped her sharply.

Shock succeeded panic. Barbara fell back limply, long enough for Gladys to tell her in swift harsh tones, "We have Ginny to think of. You'll have to help me. Barbie, stop it!"

The sound that would have been a scream came out as a sob, quiet, dull, and hopeless. And now there was another noise, a familiar one among the symphony of stranger sensations. The thump of small sturdy shoes on the stairs and the rattle of dangling roller skates brought Barbara jumping to her feet.

"I'll get her. She can't go *out!*" Horror came to a climax and broke loose in the last word.

She was halfway to the door when her mother called after her curtly, "No!"

"Ginny!" she called, breathing deep, searching for inner calm and for ordinary unfrightening words. "Virginia! Did you dust your room yet?"

Downstairs reluctant footsteps lagged.

"Virginia!" Just a note of sharpness—and this time the feet turned back.

"I was just getting the dust rag, Mommy." Ginny appeared at the foot of the stairs, guilty innocence in every line of her face, skates nowhere in evidence, and a large gray cloth in her hand. The scene had played itself out this way a hundred times before, and it had always been funny. Now it wound to a close like an old worn-out film. The two who stood at the top of the stairs watched with tortured senses the inevitable ending of the staled sequence.

From behind, Gladys heard an outpouring of breath, a jerky sign of finished fear. She waited in silence till Ginny had passed them and gone shamefaced into her room, then turned to the older girl. "Barbie, you'll have to get her playing something inside. Don't scare her. Don't tell her she *can't go* out. Just keep her interested in something *in here."* She turned again, started for the stairs.

"I can't,' Barbara said hopelessly. "I can't. I don't know what . . . "

"Of course you can." Gladys didn't even look back. "You have to." Halfway down, she paused and called back. "I've got to do some phoning. Turn off your radio, Barbie, and I'll listen in down-stairs. Remember what I said." Without waiting for a reply, she went on down, drawn by an instinctive need too strong to resist. She picked up the phone and had to wipe sudden futile tears from her eyes before she could dial.

"What num-ber are you call-ing?"

"Atlas 9-4200. Mitchell Associates." Her voice was still clear, somehow untouched by the fear that clutched at her throat.

"I am sor-ry. That number has been discon-nected . . . due to emcr-gcncy."

"Thank you." The receiver dropped from her hand, and she marveled at the bored everyday efficiency of the operator. Perhaps she had been overfrightened. Maybe it was her own dread that had crept into the radio announcers' voices.

She switched on the radio, loud, and tuned it down again imme-diately, keeping the rush of words locked up in the room with her, not letting them get out to do their damage upstairs.

"Do *not* leave your homes. Stay indoors." It was the same man she had heard in Barbie's room, and even that small familiarity was welcome. "The governor has arrived at Emergency Headquarters in White Plains and will speak to you over this station at four-fifteen. The time is now three fifty-three. The governor's message will be heard in exactly twenty-two minutes. Stay at home and keep your radio tuned in. Citizens are requested not to use their tele-phones for personal conversations. All lines still up are needed for rescue work and emergency squads. All persons with medical or safety control training are asked to report to Emergency Head-quarters immediately by telephone. Just call or dial the operator and ask for the nearest E.H.Q. All others will please refrain from use of the telephone. I repeat, keep your radio tuned in, and do not use your telephone. The governor will deliver his message in twenty minutes at four-fifteen, Eastern Standard Time. Stay tuned to this station."

Three fifty-five! This, all of this, in half an hour. It was already after three when she had stood on the front porch and watched for the children. And now—not yet four o'clock!

TWO

Somewhere a siren was shrieking, off in the distance. It had been going on for a

long time, sustained shrill background to the crazy words that spewed from the ceaseless, coughing static

of the radio. Now as she listened it began to die, fading away until its shattering impact ceased to fall on bruised nerves, until its caustic cry was heard in memory alone. Memory held another siren, that was not a siren, that was thunder. That was not thunder; it was the warning scream of slaughter in the skies. And now again the sound, the dying sound, like a factory steam whistle left to blow itself out.

The smell of scorched metal roused her from nightmare. She ran through the dining room, and the swinging door to the kitchen flapped open and shut, open and shut, as she turned off the flame under the kettle, dry now and empty, blackened on the bottom and in one wide streak up the side. Sitting forlornly on the spout, the silenced robin returned her stare with one accusing eye.

Robins, Gladys thought, are supposed to say, "Cheer-up!" It seemed very funny. Laughing, she reached for the insulated handle, dropped it again as it burned her fingers. The sudden pain cleared her head. She folded a pot holder around the handle and carried the pot over to the sink. The hiss and sizzle of cold water hitting the bottom, spattering up against the dry-hot sides, was familiar, reassuring. She saw the peas still standing on the worktable, half shelled, and thought with a grateful start, We still have to eat.

She tackled the small task with a furious release of pent-up energy, her fingers working with accustomed speed and knowledge through the pile of unshelled pods; she finished just as the toy clock struck four. In fifteen minutes the governor would speak. She shook the peas loose in the colander, but her hand, halfway to the tap, stopped in mid-air.

The water—was the water all right?

The phone pealed urgently, and Jon's face swam before her, his voice sounded in her ears. She started running for the front of the house, but the pounding of her heart made her slow down. You couldn't keep on running, no matter what kind of emergency it was.

"Jon!" she breathed. There was no answer, only the tense silence of a telephone where someone waits to speak. "Jon," she cried again, "Jon, where are "

"This is Telephone Central," a mechanical voice broke in, "call-ing to check your wire. Thank you for an-swer-ing."

"But what . . . who . . . ?"

"This is Telephone Central," the voice said again, "calling to check your wire. Thank you for an-swer-ing."

"Operator!" Gladys demanded. "Operator, you cut into my"

"This is Telephone Central," it began to repeat. They couldn't hear her at all. It was a one-way connection.

Gladys didn't believe it. She stood there, jiggling the hook futilely, until the phone went dead, buzzing monotonously in her ear.

She dropped the receiver back on the cradle, then picked it up again and dialed the operator with a swift angry circle of her finger. Nothing happened; no inquiring voice, not even the comforting delay of a ring on the other end.

Angry at herself now, she hung up and tried again. This time she waited for the dial tone. Now at least it rang—on and on, endlessly. She was ready to give up for

the last time when the oper-ator's precision-machined voice finally asked what she wanted.

"Emergency Headquarters, please." Miraculously the operator made the connection without questioning her need.

Then there was a man's voice at the other end, bored, weary, but human. Gladys tried to stay cool and rational, but the man's voice was too close to kindness and her purpose thawed. Horrified, she heard herself babbling about water, and her husband in the city, her son, and the bombs, until he interrupted sharply.

"This is a priority wire, lady. What do you want?"

One at a time, she told herself firmly, one thing at a time.

"My husband," she said quickly, "my husband is in the city. How can I find out

"You'll be notified if we get anything," he broke in. "It'll all be on the radio when the governor talks. You listen in to that."

A dozen urgent unanswered questions circled dizzily in Gladys' mind. She was terrified that the man would hang up. "My son," she threw at him hastily. "He's at school. He's away at Texas Tech."

"An engineering student?" The voice sounded faintly interested. "Yes," Gladys breathed hopefully.

"All technical students are being mobilized into the Army," he said.

Gladys gasped and recovered. "But he can't—I mean he's only seventeen "

"All technical students are being mobilized," the man insisted. Gladys didn't believe it; it was absurd. "But there must be some way I can find out "

"The Army will notify you."

"The school's in Houston," Gladys said hopefully. "Do you know anything . . . ?"

"I'm sorry, lady. That's all I can tell you." The phone clicked again and buzzed while she stood there holding it to her ear until finally another of the mechanical voices cut in.

"Num-ber, please?"

Gladys couldn't think. One immediate question filled her mind now. "The water," she implored. "I've got to know about the water. Is it all right? Can I use it?"

"I am sor-ry. We do not have that information at this exchange. You will be noti-fied by the prop-per author-rities."

A definite click at the other end broke the connection. Gladys put the receiver down slowly. Jon . . . Tom . . . what did she know that she hadn't known before? The water . . . "all technical students" . . . "proper authorities" . . . Phrases swam around in her head and suddenly achieved meaning.

She had to remind herself again not to run up the stairs unnec-essarily. "Barbie," she called, and waited to hear the door of Ginny's room opened. "Barbie, you know where Tom's old school-books are?"

A vague affirmative floated down the stairs.

"You go look and bring me down everything on physics. Right away."

"Mom, there's *two shelves* full of physics!"

"Well, you know what I want," Gladys said impatiently.

"I don't see how I'm to know what you want if you don't . . ." The injured tones drifted down the stairs.

"For heaven's sake, Barbara, just use your judgment for once." No answer, but

footsteps marched down the hall. She called me Mom again! Gladys thought suddenly. I have to be careful . . . I have to watch myself.

The kettle began to whistle. Gladys couldn't remember why she had put it on again, but now she got down a big canning jar and filled it, running boiling water over the top and sealing it tight. She put it out on the window sill and filled the kettle once more. At least they would have drinking water if they needed it.

The clock said four-ten. Barbara pushed the door open, hugging a toppling stack of books to her bosom. "I hope these are right," she said stiffly.

"I'm sure you chose better than I could," Gladys assured her. "Maybe you can find what I want. Do I have to boil the water or anything like that? Maybe I should have read up more before . . . but I don't know; I never could believe, really . . ."

"It wouldn't do any good," Barbara said knowingly. "Even gas masks don't help." But she was trailing a finger down contents pages, riffling open the most promising book. "Maybe some of the stories in those magazines he used to read would tell you more. Really, Mother"—she was upholding Tom's seven-year-old family argument—"they had some pretty good stuff in them . . . any-how Tom said they did."

"We wouldn't know what to look for," Gladys told her. "We couldn't go through all the magazines. Anyhow, he was afraid I'd throw them out and he put them down in the cellar in a wooden crate. I don't even know which one it is."

"Mother," Barbara broke in suddenly, "who called up be-fore?"

"They were just checking to find out if the phone was working." Gladys took a deep breath. *How much can I tell her? How much should she know?* After that panicky quarter hour at the radio upstairs it was hard to decide.

"But I called Emergency Headquarters and they said they didn't think Tom's school had been bombed. They said the Army would notify us; they're drafting all the technical students."

"Did they give you his address? Did they know what part of the Army he's in?"

Gladys shook her head. "They're supposed to notify us." She couldn't understand the easy excitement of this reaction.

"Here's something," Barbara was saying. "It tells about safety measures at Oak Ridge " She stopped short at the look of
dismay on her mother's face, and then comprehension flooded over her. "Oh, Mother, everybody knows we're the strongest country in the whole world—we've got a"—she struggled with the words, try-ing to get them straight—"a stockpile of bombs, and bases and
planes and missiles, and " She stopped. "Tom told me," she
confided. "He always knew it would happen, but you never let him talk about it, and he was always wishing it would wait till he was old enough and now he's *in* it, don't you see? I'll bet he's so excited
he can hardly

She stopped short, vaguely aware that she had said something wrong. "But, Mother, don't you see there's nothing to worry about? It's not like fighting in the old days. Tom won't have to go to the front or anything. He's a technician, and he'll work at the base, and —well, the danger is only in the big cities, and—well, they *must* have the radio or telegraph or something working all over the country already,

or they wouldn't have known about Tom's school. Mom! *Where's Daddy?"*

With numbed lips Gladys framed the lie. "He's all right, honey. I'm sure he wasn't hurt, only they won't let him out of the—the danger zone, until everybody's checked. I don't understand, but the governor is" Her eyes flew to the clock. "It's started already.

Make sure Ginny's all right, will you, Babs? And then come down if you can." She flung it over her shoulder, already on the way to the radio.

The speaker was giving forth a low authoritative rumble, none of it distinguishable as words, but the sum total of it clearly thegovernor's speech. She turned it up too far, and a bombardment of words filled the room.

"The Army is fully mobilized and there is nothing further to fear. There will be no more attacks. A screen of radar shields every inch of our borders, from below sea level to the far reaches of the stratosphere. Nothing can get through. We arc living inside a great dome of safety, our whole nation protected by the radar sweep from bases prepared long ago."

But they didn't work. It didn't work before. Gladys tried to understand.

"Our entire energies now must be directed to rescue work in the bombed areas, and to safety measures in nearby zones. When I have finished, the emergency radiologist for the entire area will speak to you. For full information about safety measures, be sure to keep your radio tuned in. Several important announcements will be made by the radiologist. In closing, I want to comment on the remarkable courage—the heroism—displayed by all of you in this national emergency. In times of great crisis the true mettle of a e people emerges; and I may say, without fear of exaggeration . . ."

For a moment she was aware of Barbie at her shoulder.

"The governor?" the girl asked, awed. Gladys nodded, motion-ing for silence. The governor—and he was only a tired man, trying to cover his own confusion with words.

Still, it was the words that mattered. She listened obediently, attentively. Barbie went off toward the stairs, lingering over each footstep to hear as much as she could.

". . . sustained so great an attack with such single-minded de-termination to carry on In the face of danger—never has any coun-try on earth had better cause for pride in its fearless and co-opera-tive citizenry."

More words—no courage, no confidence, no hope—only the voice of a weary salesman, suavely peddling unwanted wares.

"For reasons of security, it is impossible for me to tell you more at the present time, about the extent of the damage incurred, or our plans for retaliation. But you may carry on with your duties to

home and country, assured that the enemy shall not go unpunished! At this moment plans that have lived only on paper for many year: are grinding slowly but surely into action.

"Our enemies shall learn now to fear the eagle in its nest. "Thank you, my friends. Courage and patience are all we need to win."

Gladys heard the last words with a sinking sensation of bewilder-ment. The man had said nothing, nothing at all. Nothing about the city, about the people trapped

there . . . nothing but words. . . .

"That was Governor Cauldwell, speaking from Emergency Headquarters. Please do not turn your radio off. In one minute you will hear the district radiologist. While waiting, please supply yourself with writing equipment. You will hear information of vital importance. Get paper and pen or pencil now. The radiologist will be on the air in forty seconds."

"I'll get it, Mom." Gladys didn't know Barbara had come back until she spoke.

"Thanks, baby." She took the pad and pencil and looked up into her daughter's excited face. "I don't know what I'd do without you. I rea,:y

She stoppea. The radio was clearing its throat and the an-nouncer's voice had come through again.

"Here you are, ladies and gentlemen. The man who holds our safety—yours and mine—in his hands throughout this emergency —District Radiologist Harold F. Hennessy, speaking from Emer-gency Headquarters. Will you come in, please, Dr. Hennessy?"

A second's silence, broken only by the incessant low-pitched barking of the static—then one more void in the welter of voices.

"One hour and fifteen minutes ago you heard the first radio report of the bombing of New York City. You know now that our whole country has been attacked 'nd severe damage has been in-flicted in many major cities.

"For security reasons I cannot tell you the exact extent of the damage, but I can tell you that communications are being restored and that a national government will shortly be in operation.

"For the rest of you—you already know that the island of Manhattan, where the largest damage was inflicted, has been com-pletely closed off. Washington Heights, where radioactivity is below danger level, including the entire area from 125th Street to the river, has been transformed into a gigantic emergency headquarters, field hospital, and Army base. Scores of radiologists are at work there, testing conditions to provide for the safety of suburban areas. Rescue squads are penetrating from the hospital base there to the lower part of the island, inspecting every building, subway, sewer, or shelter of any kind still standing where survivors may be holding out.

"At the present time fires are still burning in many parts of the city, but most of the larger buildings are still standing, and many of these are fireproof. Outside the areas of direct hit, many survivors are expected."

The words were stem; there was no attempt to allay fear, but like the dentist who says, "This will hurt a little, but it won't take long," Hennessy renewed courage by the simple admission that things were bad. The knowledge, new to Gladys, that the national government had broken down, seemed credible and bearable, as long as something was being done.

"Another hospital base is now being established in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, to care for victims of the bomb burst in the lower riverside area of the East Bronx. Similar smaller bases will be set up as rapidly as possible in the outskirts of Brooklyn and Queens, and hospitals are already treating emergency cases in some suburban areas.

"No one at present is being allowed to leave the areas of heavy contamination except by way of the hospital bases and decontami-nation centers. A cordon of

police and National Guardsmen is being thrown across Westchester County at New Rochelle and across Queens County at Jamaica. Similar patrols are being estab-lished by the local governments in New Jersey. We are anxious to release survivors as quickly as possible, but it is essential to prevent exposed individuals from leaving the area without a thorough ex

amination. Special equipment and training are required to detect the presence of atomic radiations and many survivors within the danger zone may be unaware of their own condition.

"Remember—trained personnel arc now at work directing res-cue squads. Operations are being carried out in accordance with well-integrated plans developed and improved over many years. Unorganized attempts at assistance or escape can only result in panic and confusion. Our object is to move everyone as quickly as possible out of contaminated areas and away from any danger of infection.

"For the time being your first concern must be your own safety. Radioactive rain, resulting from the underwater explosion, as well as dust, smoke, and wind, may endanger large areas around New York City. The entire area of Greater New York, including Staten Island; Westchester County as far north as Pleasantville; the lower part of Fairfield County, including Ridgefield and Wilton, in Con-necticut; all of Suffolk County in Long Island; and all parts of New Jersey along the Hudson from upper Middlesex County to the New York State line; and in Rockland County in New York State, as far north as New City

"If you live inside this district you will receive a visit within the next few hours from an emergency squad truck. Members of emer-gency squads will be prepared to answer your questions and to handle immediate difficulties.

"If you live outside the limits I have described you are requested to stay near your homes and hold yourselves ready to assist Emer-gency Headquarters. Your help is desperately needed in the danger zones.

"Further information and instructions for all will be broadcast over a local station in your vicinity. Please listen carefully and write down the information that is given you. But before you turn your dial, one last word of encouragement. We have been damaged but not destroyed. Local governments are functioning. Trains are run-ning in most sectors. Local wire and telephone services are in operation. Emergency Headquarters are operating in the vicinity ofevery bombed area. Amateur radio operators are already filling in nationwide gaps in communication. Everything that can humanly be done to save lives and prevent further disaster is being done."

Abruptly the voice stopped and it was hard to tell whether the sound that followed was a snort of disgust or just more static.

"In order to conserve power and to prevent this information from reaching the enemy, this broadcast will be continued over a low-power short-range station. Please tune your radio now to 980

-that is number 980 on your radio—number 980—please tune your radio to number 980 . . ."

Gladys got up stiffly and handed the pad and pencil to Barbara. Will you listen carefully, Barbie? I want to take a look at Ginny —she's too quiet." Barbara nodded raptly, already turning the dial, intent on finding the station.

"I'm *not* too quiet." It was a high-pitched indignant voice, im-mediately behind

Gladys' elbow. Perched on Jon's big lounging chair, legs straddling the fat armrest, Ginny rested one foot defi-antly on the forbidden upholstery. A tense smile tried to deny round frightened eyes in her white face—a shockingly mature face from which curved baby contours had vanished in an hour's time. Gladys scooped the little girl into her arms, feeling the nerv-ous resistance of thin wiry muscles. Ginny's head burrowed into her shoulder.

"I don't *like* that man, Mommy. Turn him off." The words were muffled, and Gladys could feel the moist mouth moving against her throat. She sat down in the big chair, cradling Ginny in her lap.

"I can't turn him off, baby. We have to listen and find out something. Sec how Barbie's going to write it down!"

Ginny obstinately buried her eyes against her mother's face. "I don't want to look. I want to turn him off."

"Why, honey? Why don't you like the man?"

"He won't let my daddy come home. Turn him off and make him let my daddy come home!" At last the tears came. Gladys didn't try to stop the convulsive sobs. She held Ginny on her lap

quietly, soothed her with firm hands and wordless comforting sounds.

Barbie looked up from the radio, annoyed, gesturing from Ginny to the loudspeaker, and Gladys stood up, stumbling a little with the weight of the child in her arms. In the kitchen they could sit together in the big old rocker until the shock wore off and Ginny quieted down.

THREE

The sobs came fewer and further between, until finally Ginny picked up her head and stared at her mother out of great doleful eyes. Gladys reached for a paper napkin to wipe away the tears, but Ginny pushed her hand away and began rubbing at her own eyes with crayon-stained fists. The final effect made it easy for Gladys to laugh, and when she carried Ginny over to the mirror the little girl joined in.

But the question had not been forgotten.

"*Why* won't that man let Daddy come home?"

Gladys wondered how long Ginny had been in there listening, and how much she had understood. It was a continuous source of astonishment to her, the ability of small children to comprehend anything frightening or misleading, while presenting a blank re-flecting surface to all useful forms of knowledge.

"Well," she began, "there was a big explosion in the city today, and everybody has to be extra careful for a little while." "Did Daddy get hurt?"

"I don't think so. Daddy had to go way uptown to see a man today, and the accident was all the way downtown."

"Well, why won't they let him come home?"

Well, why don't they? I don't know. "I guess they need all the strong men to help the people who are hurt, darling."

That was inspired; Gladys wished she could satisfy herself as easily. The little girl broke her stiff stance and ran to wipe her eyes formally on the kitchen towel.

"Can I go out and play now?" she demanded. Gladys glanced dubiously at the

clock.

"It's too late, Ginny." She didn't wait to find out if the act was convincing. "Did you finish your drawing?"

"I'm tired of it."

"What did you make?" Gladys repressed a sigh. "May I see it?"

The little girl was thoughtful. "I guess I'll have to finish it first." She started toward the door and then stopped and went back to the sink. The water glass was standing where it always did, well within reach for Ginny and her smaller-sized friends. It took Gladys a moment to realize what was happening.

"No, honey." She snatched the glass from her daughter's hand and got the sealed jar of water. "Drink this instead."

But her own fear was in her voice, in her face, in the way she took the glass.

"I don't want to. What is it?" Ginny responded promptly. "Water."

"Why can't I drink the other water?"

"Just because."

Ginny recognized the note of finality. She took the glass and pouted. "It's warm."

"I'll put an ice cube in."

"I don't want an ice cube." She was dangerously close to tears again. "I just want a drink of water."

To save her life, Gladys couldn't think what to do next; then the door burst open, and Barbara came in, waving the pencil and pad with wild excitement.

"I've got it all, Mom. They're starting to repeat it now, but they said to keep the radio on and they said if there are any flashes they'll ring a gong or something so people will come back and listen."

Gladys took the pad and glanced at the penciled scrawl. Bar-bara had recently been affecting a sophisticated backhand penman-ship, but today she seemed to be growing rapidly back toward childhood in every way.

"The emergency trucks are starting around now," Barbie was rattling on. "And they're going to give us equipment and sheets of information and everything

"Hold on a minute." Gladys turned to Ginny, so absorbed in her big sister's report that she was sipping the warm water without a murmur. "Aren't you going to show me your picture?"

"For heaven's sake, Mother," Barbie broke in, "don't you want to hear

Gladys quelled her with a look.

"For 'evan's sake, Mommy," Ginny imitated her sister.

Gladys smiled and added a firm push on the small behind to a one-word dismissal. "Scoot!" It was emphatic.

With enormous dignity Ginny put down the glass of warm water and walked slowly out of the kitchen. Gladys held up a warning hand until the footsteps had passed the dining room.

"Now"—she turned to Barbara—"tell me first, did they say any-thing about the water?"

Barbie shook her head impatiently. "No, they didn't say anything about things like that. They said we should ask the emergency truck people about anything that worried us. All they said was the trucks would come around and we should stay indoors and not go out till after the trucks come—and they want blood donations,

but I don't think from us—and there's information you're supposed to have ready for the trucks when they come."

"What do they want to know?"

"You have to write everything about Daddy—his name and de-scription and everything. Everyone who has anybody in the city is supposed to do that. A whole description so they can identify him in case "

She stopped, and cast a worried look at her mother, but Gladys seemed calm.

"Well, anyhow, they want a description and they said be sure and write it clearly. Then you have to do another sheet for us—one for each, I mean. You're supposed to write down our names and ages and put the address on, and then put down where we were during the day. Every place anybody went, and what time it was. You have to do a separate sheet for each one and put them on the bottles

"Bottles? What did they say about bottles? What for?"

"Oh, that's for the urin—urinas " She took the scribbled note sheets from Gladys' hand and skimmed through them till she found the word. "Urinalysis," she pronounced triumphantly. "They want everybody to give them a sample. You're supposed to sterilize bottles and put it in, and then put the paper with the information about each person on the bottle. I mean—well, when I say it," she finished defensively, "it sounds all confused, but it isn't, really."

"Are you sure you got that straight? What would they want the samples *for?"*

"I don't know. I don't know *what* they want them for, but that's what they said." Barbie's tone was aggrieved. She handed the papers back to her mother and pointed to the spot she had been studying. With the verbal report to help her, Gladys found it easier to make out what Barbie had written. Apparently that *was* what they wanted.

"I think I understand," she murmured. But she didn't. "What's this?"

"Oh—that's about the phone. They kept saying not to use it for anything except emergencies."

"Thanks, dear," Gladys said absently. "You did a fine job." She checked through the pages again, then pulled her chair up to the table and tore a fresh piece of paper off the pad.

"Mom . . ."

Gladys was having trouble with the sheet. Her eyes didn't seem to focus right when she had to put down the necessary statistics. She tried to brush aside Barbie's intruding voice and concentrate on the pencil and paper.

"Mom, I guess it's all right to drink fruit juice or something out of the refrigerator, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course." The refrigerator door slammed and she heard the noise of pouring absurdly loud, as if whatever had gone wrong with her eyes was making her ears work better.

She didn't hear the footsteps, though, because the sudden touch on her arm made her jump.

"Mom—would you like me to do it for you?" The shy politeness in her daughter's voice almost pushed Gladys over the edge into tears, shameful and revealing. She managed to smile an equally polite and almost as shy, "Thanks," and pushed the pad across the table.

She sat there until things came back into focus again and then she continued to sit,

watching Barbara fill the sheet with a meticu-lously legible description of her father.

They understand so much, she kept thinking. You don't know it until something happens, but they're so grown up inside.

She got up and went over to the bright-colored Tyrolean plaque on the wall that held a tiny pad of paper for marketing lists. The top sheet bore notations from another world: "soap flakes," "soda," "call cleaner." She tucked the slip of paper in an apron pocket and began jotting down on a fresh sheet the things she wanted to re-member for the emergency squad.

In the front room the phone came to strident life again.

Barbara looked up, but Gladys was already through the door. This time she didn't let herself think at all about what it might be; but still her hand hung hesitantly over the receiver. When she finally brought the phone to her ear she had no chance even to say hello.

"Gladys?" a voice demanded. For a moment she couldn't identify it and then the voice rushed on. "This is Edie Crowell."

Of course, Gladys thought. But what's wrong with her voice?

"Hi," she said with forced brightness. "Are we allowed to use the phone now?"

"I don't know—we're not supposed to, but I couldn't stand itany more. Phil was on his regular route up in Peekskill when it h ippened and they called me up and said he was drafted for r, scue work. I'm here all alone and I keep thinking about him and —I tell you, I'm going crazy, Glad!"

Why, she's hysterical. Gladys could see the Crowells' big white house through the hall window. It had a lot of rooms for a worried woman to rattle around in.

"It must be awfully lonely," Gladys said, trying to get used to this sudden rush of pity for Edie Crowell. "But listen, Edie, is it all right to use the phone now? Didn't they say something about leaving the wires clear?"

"Gladys, you're inhuman!" Edith shrieked. "I only called to find out if I could come over. I just can't stay here any more by myself."

"Well, we're not supposed to go out." Gladys hesitated. "Why don't you wait for the emergency truck to come around and maybe they'll say it's all right. You know we'd be glad to have you here. Oh, Edie," she burst out, *"why* won't they let them out of the city?"

"Let them out?" The voice rose to a shrill crescendo of panic. "You want them to let people out to spread radiation disease every-where? Every living soul in the city is as good as dead. *Let them out?"* She was practically screaming now. "What I want to know is why do they waste more lives sending rescue squads *in?"*

Gladys' head was very light. It was spinning around, trying to get up enough momentum to free itself from the lead weight of her body. She groped for the chair, telling herself that Edith was half crazed with worry, that she didn't know what she was talking about.

"But," she said feebly, "they said on the radio—"

"Lies!" Edie stormed. "They haven't told us the truth all these years, do you think they'll tell it now? They said it couldn't happen, didn't they? All that nonsense about radar screens!"

"Edith!" Gladys broke in against the current of mania. "Stop it! You've got to stop it! Right now! They're *not* lying to us. I don't know what happened before, but

this is real, this time. Jon's in

the city, and he was there all day, and at least they're doing some-thing to try and get him out. The other time, in Japan, they saved a lot of people."

"Japan!" Edith raved. "That was nothing. They didn't even

"Edie, you shut up—shut up! Shut up!" She repeated it sav-agely, so deep in her throat it came out like a whisper. "I won't listen. I'm going to hang up."

Ginny was coming down the stairs, carrying her picture in one hand. Gladys kept her voice low, turned her head so the child couldn't hear.

"You stay off the phone, do you hear me? If Jon and Phil can stand it in the city, you can stand it there by yourself!" She slammed the receiver down viciously, not trying to control the surge of anger. It seemed to make her stronger, helped her throw off the permeating weariness.

"What's the matter, Mommy? Why are you mad?" Ginny had come up behind her.

"Because I was talking to a very, very silly woman." Cleansed by fury, she found she could even be gay now. She admired the drawing enthusiastically and saw the child relax before her eyes, as her own manner returned to normal. "Go on now." She shooed Ginny into the kitchen before her. "We're all going to make supper together, and you can help. How're you doing, Babsy?"

"Mother, I've *asked you . . ."* Barbara said coldly, straighten-ing up over her work.

"I'm sorry, darling." The baby name, forbidden for almost two years now, had popped out irrepressibly at the sight of the young shoulders hunched over the kitchen table, the tightly clenched pencil laboriously covering fresh paper. It was just so that a younger Barbara had sat over her homework at the same table, night after night, in the last of the city apartments.

Gladys laughed, and saw it was wrong, then couldn't stop her-self. "I'm sorry, but you looked so . . . so . . ." There was no way to explain. "Well, I'm sorry!"

Unassuaged, Barbara held up three finished sheets of paper."These are done, if you want to look at them," she said stiffly.

"If you think they're all right I won't bother," Gladys answered hastily. "I want to get those bottles ready, and get started on .upper—sec if we can get done before the truck gets here. You make the salad, Barbie, and Ginny can set the table." But she couldn't help adding, "Just be sure you've got down everything about the times you and Ginny went outdoors during the day. I didn't go out at all."

"That's what I'm *trying* to do." Barbara was still on her dignity. If you think Virginia can spare a moment before she starts setting the table, maybe I can do this one right."

Gladys kept herself very busy pulling mason jars off the top shelf, until she could stop smiling. Then she climbed down and commanded Ginny to answer her sister's questions. She got out the big pot that had once sterilized the babies' bottles and filled it with water for boiling.

The roast was still standing on the table where she had left it hours before. There wouldn't be time to cook that now. She put it back in the refrigerator and got out some of the cube steaks she kept for Jon's midnight raids. Outside the sun was beginning to set and she turned on the lights. The steaks sputtering on the broiler and the children's voices in the lamplit room brought life suddenly hack to a familiar,

livable plane.

She issued brisk orders, and the two girls obeyed swiftly, happy to seize on a pattern of behavior that they knew. It was a victory when Barbara so far forgot the world outside that she squabbled briefly with Ginny over the proper placement of the forks.

It all went quickly—too quickly, because when they were done the three of them had to sit down around the kitchen table, as they always did, when Jon stayed in the city too late to come home for supper.

FOUR

The mood that had sustained them through the bustling preparations for dinner fell rapidly away. Nobody men-tioned Jon; but not wanting to mention him, they didn't talk at all. Once tires screeched on the street out in front, sending Barbara and Ginny both dashing to the door.

Gladys heard the door open, and fear shot through her, raised her out of her chair and after them to bang it closed again. She turned on them with flaming sudden anger.

"Barbara, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! You knew bet-ter than that! Ginny, next time you leave the table you're going straight up to bed!" Shame reddened in the older girl's face, and a tremulous underlip shaped itself into a pout on the five-year-old's. Without a word Barbara turned on her heel and started back to the kitchen. Ginny just stood still, facing her mother. Her small red lip curled outward as if it wanted to wrap itself around her chin, and the visible reaction, finally, transformed itself into a vocal one.

"I want my daddy," she sobbed. "I hate you. I hate you and I want my daddy!"

Impulsively Gladys bent down to the child, now seated squarely on the floor, and tried to fold the stubborn baby flesh in her arms.

I want him too. Oh, Ginny, if you knew how I want him!

The words were in her mouth, in the tears that lay ready behind her eyes, in the lump of loneliness growing in her breast, but she didn't say them. The child was frightened enough already. She satisfied her own yearning arms with a quick hug.

"I want my daddy!" Ginny shook off the embrace.

Gladys straightened up stiffly. "Well, you'll have to be a big girl and wait till he comes home." The words were pathetic in their weakness, but they were all she could offer.

"I won't. I want my daddy. I'll run away and find him." The little girl did not move to make good her threat, but the words stopped Gladys, already halfway through the room. She went back and locked the door and windows, bolted them, too, firm against small hands . . . and proof against invaders from outside. It should have been done anyhow.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" The words of controlled rebellion faltered as she went out. By the time she reached the kitchen she could already hear the first sobs shaking the little girl in a convulsive release of violent emotion.

Barbie stood at the table, looking down silently at her half-eaten supper. "Aren't you going to do anything?" the girl demanded.

"No. Sit down and eat your supper. She'll come in when she's ready." Every impulse urged Gladys to go back, but she knew that any other day Ginny's squalling would leave her unperturbed. Special sympathy now would only get the child more upset. She couldn't be placated; she just had to cry it out.

"But, Mother, you can't just . . ."

"I said, sit down and eat your supper," Gladys repeated slowly. "I thought you were old enough to know better, Barbara."

Blushing again, and miserably aware that she had started the whole thing by running to the door, Barbara pulled back her chair, the legs scraping against the linoleum in a long-drawn-out screech that set off their nerves to skittering frenzy again. Dog-gedly Gladys attacked lukewarm peas and potatoes.

The crying stopped. There was no sound in the house except the determined scraping of Gladys' fork across her plate. Barbara sat with downcast eyes, staring at her plate.

"Mother, I . . . I don't feel so well. May I be excused?" The formality of the request left Gladys no alternative.

"Certainly, Barbara," she said coldly. "Perhaps you'd better go upstairs and lie down?"

"I think I'd better." Barbie robbed her of the victory, accepting the proposal as willingly as though it were not a command.

"I don't feel good either." The swinging door edged noiselessly

open to permit the entry of a small red nose, tight white lips, and a stray lock of soft brown hair. Ginny herself stayed hidden behind the door.

More relieved than she wanted to admit, Gladys unashamedly reversed her tactics. "Well," she announced blithely, "that fixes us all up, because I feel perfectly rotten. Let's throw out all this junk and have some good hot tea."

The red nose snuffled once rapidly, and the waving strand of brown hair advanced through the door, followed by a transformed child. *"Tea?"* she asked. " Really truly *tea?"*

"Really truly, goopy." Barbara relaxed immediately. "I'll fix it, Mother." She got up, with plates in each hand, in a flurry of activity. Gladys would cheerfully have traded places with her daughter, but she forced herself to sit still and wait while Ginny made a casual sidewise advance to the table. Finally one small hand came to rest on her knee. Then with a sudden scramble the little girl was on her lap, hugging her in a passionate frenzy of reformation, nestling and nuzzling against her until, communion achieved, the small head came bolt upright again. Then red-streaked eyes watched anxiously, still not entirely convinced, as Barbara poured steaming water over tea leaves and brought the covered pot to the table.

"Tea!" In her own seat at last, Ginny cuddled the warm cup in both hands and took a great noisy sip of the milky stuff. "Tea!" she marveled, and Barbara smiled at her mother again.

It was a hiatus in the storm, a valley of safety where they were safe and peaceful together for ten minutes that night. Later Gladys remembered it, relived every one of those minutes in the warm, bright kitchen, with both her girls trusting her, secure, mysteriously confident in her power to fix things, somehow.

Then Barbara was pushing her chair abruptly back and reaching for one of the jars

Gladys had ready. She shouted something through the flying door. ". . . while I can." And it was strange enough behavior for a grown girl. But emotional ups and downs could do these things, as Gladys suddenly realized with painfulacuteness. Apparently the youngest one was alone in her freedom from reaction to too great tension.

Gladys gave Ginny a smaller bottle and sent her after her sister, to the upstairs bathroom, no less amused than she was astonished that for once her own urgency was more compelling than her young daughter's. Barbara could take care of the little one. She herself needed a moment alone to mend her defenses.

She left the dishes for the time being, half aware that they would be a welcome task later, and when she was done labeling her own jar she went into the living room. There was music coming over the radio, and upstairs the sounds of footsteps and running water. Gladys moved about straightening things from long habit putting the room to rights for the evening, switching on lights.

It was all so normal, so usual, so like every other day. Against her will she was drawn to the window, where street lights should be casting shadows from the spring-greened maples. But out there it was dark and only the cloud-cased moon sent an occasional waver-ing shape or shadow around the street.

The noises upstairs were not normal or usual. Barbara wasn't getting ready for a date; Ginny wasn't undressing for bed. They were busy filling mysterious jars for strange men to take away. She realized that the noise of combat and persuasion had died away upstairs. The girls were taking a long time for a simple job. Maybe she'd better go up.

Gladys stood at the foot of the stairs, and familiar sounds and shadows grouped themselves into a pattern. The light was on in Ginny's room. A low rhythmic murmur revealed itself as Barbara's voice when it rose to a dramatic word or phrase. Barbara was reading aloud to Ginny.

One light went out, and footsteps measured the length of the hall, toe-steps, really, cautious and quiet, walking away from the room of a child just fallen asleep. The bathroom door closed, shutting out the remaining light. Gladys hesitated on the first step. She wanted to go upstairs, to tuck Ginny in, to see what Barbara was doing. But she had an obscure feeling that something important

was happening, something she shouldn't interfere with. Something that had started in the kitchen, at dinner . . or before that, upstairs, in front of the little radio. Something that had made Barbie offer to write the report about Jon, had made her put Ginny to bed without being told.

Whatever it was, it belonged to Barbara. Gladys went back to the living room and sat down, made herself stay there till the girl came into view on the bottom steps.

She was holding the two glass jars, big and little, carefully balanced in her hands.

"Ginny's in bed." She went straight across the living room toward the kitchen, carrying the jars. "I told her you'd come and look in on her later." She disappeared into the dining room and reappeared a moment later, carrying all three jars on a kitchen tray. She took the tray out to the hall table and stood there, wrapping each one carefully in its labeling sheet.

"It'll be all ready when they come." She was elaborately ex-planatory, as if she knew her mother would never otherwise under-stand why she had bothered.

But I do . . . I do . . . Only there was no way to say it, no gesture she knew how

to make.

Impulsively she went over to the china closet in the corner and opened the cupboard in the bottom where they kept the rarely used liquor. Jon wasn't much of a drinker. She pulled out a couple of bottles and held them up, studying the labels.

"I'm going to have a drink," she announced, and now the whole thing seemed silly. Was this a symbol for maturity? She tried to sound natural. "Would you like something, Barbie? A little wine or"—she couldn't help hesitatinb—"perhaps some brandy?"

"Moth-er!" Barbara was clearly shocked.

Gladys held up the bottle. "Well," she asked a little sharply, "do you want it or don't you?" She watched the struggle of con-science and curiosity on her daughter's face. Barbic's new-found maturity might be fundamental, but it had not yet begun to affect her superficial reactions and attitudes.

"We could make some eggnog." Gladys proposed a compromise. "It might settle your stomach a little." She started toward the kitchen, but Barbara jumped up to intercept her. She wondered if she had the same look of foolish guilt on her own face.

"I'll do it, Mother. Francie's mother taught us how, once." She grinned then. "I guess I never told you about that."

The bright smile twinkled familiarly until the girl vanished through the dining-room door. Gladys turned the radio up louder, wondering how many other things she would learn about her chil-dren in the days ahead.

". . . rioting and panic in some sectors." The brutal words from the loudspeaker drove everything else out of her head. "However, Emergency Headquarters in all districts arc carrying on a deter-mined effort to maintain order. If you have not yet been visited by an emergency squad truck, please do not become alarmed. There has been no trouble in this section and emergency measures are proceeding as scheduled. All of you will have been visited by trained squadmen before midnight tonight. Stay indoors. Do not use the telephone unnecessarily. Assistance is coming to you.

"We repeat our news broadcast. Amateur radio communication lines are now operating throughout the country. The amount of damage done to major cities is still unknown, but government is functioning from secure headquarters, and the Army is already mobilized for retaliation."

Gladys listened dutifully, knowing these things should concern her. But they never said anything about the city, about survivors, about evacuation . . . *about Jon!*

Her attention wandered back to the radio. "There have been reports of rioting and panic in some sectors, however . . ." The announcer was repeating what she had heard before.

"Do not become alarmed," he said.

Gladys caught a glimpse of her own face in the mirror over the mantel, and the long lines of haggard middle age shocked her. It seemed frivolous, in the face of the fear that hung about them, to go upstairs for powder and lipstick. But she had to go up and

look at Ginny anyhow, and she felt dirty, spoiled. She could at least wash her face.

The bright light in the bathroom hurt her eyes—gleaming polished porcelain and paint. The evening mess was all cleaned up; Barbara was certainly going through a change. Tenderness rushed over her again, and compassion, for the girl who was too young to grow up so much. Gladys doused her face in cold water and pulled a stiff-bristled brush through her hair. Combing it, she took a good long look in the mirror and added fresh powder and lipstick after all. Then she stopped in her room long enough to remove the con-fining girdle, stockings and shoes, and padded downstairs again in soft furred slippers, cherry red to match the warm wool robe Jon had given her for Christmas.

Barbara had the foaming pitcher already set down on the coffee table and was reaching for two of the hand-painted glasses from the top shelf of the china closet. Formally, like a child's tea party, Gladys poured the drinks. Then she curled up on the sofa and let tiredness claim her. Gradually warmth penetrated downward and spread out inside her. She could feel the tension in all her muscles flowing away; now there was nothing to do but wait. She sipped at the drink, and the glass in her hand grew heavy, until she put it down on the end table, unfinished, and remembered to pick it up for another sip only with difficulty. Nothing to do but wait . . .

e city

There was no way out of it; he'd have to go all the

way uptown to see McMahon before he could close the

Kellogg deal. He grabbed a cab, irritated at the

unlooked-for expense; irritated at himself for not bother-ing to get the car, for not even thinking of the subway; irritated at all the shouldering, shoving people who—like himself—didn't have sense enough to get out before it was too late.

Out of what? Too late for what? He didn't know. He thought of the headlines in the morning paper, but that was foolish. You

didn't take those things seriously, personally. It was just—too many people, not enough time. There used to be more time.

He paid off the driver, and as soon as he walked into McMahon's dining room he realized what was wrong with him. He was hungry, that was all. He accepted a cup of coffee and watched the old hypochondriac finish off lunch enough for twelve healthy men.

Mack was surprisingly reasonable. They got everything cleared up in a few minutes, except the paragraph he'd known there would he trouble about. He could get out and get a'neat soon. Then they saw it.

The big window across the room faced east; at first all they saw was a darkening of the sun, a funny color in the sky. They went over to the window, and there it was, blossoming out in the sky away downtown, so beautiful you forgot to be scared . . . or else you were so scared it wasn't like any fear you could recognize.

They watched the big cloud form in the sky over the bay: white, then tan, muddy, and at last a swirling pinkish mass. They began to believe it, really, when the swirling stopped and the climbing column of steam turned back on itself and became a pounding pillar of rain, falling out of the giant cloud like a trick shot in a movie.

They didn't say anything, except just Mack's one word, "Well!" Then they turned

and headed for the door, walking, not running, because that was the way McMahon was. But he noticed Mack had forgotten to limp. He edged past the older man, being polite but determined about it. Then he flung himself down the staircase, leaping, running, taking two, three steps at a time. He was on the second landing when the blast shook him.

The house shuddered, but it stood. He kept going down, more carefully now. Another blast, and he could hear windows breaking, but not the sound of the bombs. He felt *the blast; he didn't hear it. Then there was one he heard, different, close by.*

A gas tank going up, a real old-fashioned explosion; he had time to recognize it before a flying beam found his head.

He couldn't have been out long, because it was still light when hedug himself out. Up the block three different fires were burning. c bouds hung over the city in every direction, but they weren't using that trick movie shot any more. The clouds were gray, good old honest gray, no rosy linings . . . or was it glasses? Did you use smoked glasses to make the color show? He couldn't remember. Someone was running down the street, passing him.

"Mister!" he shouted. "Mister, I'm lost!" He began running, too, running after the other man, trying to catch him and find out how to get home.

FIVE

"Wake up, Mother." It was Barbara bending over her, shaking her shoulder. "Mother, please don't go back to sleep." The face was pale and drawn, sharply in focus now.

"What is it?" Immediately Gladys was wide awake. Then, as Barbara relaxed, she realized there was no immediate crisis. "I must have dozed off."

The girl nodded her head. "I wanted to let you sleep, but I guess the eggnog . . . and all that stuff on the radio . . . I don't feel so good, I've got kind of a headache and "

"Of course, baby." This was easy. Among all the strange new things these words came automatically. "You go upstairs and take an aspirin and get into bed" It was wonderful not to have to *think* what to say. "If you can't get to sleep, call me."

She managed an encouraging smile, and Barbara responded with a watery imitation of her own grin.

"I'm sorry," the girl fumbled. "I don't like to walk out on you . . ."

"Go on," Gladys told her. "Shoo! Get to bed."

The old formula was still good. Barbie turned obediently and went up the stairs.

Gladys glanced at her watch. It was only a little after nine. She hadn't slept long, and she was stiff all over, but she felt better. She walked around the room, getting the kinks out of her joints.

She could hear Barbara splashing in the bathroom. Once a door opened, and once she thought she heard Ginny's voice pleading outside the bathroom, then the click of the latch and the two voices raised a little in minor altercation, quiet now and then arguing again. After a while there were footsteps going down the hall, and finally Barbara returning to her room alone.

Gladys turned the radio up a little louder and sat down in the big armchair where Jon listened to the baseball game, Saturday after-noons. Her fingers rubbed the worn

upholstery, wandered of their own accord to the table that held his pipes and tobacco, riffled the pages of the big, bright-colored merchandising magazine in the rack underneath. Frightened by the longing that crept up on her, she tried to concentrate on the radio.

"Evacuation is already beginning in some sections. Please do not call Emergency Headquarters for information. If you are to be evacuated, you will receive instructions . . ."

Something was thumping at the door. It was heavy, authoritative, but strange. She hesitated, trying to make it out, and it came again, imperatively. She went to the front window that gave a clear view of the porch and pulled back the drape.

She had forgotten to turn on the porch light, and the street lampswere off. In the moonlight only the bulky outline of a man was dimly visible. Another bang on the door: Gladys almost ran to un-bolt it, opened it hastily, and stepped back a pace in sudden panic.

The visitors took her reaction for invitation. They stepped inside and closed the door behind them. Not until then did either one of them lift the visor set into the helmet top of the bulky one-piece suit that covered each completely, shoes, hands, head, and all.

The simple act of revealing their faces changed them from fictional monsters to human beings. Gladys breathed again, and recognized one of the men, with surprise, as Peggy Turner's hus-band, Jim. The man with him was young and serious-looking.

`"This here is Dr. Spinelli, Miz Mitchell," Turner introduced him. "He's an intern over at the new V. A. Hospital."

Gladys tried to acknowledge the introduction with a smile but her mouth was still stiff from the moment of fear.

"Sorry if I gave you a turn, Miz Mitchell," the big man apolo-gized, "but I knew you had kids here, so I thought it would be better to knock instead of ringing the bell. I know it makes a funny sound with these gloves on."

"Oh, it wasn't that. It was just—well, you look so strange."

"You should hear the kids, some places we go," he broke in, grinning. "They think we're Martians or something. Some of 'em never quit bawlin' till we go." He laughed, a bid sounding mascu-line laugh that made her worries seem silly.

"Do you . . ." She hesitated. "Is it dangerous outside? Is that why you have to wear *them?"* she blurted out defiantly.

"Now don't you get yourself upset, Miz Mitchell," he reassured her. "We got to wear these things because we go out so much in different neighborhoods. Some places could be dangerous, and we never know till we get there. But this street right here, you could go out for a pleasure walk and never get hurt."

Dr. Spinelli cleared his throat uncomfortably. Gladys turned to him, questioning, and he said hastily, "Mr. Turner's absolutely right, Mrs. Mitchell. But just the same, you better not try it." He produced an apologetic smile. "This neighborhood's been perfectly

safe all along as far as we know, but there are still clouds of hot stuff blowing around. You shouldn't go outdoors until you get word it's all right—maybe sometime tomorrow."

Jim Turner bent on the younger man a glance of amusement that brought a slow

flush up over the bony features. Gladys remembered the urine samples and reached for the tray.

"Do you take these now?" she asked, too brightly, breaking the silence.

The young doctor accepted them eagerly. "I'll take them right out to the truck," he said. "I have to ask you a few questions later, but I can get these checked meanwhile."

She noticed that he stowed the jars away carefully in a big pouch pocket built into one side of his suit, and fastened the zipper securely before he opened the door.

Turner followed her into the living room. "Don't let the young feller worry you, Miz Mitchell," he repeated. "He's a nice kid, but he's fresh out of school—all he knows is out of books, and he thinks that's all there is to know. We got to wear these outfits just because we're out so much," he insisted. "No real danger anyplace around here now, but you know how it is—a little bit here and a little bit there . . ."

He opened up the bulging pouch on his own suit, exposing a sheaf of rough white paper, and counted off several sheets. "Now this'll tell you more about everything than I could do myself," he said. "You can study it up after we're gone, and then if there's any-thing still bothering you, we'll be around again tomorrow, and I can explain it to you."

Gladys took the papers from him. They were numbered in se-quence, as if they were meant to be fastened together as a booklet. On top of the first page it said in big block letters:

VITAL FACTS FOR CIVILIANS-ATOMIC WAR
-RADIATION EFFECTS-EVACUATION

Underneath, everything was in close black type, blurred slightly from rapid mimeographing. She tore her eyes from the page, trying

to get her thoughts together, to remember all the things she had to ask. Turner was saying something, but she didn't listen. She had written everything down someplace. Of course, it was all in her apron pocket, upstairs.

"Listen," she said, "some things have got me worried." There

was one special thing that couldn't wait till morning. What was it?

Then she remembered. "Is there anything in here about the water?" "Water?" He didn't understand.

"Is it all right?" she persisted. "Do we have to boil it or any-thing?"

"Nothing to worry about there." He seemed very confident. "The water's okay. They've got a gang of Geigers on it all the time. Any-thing went wrong, they'd cut off the supply."

He saw her mouth open for a horrified protest. "I mean, just the supply from the local reservoir," he amended quickly. "There's some way they can bring the water straight through and by-pass this reservoir altogether. Might be without for a couple of hours, but no more than that. Boiling wouldn't help anyhow," he added. "You can't get hot stuff out that way. You just relax and take it as easy as you can. I'll be around again on the truck, and when you read through those papers you'll see we didn't leave much out."

"But how . . . who's doing it all?" For the first time Gladys was curious. "Who's running everything? Who put these out?" She rustled the papers in her hand.

"Oh, we've been getting ready for this a long time." He smiled knowingly. "Our

country wasn't so dumb."

"I know," she said impatiently, "the bombs and planes and all that. You can't read a newspaper without knowing about those things," she added bitterly. "But I didn't know about anything else—the trucks you're using, and those—diving-suit things you wear "

"Well, nobody else knew either," he assured her. "Nobody who wasn't in it. When you want to win you got to keep a poker face and play it close to the vest. And any time the government let out any information about what we were doing some scientist would

start yelling about warmongers, or some reds would have a demon-stration."

"Well, when did *you . . . ?"* Then she realized: Of course—the "business trips"! She sat down on the edge of the sofa, thinking, and looked up at Turner with a new respect. *I wonder if Peggy knew?*

"I was in the Reserves," he said, "and I guess I had the right kind of background or record. They sort of cased me in slow. They had to be pretty careful about picking people who could keep their mouths shut. Now," he changed the subject firmly, "let's see, is there anything else you got to know? They're gonna be wanting blood donations, but I don't think they'll take 'em from folks this close to the city. Not till after the lab boys get them samples checked, anyhow."

When she wanted to know what the blood was for he pointed again to the papers he'd given her.

"It's all in there—in that part about radiation disease," he said. "You read that good, and you'll know practically as much about it as I do. Now there's one other thing I got to tell you, about evacuation. If

A muffled pounding at the door interrupted him. This time Gladys flew to open it. The young doctor came in and went straight into the living room, waiting until Gladys had closed the door again before he raised his visor and nodded curtly to Turner.

"Looks okay. The Geiger doesn't show anything," he told Gladys. A peculiar feeling of antagonism between the two men seemed to fill the room. It was upsetting; she almost didn't hear the question the doctor was asking.

"I'm sorry." She tried to cover up the wave of irrational resent-ment. "I'm afraid I didn't . . ."

"Just a routine question," he explained. "Has anyone in your family been ill any time during the evening?"

"Well, none of us felt too good." She didn't know whether it counted, really, but she started to tell him about the incident at supper. The doorbell buzzed sharply. Turner waved her to go on and answered it himself.

He was back almost immediately, explaining, "They need me there." There was an edge of triumph in his voice that Gladys didn't understand. But he couldn't go yet; there were too many things she still had to know.

"Will you be back?"

His visor was already halfway down, but he opened it again and turned back to her.

"1 think I told you just about everything," he said. He was reas-suring again, but impatient too. Whatever was waiting for him out-side, he wanted to get to it.

Why, he likes this! Gladys thought suddenly. He's having fun! "Anything special on your mind?" He was waiting, restlessly polite.

"About the water," she said urgently, remembering her fear. "I know you said it was all right, but . . ." She felt foolish, pressing the matter, but she had to ask. "Didn't I hear something about germs that could be put in the water supply? Wouldn't boiling help that?"

"They're checking that too," he told her impatiently. "You don't have to go looking for extra work, Miz Mitchell. You'll have plenty to do, just following instructions. If there's anything dangerous, we'll let you know. Now . . ." His voice was warm and genial again, reassuring her. "If that's all that was on your mind . . ."

He wouldn't wait any longer.

"No!" she exploded. "No, that's not all! There are a million things on my mind. I want to know why my husband can't come home, and what to do for my children, and where my son is, and whether my house is safe. How long is this whole impossible thing going to go on? How long do I have to wait to find out if my hus-band's alive or dead?" The involuntary violence of the declaration left her startled and ashamed. She sat down again weakly. "I'm sorry." Her voice was dull. "I know you can't tell me any of those things."

He made the faintest motion toward the door. "There's nothing else, then?"

"No," she agreed, "there isn't anything else."

The doctor was nice. He waited until the door was closed and said, as if nothing had happened, "You all felt better after the tea, though?" He smiled for the first time, really, a smile that used his whole face. It was unexpectedly sweet, and totally disarming.

"Yes . . . oh yes." She wanted to thank him, but she didn't know how. It was hard to concentrate on the story. She heard the motor start up outside and was suddenly panic-stricken. He was going away; she knew he wouldn't come back. He thought she was just another hysterical woman.

The doctor was asking her to go on. Of course—they couldn't go without him! But she could see he was worried too. She told him about Barbie feeling bad again after the eggnog.

"That doesn't sound so bad," he told her. "I think everybody in the country must have lost his appetite tonight." He smiled again, that surprisingly charming smile in his long, sober face. "Of course we won't know anything for sure until we get real lab analy-ses on all the samples, but so far there is no reason to believe that your children were exposed to anything. Your girls' symptoms don't sound too serious—you *would* know if either of them had been really sick? I mean real nausea with vomiting."

"Good Lord, yes!" She found it was possible to laugh. "I'd have had to clean it up."

"Well, I guess that takes care of everything." He paced rest-lessly to the window and tried to look out. Then he stood still, his head cocked to one side. What was he listening for? "Look," he said suddenly, "there's one question of yours that I can answer." He stopped, hesitated, and then explained, "I don't think I'm supposed to tell you. I'd rather Turner didn't walk in on it. . . . But you shouldn't count too much on your husband getting back here soon. There's some talk about evacuating this

whole section—and I know they've stopped sending patients through to the hospital here. It's the same thing I told you before: we won't really know how safe this neighborhood is until after the analyses are finished at the lab."

"You mean you don't even know yet whether it's all right out there?" She stared at. the soft drapes closed across the windows, as if she could see through to the unknown danger.

"Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to make you think *that.* We know it's okay right now. What we have to find out is whether it was all right all day—and whether it'll still be all right tomorrow."

"But the bombs were miles away! How could there be any danger around here?" she demanded.

"It's not that simple," he explained. "There's dust and smoke from the city—God knows what a freak wind could do. And with the underwater bombs, there's the rain—and then we don't even know yet what kind of bombs they used. I mean what they had in them—there are different kinds of fission materials, you know. They need different treatment. And we don't even know how the damn things came over—excuse me, Mrs. Mitchell. I get

"Don't be silly." She wanted him to go on. "I'm a big girl."

"Well, we don't know whether they were bombs or guided mis-siles. Our radar didn't catch any airplanes overhead, and that looks bad. The war heads could have been on self-propelled missiles with atomic engines, and that would mean

Gladys made a helpless gesture of protest. "I'd like to explain it all, Mrs. Mitchell," he wound up ruefully, "but I'm afraid it would take too long, if you don't understand that part. You'll just have to take my word for it. Until we know more about the nature of the bombs we have to double-check everybody and everything anywhere near a bombed area. And these urinalyses will give us a safe check—at least as long as the lab equipment holds out."

"I guess T should have read more about it before," Gladys said diffidently. "I . . . well, I just couldn't believe it. I never really believed any nation would *use* it this way."

"We did," he said harshly. "We used it in 1945. In Japan. Why wouldn't somebody else use it on us? God knows " He stopped himself. "I'm sorry," he said shortly. "After all, it isn't *your* fault. I'm just blowing off steam."

"Well, it was your turn," Gladys smiled. "I blew my top a while back."

He looked bewildered and then remembered. "That was nothing! You should see some of the women we run into. I think it was probably just because you've been behaving so well that I forgot *I* was supposed to be helping *you.* Anyhow," he resumed briskly—and Gladys thought suddenly, He's so young!—"the thing to re-member about radiation disease is that it can be treated and cured just like any other disease . . . just so we catch it early enough."

"What do you mean? How early?"

He didn't answer right away; he was listening again. Faintly, now, Gladys heard the motor starting up again, but far away, as if it were down at other end of the block.

"I'll explain that later," he said hastily. "They'll be back in a minute now, and there's one other thing I wanted to tell you. *Please* don't let it alarm you—but that wasn't a

bad idea you had about the water—just to make extra sure. We don't know whether they're going to try any bacteriological

The ringing of the telephone aggravated an already heightened imagination.

`"Hello," she breathed into the mouthpiece, hope and fear fight-ing for possession of the syllables.

"Oh, Gladys, I'm so glad you're still up. Did that squad truck get to your house yet?"

Edie Crowell again. "They're here now." Gladys was annoyed. "I mean, the doctor is. Do you need him?"

"How could I possibly know whether I need him? They won't tell us anything, so we have no way of knowing if there's anything wrong. I just thought I heard a motor outside, and I wondered if the truck was getting near the house yet." A stifled sob came over the line. "Gladys, can't you understand? I'm here all alone, and I keep hearing about these rioters and looters and maniacs out in the streets

"What on earth are you talking about?" Fear tightened in her throat again. "What's *wrong* with you, Edie?" She was dimly aware of the doctor crossing the room to answer another muffled thump-ing at the door.

"Well, Betsy called me up and told me all about it," Edith rushed on defensively. "She got the information because she works for the *Telegraph.* There are all kinds of people wandering around who escaped from the city, and they're crazy because they know they're going to die, and they're breaking into people's houses, and drink-ing, and attacking women, too. And I'm all

Oh, my God! Helplessly Gladys moved the receiver a little further from her ear to protect herself from the penetrating shrill-ness. Finally, unable to listen any longer or even to find words to end the conversation, she dropped it unceremoniously back on the hook. The doctor had returned, bringing Turner with him. Flushed and frightened, she repeated what Edith had told her.

"We better get over there," Dr. Spinelli said wearily.

Turner nodded agreement. "I know that one. Thinks she owns the whole town. Give her something to knock her out, Doc, or she'll be making trouble all night." He turned to Gladys. "You'll he all right, Miz Mitchell," he promised. "Just don't get panicky. If you have any trouble, remember I'll be around again tomorrow."

He laid a gauntleted hand on her shoulder, and she knew it was meant to be reassuring. But something in the touch of the heavy glove sent chills chasing down her spine. She was glad when he wheeled his bulk around, pulled his visor smartly down, and headed for the door.

A soldier off to the wars! It was funny, until she realized that was just exactly what he was.

SIX

She was still shivering. Her hands were icy, and the teapot on the table offered no warmth when she touched it. She picked it up and carried it back to the kitchen. It was while she sat waiting for the fresh water to boil that she realized neither of them

had answered her question about the things Edie said on the phone. She remembered the doctor's shrug and Turner's impatience to be gone—but they had never once said whether it was true.

She tried to fight down panic, telling herself she was as bad as Edie Crowell, that

she couldn't afford to give in to the fears and vapors that a childless woman could have. Still the thought per-sisted, and even as she sipped at the comfort of hot tea in a brightly lit room she couldn't throw off the newly aroused fear—the age-old fear—of wild men lurking in the dark. Every noise outside was a skulking footstep, and every familiar creak in the house a stealthy intruder.

Hastily she picked up the teapot, and took it into the living room, where the radio was producing music. She listened incredu-lously to the pulsing rhythm of a song she had danced to with Jon—when was it? A week ago? Four days? In another lifetime? Standing there alone, in the middle of the room, she could feel his arms around her, and the still firm length of his body against hers, their legs moving together, his head bent toward her, so she could see the gray that was beginning to touch the edges of his hair—and the urgent pressure of his hand on her back that made her forget the gray.

The music changed, drifted into an old, old song, played without words, taunting her memory. The yearning conviction of Jon's near-ness left her, but, eyes still closed, she managed to keep him in the room. He was in his leather jacket, the old brown suede; he had taken the trash can outside and a gust of cool night air came in before he locked the back door again. He was bent over his desk, plowing grimly through a piled-up stack of papers. On the ash tray at his hand a cigarette burned monotonously, offering up incense at midnight to the gods of success. He was down on his back on the floor, mock wrestling with Ginny, scrambling and rolling around, his uneven white teeth parted in a shout of good will toward the *world. He* was, best remembered of all, standing legs akimbo in the bedroom, his hair still damp from the shower. The fresh white, lightly starched shirt bloused out smartly as he buckled his beltflat across his narrow waist and hips. The smell of talc and shaving lotion was so real, the billowing white shirt so crisp and right, that Gladys knew, suddenly and surely, that Jon was there with her; this whole thing, this impossible afternoon and evening, was a night-mare, a sick dream, and in a moment her husband's hand would be on her shoulder; his voice would be bantering, refusing to take serious stock in woman's ills, but just the same he would ask her, "Tea make you feel better, honey?"

On the radio the announcer's voice broke in over the fading strains of the music.

"Until there is further news we will continue our selections of favorite songs. Stay tuned in to this station; we will interrupt this program to announce any new developments. Next we have an old favorite—'Stardust.' Stay tuned in." The music began again. The haunting, nostalgic strain. The song of her own adolescence. This was no nightmare. Jon wasn't in the kitchen. He might never be in the kitchen again.

The songs changed, and every now and then the announcer spoke for a few extra minutes between selections, with news de-signed to be reassuring. "Our radar screen has now been pro-nounced impenetrable by Army experts," they kept saying, and, "Survivors have been found on the island of Manhattan, even on the narrow strip of land west of the main explosion."

She picked up the sheaf of rough-paper mimeographed sheets Turner had given her and tried to read. She put aside the one on radiation sickness and found one labeled "General Instructions and Information."

BLOOD DONATIONS—required of all citizens not resident in danger zones or in

areas immediately adjoining danger zones. Well, she had given blood before; if they came for it she could do that much.

DANGER zoNEs—those where the bomb blast had been visible and those that had been swept by radioactivity following the blasts. Well, this was neither . . . and then she remembered that moment in the laundry, the instant of brilliant, blinding sunlight, and then the cloud and darkness. Was that the bomb blast? What time had

that been? Was that what they meant by "visible"? But if it were, surely, she'd have known sooner than she did. The neighborhood would have been alive with talk and fear and rumor.

"It must have been something awfully important," Barbara had said. "Everybody called up; all the mothers." And the phone kept ringing—the phone at home. She'd never answered; she thought they were all for Barbie. And that nice young teacher: ". . . so good of you," Miss Pollock had said. Because she hadn't called up, of course.

She riffled unenthusiastically through the sheets. She knew she should read them through and she didn't want to. She was too tired; it was too easy to get scared. On the radio, music and an-nouncements repeated themselves, old songs, a generation old; old news, an hour, almost a day old. The sheets of information that she didn't want were a blur of black and white, turning gray. The cherry-red robe held her warm as if, being a present from Jon, it still held the feel of his arms in its fiber.

His arms, and his mouth . . .

How silly, she thought drowsily. How silly to feel this way now: a respectable old married woman wanting her husband as she had wanted him almost twenty years before, feeling the same desperate urgency for him. She stroked the soft wool of the robe and shrugged down inside the collar, rubbing chin and check on the comfort of it.

Resolutely she picked up the sheet about radiation sickness. She stumbled through a prefatory paragraph. It was nothing to become alarmed about, the pamphlet assured her; it was no mystery; it could be cured. Adequate supplies of blood for transfusions were already being collected. "Injections of toluidine blue restore the ray-im-paired ability of the blood to clot. Phenyldrazine is an antidote for anemia. . . . Urinalysis will readily detect the presence of more dangerous and faster-working fission products. Alpha emitters such as plutonium . . ."

She skipped the introduction, wondering why every effort they made to reassure her, with radio announcements and music, scien-title phrases and soothing words, did nothing but frighten her all over, again. There . . . "SYMPTOMS. After first general malaise and period of apparent good health, victim will be subject to a variety of symptoms. Hair may fall out; itching, burning, or skin discomforts, including boils and blisters, skin hemorrhages, etc., may develop. Weakness . . . nausea . . ."

The sheet dropped from her hands. Out of the jumble of un-familiar words and phrases the only thing that made sense was the sudden memory of dinner, of Barbara, picking at her plate. "I . . . I don't feel so well." And Ginny, repeating, "I don't feel so good." Barbara, rushing so suddenly from the kitchen . . .

That was nonsense; the doctor knew all about that, and he said it was all right. The doctor would have known.

She picked up the sheet again and held onto that thought. He would have told her. She stood up restlessly. Her watch said twelve forty-seven. That was impossible; it

must be later than that. On the way through the dining room the big oak clock said twelve forty-eight. They couldn't both be that far wrong.

The music on the radio gave way again to the announcer's molasses tones. "All residents of lower Westchester County are urged to be prepared for evacuation," he said, and it didn't make sense. *This* was lower Westchester. She listened as he repeated it and went on. "Spotty danger zones have been located, along the banks of the Hudson, and in the Larchmont-New Rochelle area. Residents of these areas are already being evacuated. Please do not become alarmed. If your neighborhood is in a danger zone you have already been informed. However, *all* residents in the lower part of the county are urged to be prepared for an evacuation order any time in the next few days. For further information, please read your instruction sheet carefully." Gladys found the mimeographed pages on the sofa where she had thrown them down. She searched through the close-typed pages.

EVACUATION. There it was. "lf you receive a warning to prepare for evacuation, by radio or telephone, do not become alarmed. The measure is taken to protect you. It does not necessarily mean that

you are in a danger zone or that you have been exposed to danger-ous radiations. Many people who have not been exposed will be evacuated for their own future safety. Wherever possible, the plan is to evacuate all persons within a ten-mile radius of any known danger zones. DO NOT MISTAKE *warning* for an *evacuation order.* Orders for evacuation can come *only* from Emergency Headquar-ters. The radio or telephone warning will come first.

"If you receive an *evacuation order,* after the warning, you will still have time to prepare your family and possessions. If you do receive such an *order,* study the suggestions below carefully, and start preparing immediately. Remember, no one will be allowed to take more than he can carry himself. Take only those things that you are certain you will *need.* If there are valuables in your home, which you are forced to leave behind, give a list to your squadman to be filed at Emergency Headquarters. Small items of jewelry and similar valuables may be given to the squadman, if well wrapped and clearly labeled. . . ."

Gladys put the sheet down. All kinds of people wandering around, Edie Crowell had said, crazy, drinking, housebreaking . . . You could think about your home and possessions, you could plan on hiding things, on saving and packing. People had done that be-fore; that was what war meant. It was the other part you couldn't think about: strange deadly radiations, silent, invisible killers.

The announcer finished repeating his message, and some idiot in the broadcasting station started playing cowboy songs. Gladys turned the radio down as low as she dared and set about making up a list of all the things they'd need. Ginny wouldn't be able to carry anything—not much at least. She'd want a toy, probably Pallo, and she might be able to handle a small suitcase, the tiny one she used playing around the house. Barbie was strong; she could take a big bag. And another big one for herself. She thought of substituting two smaller cases, to make balancing easier, but she'd have to keep a hand free, with Ginny along. The things to go in: pajamas, bathrobe, slippers, toothbrush, hairbrushes and combs . . . She stopped herself. This was the wrong kind ofthinking. One brush and comb could do for all of them. Towels? A couple if there was room. She thought of stories of the last great war in Europe, and

added' soap, toilet paper.

Blankets? No. She could wear her fur coat, and Barbie the heavy camel's hair, in spite of the warm weather. They could sleep under them if they had to, and Ginny could use the bathrobes. One set of decent clothes for each of them, dress, stockings, slip, every-thing, but they'd better wear slacks and shirts traveling. She tried to remember where she'd put the blue corduroys.

Upstairs, in the attic, maybe, something creaked, and the wind blew the branches of the old elm against the house. *Thud, rattle, thud, rattle—the* branches of the elm, and a loose window rattling.

Gladys sat bolt upright. Her watch said one-twenty. She ducked around swiftly, to the peeping window, but there was no one on the porch. *Thud, rattle.* Not a man knocking. No one banging at the door. Just the tree and a window, nothing more. She was glad now that she had locked up everything downstairs, when Ginny had her tantrum.

But that was only downstairs.

She started at the top, in the attic. She had to force herself to open the trap door and reach for the light string, then go prying around with the flashlight, into all the dark corners where an invader could hide. She checked the small windows, made sure they were locked.

It was easier when the attic was done. On the second floor there was the familiar big bedroom, Tom's room, and the guest room. Carefully she locked the only window that was open.

She hesitated to use the overhead light in Ginny's room, but if she left a shadow unexplored she'd worry all night. Resolutely she switched it on and scanned the room, then turned it quickly off again, as Ginny started burrowing under the covers to escape the light.

Under the gentler beam of the flashlight the child slept in her favorite position, knees drawn up under her, arms sheltering her head. Her breathing was even and regular. Her cheek, when Gladys

touched it, was warm with sleep, and nothing more. Most assur-edly her hair was not falling out, nor was her soft baby skin marred with angry rough blotches.

In Barbie's big back room, only recently converted from bright-colored washables to adolescent chintz and frills, it was perfectly safe to keep the light on. Nothing short of mayhem could ordinarily wake Barbara before she had slept her fill—and at that, it would have to be a noisy kind of mayhem. Now pink-pajamaed limbs sprawled out in every possible direction from the tangled knot of bedclothes; wavy dark hair tumbled over the wrinkled pillow slip; the gently curved young breast rose and fell evenly.

Gladys went over and dropped a kiss lightly on her daughter's untroubled forehead. She made a futile attempt at straightening out the blankets, but gave up when Barbara stirred restively. She turned to go, and a sleep-soaked, half-aspirated word followed her.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, baby," she whispered. "I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

"Is Daddy home yet?"

"Not yet, darling. Go back to sleep." Now that the girl was half roused anyhow,

Gladys bent again to smooth the blankets. Auto-matically Barbara lifted a leg to let the sheet be unwrapped.

"I *wish* Daddy would come home," she said.

"I know, baby. I do too. He will." She sat on the edge of the bed, stroking the girl's head, knowing she wasn't really awake. Barbara had been known to carry on conversations for as long as half an hour in the middle of the night, and never remember a word of it in the morning. She whispered, low enough so Barbara wouldn't hear if she was asleep, "Do you feel all right now, Barbie?"

"Sure." There was healthy irritation in the answer. "There's nothing wrong with me. You go to bed, Mom." She turned over, away from the stroking fingers, and was immediately asleep.

Bed? Gladys thought. Why not? She had never gone to bed before, until Jon was home, but tonight—tonight it would be sillyto wait up for him. She thought of the bed, cold and empty and alone. Not alone as it was when Jon was working late downstairs, nor as it was when on a rare Sunday morning he crept out to let her sleep, and fixed breakfast to bring up to her later. But now a differ-ent kind of alone, something she'd never thought about without a shudder that drove the thought away—alone, perhaps, and cold for the rest of her life. No.

She might curl up on the couch in the living room. Then if the phone rang, or if anything at all happened . . . "People wan-dering . . . crazy . . . home-breaking, drinking . . . attacking . . ." If anything at all happened, she would be there, ready, and not in her empty bed.

She had to do something. She would never stay awake if she didn't find something to do. She couldn't go down there to the empty living room and the terrifying radio.

She opened up the big upstairs closet, the one she'd been mean-ing to clean out for years, and began exploring for things they might need.

There was Jon's camping stuff, unused since he had given up fishing in favor of golf. The nested pans and utensils would be useful. And maybe the knapsack. She slid the straps over her shoulders and stifled a giggle, remembering her one dismal attempt to tramp through the woods alongside her new husband with one of these things on her back. Maybe Barbie could use it; she was a more athletic type.

Then, with half the things on her list collected, and as many more that weren't on the list at all, weariness fell on her like a smothering blanket. The wind must have started up again, because she could hear the tree and the window once more. *Thud, rattle . . . thud, rattle.* She wasn't imagining it. *Thud. Rattle. Thud.* She glanced again at her watch. Almost four! Well, she could try to wake Barbie, in another hour. But somebody had to stay up.

Down in the living room she found the cold teapot and took it back to the kitchen, then decided on coffee instead.

The electric clock said three fifty-six. Outside there was a gray

hint of dawn approaching—not enough to make any real light, just enough to make the shadows seem darker. She sat at the gleaming white-topped table, struggling to. keep awake until the robin on the kettle whistled for her, and once more the noises and imagined footsteps assailed her. The rattle and thump of the wind sounded for all the world like someone trying to force the door. The porch

creaked, and she was sure someone was out there, but she wouldn't look. Again it creaked, and still she wouldn't look—but she did.

There was a man outside the glass panes of the door. She shut her eyes to blot out the image. When she opened them again the man was still there. He knocked on the doorframe—thud; he shook the doorknob—rattle. Gladys couldn't understand why she was no longer afraid. *Thud . . . rattle; thud . . . rattle.*

Hope sped through her mind and was gone almost before it came; Jon had a key. And the squadmen used the front door. A neighbor? Edie Crowell, driven at last to leave home in spite of all the warnings? No, the shadowy bulk was definitely masculine. Of course, it was the hat; there was no mistaking the outlines of a man's hat.

Thud, rattle. He was at it again. Fascinated, Gladys sat at the table and watched the door shake. She couldn't think of anything to do about it. The noise stopped, and the man, whoever he was, moved off a little.

He's going away, Gladys thought, almost disappointed.

The robin began to emit a low preparatory whistle, and she reached for a pot holder and pulled the little bird off its perch at the end of the spout. She kept watching the door. A vague shape moved outside; the man hadn't gone away after all. He seemed to bend down, and then something slithered through the crack between the threshold and the door. A piece of paper lay on the floor, small, close-lined, with three ripped round holes to show where it had been torn out of a loose-leaf memo book. She took a single step forward to pick it up, then instinctive caution stopped her from exposing herself in front of the glass pane in the door.

The pot holder was still clenched in her hand. Inspired, shepicked up the kettleful of boiling water and approached the door, .lowly, from the side, until she could reach out one foot and slide the paper closer to her. She bent over to pick it up, convinced with every move that she was about to drench herself with scalding water. But when she straightened up again, shakily, she had kettle and paper both clutched safe.

She remembered to back away to a safe angle before she put the kettle down and pinned her attention on the note. The scrawl was hasty and barely legible, the characters small and crabbed, reminis-cent of nothing so much as notes taken in college lecture halls, quick small letters written rapidly in an ill-lit room. It was oddly reassuring; you couldn't picture a fear-crazed housebreaker form-ing such dry, concise letters. She read, with difficulty, "Please let me in. Have something important to tell you. Explain everything—too much to write. Don't worry—am not dangerous."

Almost, she opened the door; it was completely convincing in its terse simplicity. *Maybe he had a message from Jon!* She started toward the door, and halfway there thought better of it. She got a sheet from the marketing pad and scribbled on it hurriedly, "Who are you?"

Then she was stopped. She couldn't slip it back under the door. The crack was too narrow. Pushing anything through would take careful maneuvering, and while she was bent down at the threshold the man could break the glass pane over her head, or push the whole door in on her. If he *was* dangerous it would almost be safer to let him in than to take that chance.

The window over the sink opened out on the back porch. Still watching the door, she opened the right-hand casement a half inch and let the paper flutter down, then banged the window hard to attract his attention, and locked it securely.

It worked. Footsteps creaked on the porch, and the shadow dis-appeared from the doorway. She couldn't see anything out of the window. He must be reaching from the side as she had, not taking chances either. Looking into the well-lighted kitchen, he had prob-ably seen the hot-water kettle in her hand. She crossed over to the

door and waited there until the shape reappeared on the other side of the glass pane, and then disappeared again briefly, bending down to slide the same paper back under. Edging it over with her foot, she got well out of range before she stooped to pick it up. She was beginning to feel very silly, balancing the kettle all this time, but she held onto it, grimly reminding herself that it was better to be foolishly careful than just plain foolish.

"Dr. Levy—teacher at Burl's—yr. daughter Barbara my math class," she deciphered under the smudges made by the sole of her slipper.

Dr. Levy . . . The name was familiar, but she couldn't recall Barbie talking about him. Who was it? Where did she remember it from?

She stood there, staring at the note. I've got to decide what to do, she thought. Right now! She saw another sheet from the same memo book come through under the door and, less cautious this time, retrieved it more rapidly.

"Please let me in," it said briefly. "Can't stay here. Getting light. Will be caught."

If she didn't let him in he'd go away. And she didn't want him to go away. It was as simple as that. She didn't give herself a chance to reconsider. The door key was in the lock; she turned it quickly and opened the door enough to let him slip through, but she kept the kettle ready.

The man paid no attention to the steaming water. "Turn out the light," he commanded, and turned his hack on both Gladys and her improvised weapon. A thrill of alarm went through her as she saw him lock the door.

His face was shadowed by stubble and streaked with dust. The rough tweed suit, baggy on his thin frame, might have been good once; now the pants were spattered with mud and grime, and one sleeve was ripped halfway up.

Terror-stricken, Gladys watched his right hand slide inside his jacket to the spot below the shoulder where she knew—from the movies—a holster could hang. Her hand, on the kettle, tensed and drew back.

"For God's sake, woman," he said again, "turn the light out! And put that pot down before you hurt somebody."

Jon, oh, Jon, she prayed, I need you! She stood there, holding the kettle she knew she wouldn't use, and watched him back away to the far corner of the kitchen, out of range of door and windows.

`"Look, if you won't turn the light out, isn't there some other room where people can't see in so easily?" At last his hand was coming out from under the jacket.

Jon . . . Jon, come home!

Incongruously the man brought forth a spectacle case from which he removed a spotless pair of glasses, and placed them ten-derly on the bridge of his nose.

In spite of his rough urgency, his voice was modulated, his speech educated, his

words rational.

I'm a fool, she thought. He's crazy. I'm being such a fool. But she put the kettle down and motioned silently to the swinging door.

SEVEN

"Mrs. Mitchell, I came to warn you . . . about your children. You better sit down," he interjected, "and listen carefully. I can't stay long."

It was like something out of a bad play—the man, dirty, torn, and battered, standing in that cheerful room. Gladys tried to re-member whether Barbie ever had, really, mentioned his name.

"Of course," she murmured, "go on."

At first the words and phrases kept jumbling together in her mind, full of things she didn't understand, and, like the informa-tion sheets and the radio, filling her with formless fears.

After a while the fear took form. She knew what he was going to say. She felt herself beginning to shiver.

"I wish you'd sit down," he interrupted himself again. She shook

her head stubbornly, but he wasn't waiting anyhow. "Possibly I am wrong," he said. "I pray God that I am. But I think your daughter was exposed to radiation today, perhaps to a dangerous extent."

He's crazy, she told herself again . . . certainly half crazed with worry and fatigue. He must have been out all night; that would ex-plain the stubble and grime, and the wild shining eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Levy." She was very cool, fire in her head and ice in her voice. "I'm sure you're trying to tell me something, but I guess I'm too tired to follow it very well. What radiations do you mean? I didn't know there was a bomb near here. I'm afraid I really know so little about all this . . ." She looked across at him, hopefully, politely.

"You're too tired!" Scorn wiped the weariness out of his voice. "My dear woman, don't you realize . . . ? No, of course you wouldn't. You and all the others! You
"

When he spoke again his eyes were still wild, but not his voice. "That doesn't matter; you don't have to understand—just listen. I have good reason to believe that the school was in a danger zone. The bomb, as you put it, must have passed directly overhead. Cer-tainly there was radioactive rain in this vicinity."

"But it said over and over on the radio," she objected reason-ably, "that the government would notify us if we lived in a danger zone. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" he snapped. "Why in God's name do you think I came here? I'm sorry, Mrs. Mitchell, but I've met this same thing everywhere tonight—people who didn't understand before and refuse to believe now." He took a step forward, too close to her. Her first quick fear gave way to a fantastic notion that he was about to shake a finger in her face.

"Now listen, will you? They couldn't have told you if they don't know yet themselves." Who? she wondered, and tried not to let her thoughts stray; she really ought to listen. "I just happened to be there, but I don't have all the facts either. I don't know how wide a range it covered . . ."

What? What covered what?

"And I don't know how penetrating it was. Not everybody in the dangerous area was necessarily affected. People who were in-doors, for instance—I think your little one was—"

"Well, weren't you indoors, Mr. Levy?" The more he spoke, the less convincing he was.

"No! The bombs fell in the city between one-fifteen and one-thirty. It just happens that during the one o'clock hour I took a group of ninth-graders out to Belsen's—the aircraft plant, About fifteen minutes' walk from the school, We got back just about two, and it was starting to rain. That's when I noticed your little one—she's in the kindergarten group, isn't she?" He didn't wait for her to answer, didn't give her a chance to stop him. "They were outside playing in the yard when we came back, but they were hustled indoors as soon as the rain started. I think they were inside at the other crucial time, but you should check on that. At any rate I'm certain they weren't exposed to the rain, because I distinctly recall what an unholy fuss they made about going in. It wasn't actually raining in the yard, you see, just across the street. But there was fog around the school."

"Yes, I know all about that," Gladys stopped him,.

"You do?"

Why was he so startled? "Please go on," she said clearly. "I can't imagine that you came here to tell me my little girl didn't catch cold in the rain."

"Catch cold?" His face was carefully devoid of expression, his manner infuriatingly patient, as if she were a particularly dull small child. "Look, I want you to sit down now and listen carefully, once all the way through, while I explain it. Go on," he repeated grimly, "you better sit down."

Gladys became conscious of her hand gripping the chair in front of her. With complete astonishment she stared at the whitened knuckles, as if they belonged to someone else, saw the fingernails biting into the rough fabric of the chair.

"If *you* will," she bargained.

"All right." Impatiently he started to sit down on the sofa in

back of him and became painfully aware of the mud caked on his clothes.

"Don't worry about it." But she was pleased and surprised at his hesitation.

He took a deep breath. "I was outside at a time when I believe there were bombs overhead," he began. "Your daughter. Barbara was with me. We were also, for a very short time, exposed to rain that may have been radioactive. At one of those times Barbara received radiations that may have been serious enough to make her sick. I've been

"Mr. Levy!" Gladys caught her breath between her teeth. "Do you know what you're saying?" He was too controlled; that was a kind of hysteria too. "Can you prove any of it?"

"God damn it, yes! Yes, I have proof—the best proof there is! I know I was exposed because I've tested myself. And I was about to tell you that two of the other children I saw tonight have already shown symptoms of radiation disease. *Now* do you understand?"

She was rooted to the chair, her legs and arms, like her throat, paralyzed with disaster.

Oh, Jon, come and help me!

The man's face went through a total transformation from fury to abject apology. *"I am* sorry, Mrs. Mitchell," he said. "I shouldn't have told you that way. . ."

"Don't." She found her voice at last. *"No,* don't touch me!" He drew back his hand; it had almost reached her shoulder. He's crazy! He is!

"No, I'm not crazy." His laugh was tired and bitter. She must have said it out loud. "You want me to go away," he said. "Well, I have to go. I've spent too much time here already. There are other people . . . Maybe Barbara escaped." He started toward the din-ing-room door. "If she hasn't shown any symptoms yet . . ."

"Of course she hasn't!" But now that he was going, a million doubts had to be pushed aside. "Don't you think I'd have done something about it before now? The doctor was here, you know. He said there was nothing wrong with her."

"The doctor?" He stopped and looked back.

"Of course. On that squad truck they have." Then she remem-bered. "And what's more, he did a urinalysis, and *that* was all right."

"Urinalysis? You mean you got a report already?"

"Right away, while the truck was here." She felt smug. They're all right. They're both all right. Now he'll see they are.

"The truck? Why, the fools!" he exploded. "They're actually letting people believe . . . Look, Mrs. Mitchell, did they say they made an *analysis* in the truck? How long did it take?"

"Not long." She simply would not answer any more questions. You said you were going, she thought fiercely. Now get out of here! "They didn't say what they did. They just said the checkup was all right." Then she remembered. "They said they were taking samples to a laboratory for analysis, but they checked it, and it was all right." He had to believe her.

"They must have Geiger-checked it. Well, that helps. Look, are you *sure* Barbara hasn't been sick?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Have you asked her?"

"I don't need to ask her. It wasn't anything but nerves."

He *had* to believe her. Hopefully she looked up at his impatient brown eyes, but there was no comfort there. Jon would have soothed her, would have taken the burden on his own broad shoul-ders. Jon's eyes were gray. Why did this man have brown eyes? Why didn't he *help* instead of making things worse?

"I hope you're right," he said. "At any rate, if I haven't con-vinced you of any danger by now, I never will." He started for the door again. Thank God, thank God, he's going. "You will do as you like, of course," he finished. "But if I were you I'd wake Barbara up and ask her—right now."

But she was all right when I looked at her. She was sleeping all right. Maybe she'd just had a touch. Maybe she was over it already. Maybe . . .

He was going. Maybe . . .

"Wait!" she cried, suddenly frantic. "Wait, please don't go." What would I do if she had it? "I'll wake her right now; it won't take long." She walked faster. "Please," she said again, and saw he was standing there, waiting.

Even with the overhead light shining in her eyes, Barbara didn't want to wake up. "Umm-hmm," she said emphatically, and pulled the crumpled heap of bedding off

her legs, over her head.

Just like her father!

"Wake up, Barbie. Barbie, you've got to wake up and tell me something."

"Ummh? What?" She sat up, abruptly and startlingly awake, shedding the blankets and blinking. `"What is it, Mother? *Has any-thing happened?"*

"No, honey. Nothing's happened. Only there's something I have to know. Listen, Barbie, last night

"What time is it? Did Daddy come home yet?"

"A quarter past five. Listen, Barbie, last night, when you didn't feel well, did you . . ." She was taken aback at the awkwardness of the question. Why, it was insulting! "Did you throw up or any-thing last night?"

"Well, gosh, I just felt a little sick, that's all." Barbara flopped back on the bed and pulled the sheet disgustedly over her head. "You're sure that's all?" .

From under the sheet she muffled, "Sure."

Gladys stood up dizzily, smoothed the sheet, straightened the cover. "I'm sorry I woke you, Babsy, but someone came from the school and got me all worried. You can go back to sleep."

"From school?" Sleepy but curious. "Who?"

"A Mr. Levy. He says he's your math teacher."

"Doc Levy? Is he still here?" Barbara sat bolt upright, ignoring the bright light. "Why did he want to . . . Is he on the emer-gency squad?"

"No. Should he be?" *Doc Levy!* Now she knew where she'd heard the name. Not from Barbie at all, but from Tom—inces-sandy, for two years, before he went away.

"He knows everything about atom bombs," Barbara told her. "He was at Oak Ridge and everything." She was struggling with the zipper on her bathrobe. "Only he got black-listed or something on account of refusing to do war work, and making a lot of speeches and being on committees, so he had to go be a teacher. It's supposed to be a secret. If he's not on a squad or anything, what did he come for, Mom?"

"He just came by himself. It was really awfully nice of him, I guess, but he nearly scared the wits out of me." Going down the stairs, she kept throwing words carelessly over her shoulder, chat-tering with relief. "He thought you'd been exposed to something, and he made me wake you up to find out how sick you were last night."

Barefoot, Barbie padded noiselessly behind her; Gladys couldn't know when one silent foot stopped suddenly and hovered over the stair tread, in the middle of a step. Nor could she hear the quick frightened intake of breath.

"It was awfully nice of him to come, but I did get scared. . . . You didn't really have to get up, you know. He has to leave right away. Dr. Levy . . ."

She came around the turn of the stairs, through the hall, into the living room. "Here's Barbara herself. You can ask her anything you want to. I'm sure you'll see she's all right!" She was gay in her victory.

"I'm so glad." He'd been sitting on the sofa. Now he got up, tossed aside the sheaf of mimeographed sheets he'd been studying. Gladys' last doubts about him vanished at the sincerity of his smile.

"I don't need to tell you how worried I was. I've been called an alarmist before," he

admitted ruefully. `"Unfortunately *I wasn't* wrong that time. Anyhow, these sheets . . ." He pointed to the instructions and information Gladys had struggled with the night before. "I didn't see them before. Is everybody getting them? They seem quite complete—"

His sentence broke off sharply. Gladys turned to see what he

was staring at, and Barbie stepped through from the hall, white-faced and shaken.

"Barbie. Barbie, baby!" Gladys didn't have to think; she knew. And there was nothing she could do. She took the girl's two hands and held them in her own, trying to re-enact a miracle, to pass life and health through her own flesh into her daughter. But . . .

"Oh, Babsy darling, why didn't you tell me? Why?"

The hands in hers trembled violently, and for just a moment her shoulders shook convulsively. Then, before it went too far to stop, Barbara stiffened, straightened, and lifted her head.

"I didn't want to"—she had to stop and steady her voice—"to worry you. I didn't know it mattered." She shook off Gladys' pro-tests and braced herself to meet the teacher's eyes. "Doc, is it very bad if I did throw up?"

"I don't know, Barbara." He was painstakingly honest. "It might not mean anything at all. There's no way to tell until you have a blood count."

"I mean, if I am sick, if *I have* got it . . ."

"I don't know, Barbara. There just isn't any way to know." There were pain and regret in his words, but no pity, no pity at all.

Barbara sat down in her father's big armchair. Her fingers stroked the worn armrest; her back was ramrod-stiff. "But if I am," she demanded, "what's the *worst* thing? Will I—do people die from it?"

There was nothing to mark the impact of those words but Gladys' involuntary gasp. Barbara's voice, like the teacher's, was painstakingly impersonal. Only the little pauses, the trouble finding words, betrayed either of them.

"You'd have a good chance, Barbara. More than good. It's not like Hiroshima. We . . . They know how to handle it now. And they seem to have things pretty well in hand."

"But—people *do* die from it, don't they?"

"Sometimes." He answered the question as bluntly, this time, as it had been put.

It's not natural! Gladys tried to interrupt. "Don't you think

"Just a minute. I think you ought to phone these people and tell them . . ." He picked up the sheet headed "Radiation Disease." "Here, you've read this." He let his indictment of her negligence come at her askance. "Tell them that your daughter's symptoms check with this description. And that you're calling *as instructed."*

She held the sheet, reading, as the night before: "Malaise . . . nausea . . . vomiting . . ."

"But I saw this. And I didn't know ..." Her eyes dropped to the next paragraph.

"Do not be misled if the patient appears to recover perfect health after the initial attack. Many cases of stomach disorder will prove to be superficial, but *all* should be reported. The serial number at the top of this sheet is your family's identification. Use it when you make your report. *Do not delay!*"

Dr. Levy moved restlessly. "You'll be able to take care of every-thing now, Mrs.

Mitchell, and you'll be having these Emergency Headquarters people here. I'm not exactly . . . popular . . , with them."

She tried to phrase an objection to his leaving, and found herself saying instead, `"Well, if you really *have* to go . . ."

Astonishingly Barbie had rushed up to him and was clinging to his arm. "Please, Dr. Levy," she begged, "you don't have to let her chase you away."

"Barbara!" He took his arm sternly away. "Your mother's quite correct. I do have to go."

"But you don't realize—Mom's been up all night and she " Anguished, the girl paused, then turned around to face Gladys. "I'm sorry, Mother, but it's true!" She turned back to the teacher, "She just doesn't want to believe that there is anything wrong, with me. *Please* don't go!"

"Naturally your mother's upset," he answered. "She wants to be alone with you for a while, and it will probably be good for both of you. If you're not scared she won't be."

Gladys felt fury burning within her and didn't know whom to be *angry* at. She turned swiftly to the telephone.

EIGHT

The operator didn't seem to *want* to understand her. Gladys talked urgently into the phone, pouring out her troubles to a half-dozen unidentified switchboards, until someone finally con-nected her with the clerk at the Emergency Headquarters labora-tory.

All the time she was aware of muted conversation, of footsteps coming and going, in the room behind her. She spoke into the mouthpiece, reading oft the serial number from the top of the sheet, repeating the exact symptoms as Barbara had told them to her.

"She began to feel ill about five-thirty, became acutely nauseous, thought she was going to vomit, but didn't. Later on, she says, she was sick—about nine o'clock." Why, that was . . . No wonder she didn't tell me, Gladys thought, she must have thought the egg-nog did it!

"Yes, they checked it on the truck. They *said* it was all right." And I heard her in the bathroom, and I never knew! "Slept well . . . feels all right this morning . . . Barbara Mitchell . . . B-a-r-b-a-r-a Mitchell, M-i-t-c-h-e-1-1, 2036 . . . that's right . . . Have you any idea how long it will take? I see. . . . *Please,* if you can. . . . Thank you.

"They're going to do the analysis," she said to the room at large. "They said it might take several hours. They didn't seem to think it was too serious, Dr. Levy. They said

He wasn't there. Barbara alone sat in the center of the big chair, slender, fragile, and erect. She didn't look like a girl condemned to...

Stop it! Gladys screamed at herself.

"Where . . . ?" she asked out loud.

"He's gone." Barbara licked her lips to case the numbness out of them. "Did they say anything else?"

"No. They just said they'd notify our squadman and call us back if they could. Maybe . . ." She couldn't stand by any longer, with-out offering the child some hope. "Maybe it's a false alarm, honey. Maybe you're all right. It could have been the eggnog, you know. It really could. They said it was kind of late for you to get sick. That teacher can't be sure, you know. You *feel* all right, don't you?"

Under the flood of sympathy Barbie's dam of tears broke. Gladys soothed and patted, feeling sanity return with the grip of the tense young fingers. She had to keep going; Barbie still needed her.

"There, baby," she whispered, "you go ahead and cry. You'll feel better afterwards. Don't you believe for a minute that man knows everything. He's been wandering around like a maniac all night, and if he was really so sure he'd be in the hospital himself, wouldn't he? There, baby . . ."

Her voice went on in its soothing, monotonous reassurance, even after Barbie had pulled away.

"Hospital?" She sniffled and groped in her pocket for a handker-chief. "Why should *he* be in the hospital?"

"Didn't he tell you? That's why he was going around to all the houses. He says he got it while he was taking a walk with some of you in the afternoon."

Barbie's eyes, dry now and wide, were fascinated. "But how does he *know?*"

"He doesn't!" Gladys insisted. "He just thinks so, and he's been going around scaring everyone half to death."

The word seemed to linger on her lips, tasting bad, feeling wrong.

Death. It bounced around the room, hurled itself back at her. "But I mean, is *he* sure? Does he really think he has it?" "He *thinks so.*"

"Oh, Mom, you shouldn't have let him go out! We should have asked him to stay here "

"He wouldn't have stayed, baby. There were other people he wanted to see."

"No, there weren't." Barbara shook her head. "He said it was too late to go anyplace else—it was too light out. He said he was going to try and get back to his room. But

"Look, Barbie," Gladys interrupted briskly, "if he was going home, then that's the best thing he could have done. I don't know why he didn't go to the hospital anyway if he thought he was sick. He didn't have to go around all night telling people—he could have told the squad."

"But he couldn't! He's on a list of—well, he didn't tell me much, but I know he couldn't go to Emergency Headquarters be-cause they would have arrested him. Didn't he tell you?"

Gladys shook her head. There was something wrong with the man! It was better to have him out of the house.

"He tried to call Emergency Headquarters first," Barbie said, "but as soon as they heard his name they started stalling around, and . . . I told you about that blacklist he was on for making speeches and everything . . . and they wouldn't listen when he tried to tell them about us kids. They just said to wait where he was, and they sent some men out to arrest him. Well, anyway," she consoled herself, "I told him to come back if he needed some-place to stay. I'm glad I did that much."

"Why should you do anything?"

"Well, he might have saved my life, that's all!"

"Oh, darling . . ."

Barbara broke away from her mother's hand and stalked dra-matically to the window. She pulled back the drape and stood there, staring out into the empty street. Her blue-robed back faced the room with a passive defiance that Gladys could not penetrate.

The phone was ringing. It would wake Ginny up.

She picked up the receiver and cut off a ring in the middle. She could hold it like that, keep her hand firm over the earphone, never hear what they wanted to tell her.

She raised the receiver to her ear. "Hello." The flat word was no greeting, but an acknowledgment of the expected disaster. "Gladys!" Somebody was shrieking at her, somebody alive, per,sonal, not the controlled inhumanity of an official dealing out death. A woman.

"Mello, Edie." Recognition was curious; it was like waking up. "How are you? I mean, Edie, have you heard anything?"

"Heard anything?" The harsh laughter hurt her ears. "How could I hear anything? They won't let us find out. They won't tell us anything. They've got hillbilly songs on the radio now!"

"What do you mean, Edie?" Nothing about Jon; nothing about the city. The excitement drained out of her, left her too tired to talk. "What did you call for?"

"Because I'm a damn fool!" Edie snapped. "Because I thought you could " She broke off, stifling something that sounded like a sob. "I don't know why," she finished dully. "There's nothing you can do. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have . . ." Gladys had to strain to hear; the words seemed to crumble away before they reached her.

"Well, maybe *I can* do something. What's wrong? You've got to tell me what's wrong first." She felt a perverse gratitude to Edie, for being so weak, weaker than she was.

"There's nothing you can do."

"Well, what's the matter?"

"No. They wouldn't do anything, and there's nothing you can do. I'm sick, that's all, and they wouldn't believe me. I told them I was sick, and they didn't care. They just went away."

"But, Edic, if they *said* you're all right . . . ?"

"What do they care? How do they know how sick I was? I read all about it in those papers they left, and I was right, I tell you I was right! I was sick, Gladys. I never get sick, and I was so sick. They could have—Glad, they gave me a sedative. My God, I was sick all over the house and they gave me a pill to quiet my nerves."

"Did you take it?" The doctor said Edie was all right. The doctor said Barbie was all right. The doctor knew.

"No, I didn't take it. Go to sleep and die in your sleep, and make it easy for them! They just don't want to bother. My God, Gladys, my hair! I'll lose my hair. Do you realize it says "

"Look, Edic, you take that pill they gave you." Gladys tried to sound sympathetic, but it came out cold and stern instead. "You'll be all right."

A muttering sound in the living room behind her made her sharply aware of Barbie's presence. Barbara could hear everything she said. Edie was talking again,

but Gladys didn't listen to it. "You take that pill!" she said again, fiercely. She heard the receiver on the other end banged down, a furious impotent gesture of defiance. Edie would be all right. She had to be. The doctor said so.

"What do you want, Barbie?" She turned back to the living room, but it wasn't Barbie who was talking. The muttering sound came from the radio, the first news report of the morning.

"Reprisals are being made. There is little or no further danger of attack. Our radar screen is now constantly in operation and all large centers arc under the protection of military government. Many saboteurs have been apprehended, and any still at liberty will no longer be able to operate under new military restrictions. The type of missile used by the enemy is worthless without the co-opera-tion of an agent at the point of attack. If all citizens co-operate with the emergency government, there is no further danger of enemy attack. Stay tuned to this station for further news in twenty min-utes. Meanwhile, some recorded music . . ."

Impatiently Barbie turned the radio down. "They didn't say any-thing at all," she complained angrily. "Nothing but a lot of stuff about rioting and panics. It's quiet enough here, heaven knows!" She went back to the window.

"Barbie." Gladys' voice tugged at her back. "Barbie, did they say anything about the city—anything at all about what's happening there?"

"No. Nothing new."

"What about the panics? What kind of rioting?" She didn't really want to know, but, whatever happened, she couldn't let the silence grow between them again.

"It's nothing important," Barbie said impatiently. "Fires and stuff, just the same thing they said last night. Oh," she rememberedsomething, "if we see any strangers wandering around we're sup-poseil to report them to Emergency Headquarters right away, and not let them into the house, whatever happens, because some of them are looting and robbing and stuff like that."

She stopped suddenly. "Dr. Levy!" she said, aghast. "They said the squadmen had been instructed to shoot if necessary. Oh, Mom, we shouldn't have let him go!"

Gladys held back her anger. "He'll probably come hack," she offered, "if it turns out to be too hard to get where he wanted to go."

"He didn't *have* anyplace to go," Barbie insisted.

She was not going to argue about the man. Maybe after she had some coffee she could do something about Barbie. She went back to the kitchen and waited once again for the water to boil. But now the sun was beginning to stream through the window. The white enamel was shining and familiar, and the porch was empty. All outdoors was empty of any sound. There was nobody outside this morning—no one emptying a garbage can or trying to start a re-calcitrant car, no dogs whining at back doors for admittance, no babies being put out for the first morning sun.

The robin let out a soft preparatory whistle, and Gladys got up wearily and poured the steaming water into the coffeepot. She let it drip and went back to the window to stare out into the silence.

It was so quiet. Not even birds . . . *No birds!*

She looked out now, eagerly scouring the trees and telegraph poles with her eyes. Then she saw them on the ground, right in back of the house—three sparrows on their backs with toothpick legs turned pleading to the sky; another across the lawn; a

few more farther away. Those that hadn't died had gone. Where?

"Daddy, where's Daddy?" The swinging doors slammed against the wall *under* the impact of flying small fists and feet. Ginny stood breathless in the middle of the room, her pajama pants hiked above her waist to free her legs, the top dangling from her other hand to the floor. "Where's Daddy? I heard him talking. Where is he?"

"That wasn't Daddy, darling. Daddy didn't come home yet. That

was a man who came to tell us Daddy was all right," she impro-vised. "He said Daddy will come home as soon as he can."

Ginny shook her head. "No, she said firmly. "That was my daddy. He came home. I heard him last night, and he never came up to say goo' night. I want my breakfast." She backed to a chair and sat down next to the kitchen table.

Gladys poured a cup of coffee. "I know what," she said. "We'll have a special Sunday breakfast."

"With French toast?"

"**Yes.** And all the trimmings."

Ginny was thinking. "We can't have a Sunday breakfast because it's Tuesday, because I went to school yesterday, and I didn't go the day before."

"Well, we'll pretend it's Sunday. Barbie!" she called into the front room.

"But if we pretend it's Sunday, then I don't have to go to school." Gladys hid her relief behind her coffee cup—one less item to

explain. "Right. Barbic!" she called again. "Don't you want your

breakfast?"

No reply. Gladys shoved her cup regretfully away. She started for the door and found her younger daughter trailing, puppylike, behind her.

"Sit down, Ginny. I'll be right back."

"I want my breakfast."

"I said I'll be right back."

"I want my breakfast now."

There was nothing to do about it. Gladys scooped a can of frozen orange juice out of the freezer, opened it, and mixed it with absent ease, then set the glass in front of her pouting daughter and said sternly, "You sit right there until I come back. And finish that juice."

Barbie was prepared for her. "I'm not hungry," she said as soon as Gladys walked in.

"I don't care whether you're hungry or not. We're going **to have**breakfast, and a decent breakfast, too," Gladys told her. "If you don' t want to eat you don't have to, but you do have to sit there and behave yourself."

With the whole world shaking around her, Gladys was still firm in one faith—the effects of the smell of French toast on her chil-dren's appetites and tempers. All she had to do was get Barbie *in* there.

"Listen, Barbie," she said quietly, "Ginny heard voices down here before, and she thought it was Daddy. I told her it was a man who came to tell us Daddy was all right. You've got to help me, Barbie," she pleaded desperately. "I know how you must be feel-ing, but there's nothing we can do till we find out, one way or the other. There's no reason to get Ginny upset until we're sure. If I have to have trouble with her right now I just don't know what I'll do."

There was no answer still, but when she turned back to the kitchen Barbie followed her. And when she looked she found the girl's face fixed in a determined pattern of good humor. She set herself to getting breakfast with a concentration of energy that drove all thought of the children from her mind for a few minutes.

But when she sat down she discovered that Barbara was con-fining her facsimile of conversation to the little girl. On the infre-quent occasions when Gladys forced attention to herself she could evoke nothing but a furious glare. The silence outside was a con-stant oppressive lack in the background. Sooner or later Ginny was going to look out the window and see the birds. She couldn't put off explaining things to the little girl much longer. She'd have to find some way.

Against the general silence the one small noise was an uproar. The children began to jump up, then hesitated, remembering what had happened the night before. But this time Gladys was no less curious than they. All three of them rushed to the front room and stared out of the windows, watching the truck grind to a halt in front of the house.

"It's Daddy coming home!"

Gladys knew why the truck was there; so did Barbie. Across the little girl's head they stared at each other, while Gladys hunted dumbly for the words she felt she ought to find.

"But they said it would take hours . . ."

Barbie's protest was so much an echo of her own futile will to resist—with a choked cry, half of pity, half of relief, she threw out her arms to her daughter. And with a headlong rush of escape Barbara's contorted face came to rest on her mother's shoulder.

"It isn't my daddy—it's a lady in pants and she's got a washing machine. Mammy, she's got two of them and they can walk."

It was impossible to sustain the drama of the moment in the face of Ginny's announcement. Barbie had to look too.

"They are not washing machines, silly!" she told Ginny. "They're diving suits. But, Mother, why? . . . Oh!" The explanation dawned on her.

NINE

"Mother, it's Veda! Ginny! Ginny, hurry, it's Veda! They've brought her home."

She struggled with bolts and latches and flung the door open just as Gladys came up from behind.

Coming up the front steps, flanked by the massive suits of the squadron, was Veda indeed—but a strange, unfamiliar Veda. Her face was pale, her eyes swollen, and she was covered from head to foot in a rough, flapping suit of men's overalls. Her tightly braided hair had come undone on one side and dangled in stiff iron-gray waves on her shoulder. The overall shirt, several sizes too large for her, was tucked bulkily inside the sagging denim bib. On her feet she wore nothing but a pair of cheap straw scuffs.

Gladys pulled Barbie back from the door as the strange trioapproached. But she forgot about Ginny, who launched herself at Veda, with a violent sidewise attack that seriously upset the dignity of the squadman on the left and made him lose his hold on Veda's arm. Gladys thought he was going to be knocked off his feet, and wondered hysterically if they could get up by themselves when they fell in those

suits. But nothing catastrophic happened. Veda disentangled herself from the child and the men both, the door shut, and they were all standing in an ill-assorted circle in the small front hall. There was a jumble of talk from the two children, mixed with indignant voicings from Veda and an attempt at ex-planation from one of the men. Gladys couldn't understand any-thing. She shook her head impatiently and motioned toward the living room.

They trooped in together, but when Veda tried to cross to the other side of the room one of the men took her firmly by the arm again.

Gladys turned on him indignantly. "Would you mind explain-ing " she began, and then interrupted herself. "Will you *please* be quiet"—she turned on the children sharply—"so I can hear what's going on?"

In the lull the man spoke up. "You Mrs. Mitchell?" Gladys nodded. "Sorry to bust in on you like this," he said, "but this woman here says she works for you and we have to get some in-formation about her. Now if you'll just answer a few questions we won't take much time."

"I'll be happy to answer your questions"—Gladys was still in-dignant—"as soon as your friend takes his hands off my maid."

"She does work for you, then? I'm sorry, lady, but we can't let her go. She might be dangerous."

Dangerous? Veda? "I've never *heard* anything so ridiculous!" Gladys told him heatedly. "if you expect to find out anything at all from me you'll let her sit down decently right now." For the first time since the whole mess started she had found someone on whom she could righteously vent some of her wrath.

"Listen, lady"—the man who had been holding Veda's arm

spoke for the first time—"this woman talked us into coming over here to corroborate her story. If you don't feel like co-oper-atin'

Gladys ignored him. "Now, Veda." She took the offensive. "You sit down, and if they bother you any more I'll report them im-mediately."

"Mrs. Mitchell." It was the first man again, and he seemed to be trying not to laugh. "You probably don't realize that what you're doing is obstructing the path of justice. This woman is a suspected saboteur."

"Suspected *what?"*

"That's what I said. You got a radio; you know how the bombs came over. Well, every one of them bombs had a radar beacon set to bring it in to its target, and every one of them beacons was set by an enemy agent. We have to find the people who did it, and find 'em fast. Now do you want to help, or don't you?"

"All right," Gladys sighed. But she still protested weakly. "Only I don't see why he has to hang onto her arm like that."

"First of all, what's her name?" The man overrode her objection smoothly. He took a notebook out of the zippered pocket in his suit and dug for a pencil.

"Veda Klopak."

"Age?"

Gladys saw a look of alarm chase across Veda's face and heard Barbic, behind her, snickering. Veda had been an official thirty-nine ever since she came to work for them. Some rapid mental figuring produced a doubtful answer. "I don't know for sure, but I think about fifty-six or -seven." Veda stopped shaking her head and

looked relieved.

The squadman hadn't missed Veda's vigorous negatives or Bar. bara's snicker, either. He was smiling when he said, "That checks close enough. Address?"

"I'd have to look it up," Gladys said. "I know it's in the East Bronx, but I don't remember the number since the last time she moved."

"Know how long she's been there?"

"Oh yes." Gladys thought back quickly. "It was just after Christ-mas she moved in . . ." The year Tom broke his arm . . . that was the year before we got the washing machine . . . "Four years ago," she finished triumphantly.

"You don't know the present address?"

"I have it written down someplace. I don't know exactly where." Gladys was increasingly flustered. This wasn't a joke or a silly misunderstanding. They were *serious!*

Barbie was tugging at her sleeve, but she waved the girl aside and looked frantically for the telephone pad.

"Mother

"Just a minute, darling . .."

"But, Mother, here -"

"Barbie, I *said* wait a minute. I'm busy. Where in the world did I . . . ?" The pad was nowhere near the telephone.

"But, Mother . . . Mom . . . are you looking for the pad?" Gladys whirled around. "For heaven's sake! I've been looking all over for that. Where—"

"Well, I've been trying to give it to you."

Gladys riffled through the pages, trying to hide her confusion. Everything that happened this morning seemed to make her feel more foolish. And now she couldn't find the street number in the book.

"I have the phone number here," she said finally, avoiding the amused eyes of the man with the notebook. "I don't know *where* I've put the address, but I know I have it someplace. I can look in my bag upstairs; sometimes I just keep things in there on scraps of paper, I

"No need to do that. The phone number's enough. We can check it against the address we have."

"Well, I'd be glad to run up and find it for you," she assured him. It would be a pleasure to get out of that room for a moment, to have a chance to make sure her hair was combed, and to get hold of herself again. She took a step back.

"It don't look so good, lady." The other man, the one who had been holding onto Veda all along, spoke up again. "You bein' so anxious to get out of this here room. Mebbe you just better stick around here. My buddy told you the phone number was good enough."

Gladys found the number in the pad again and discovered that her fingers were trembling. The man's hard eyes and set face, his expressionless voice, and even his choice of words were all straight out of a grade-B gangster picture. But he was real. It was all real.

"Why don't you ladies just sit down and make yourselves com-fortable?" the man with the notebook asked. "No need to get all bothered. All we want to do is ask a few questions."

"Sure, go ahead," his companion offered dryly, clearly excepting Veda, by his tone of voice as well as by his continued tight grasp on her arm. "Make yourselves comfortable. I can see this is going to take some time."

It did. Endlessly Gladys repeated vital statistics about Veda, her household, herself, and events over the fifteen years during which Veda had worked for her.

But they were never satisfied. Over and over they went back and forth, covering the same ground from different directions, shooting an occasional question at Barbara, and even one or two, that she could answer, at Ginny, trusting more to the children's lack of dissimulation than to Gladys' greater knowledge.

She told them about old Mr. Klopak, whom she still firmly be-lieved had been the last real carpenter alive, about how Veda had come to work for her, part time, when Tommy was two, and Barbie just born, and old Mr. Klopak, repairing Tommy's old baby furniture for them, mentioned that his daughter was out of a job. Then Barbie got to play-pen age just as the recession struck, and Veda worked elsewhere for a couple of years. When Jon began making money in the early war years Veda had come back to them, and in one way or another had been with them ever since.

After her father died she had thought about coming to live with them, but never could make up her mind to do it. She had her ownways, and she was set in them; she knew they didn't fit into Gladys' household. Finally she had found a boardinghouse in the Bronx where she could sleep and fix herself an early breakfast, and keep her own things the way she liked them to be.

"I'll tell you, ma'am," he said finally, "we found this woman under suspicious circumstances. The whole neighborhood where she lived got a big dose of hot rain

Barbic sat up on the edge of her chair and opened her mouth to question him, but he went right on without giving her a chance.

"Everybody else around there—you understand, everybody for at least five blocks either way—is either dead right now or pretty sick. This one never got a drop on her. She had herself all wrapped up and shut in that room, like she had a pretty good idea what was going to happen. That don't look so good—especially when you know that there had to be somebody around there to set that gimmick in place in the river."

"I don't know anything about the gimmick you're talking about," Gladys protested for what seemed the hundredth time. "But I've already told you that's what Veda always does when she's sick. I've argued with her about it for years, but she's been doing it ever since I've known her. Besides which"—wearily she tried to hit a lighter note—"she couldn't possibly be an enemy agent. She just works too hard. She wouldn't have time."

She won a feeble smile from the friendlier of the two men, but nothing could prevail over the stony mask of the other. The ques-tioning was resumed, and now they wanted to know in detail every-thing Gladys could tell them about Veda's personal and medical idiosyncrasies.

But in the end they were satisfied; they had to be. And even then it seemed to Gladys that they were reluctant to give up a suspect.

"We'll leave the woman in your custody, Missus," Flinty Eyes said finally. He loosened his grasp on Veda's tortured arm. She stood there, rubbing the spot he'd been holding, angrily silent.

"But that means she stays here. You don't let her out of this

house for any reason whatsoever, without clearance from the Security Office," he added. "I can't say I'm sure about her yet, but we can't waste time on cases like this one. Right now we got to prove, and double-prove, every accusation we make. Things get a little worse, they're going to realize security is more important than jury trials."

"Things get *worse?"* Gladys gasped. "But it said on the radio-you—the squadman in the truck told me—things *can't* get worse."

"The radio isn't telling everything," the other man put in. "But you'll be okay as long as you're telling the truth. Things'll be a lot better when they give our office some leeway—better than if it gets to the vigilante point, anyways."

"You just keep a close watch on her," his partner said. "We might be coming back to check. Can't say for sure."

Once more Gladys felt herself burning with a passion of indigna-tion, but this time she contained it. There was no purpose in flaring up now, when they were ready to go.

At the door the friendlier of the two paused. "You can call us through the Emergency Headquarters if you need us, Mrs. Mitchell. Just ask for Security." His smile did not include Veda.

For a long time, it seemed, they stood there, after the final closing of the door, mother and daughters staring at the rumpled, ruffled woman whom they had known so long and so well, and were now really seeing for the first time.

At last Veda broke the silence.

"Coffee's boffin'," she said, sniffing.

TEN

Gladys' hand leaped to her mouth. "I had it on to stay hot," she breathed. "1'11

She had to stop talking. She had to blink back tears and it washard to keep her mouth straight. Her voice promised to quaver babyishly if she said another word.

She couldn't let the children see this; she couldn't act this way **in** front of Veda. She couldn't understand it either. Veda was back, and she wasn't alone any more, and here she was ready to cry be-cause her coffee was spoiled.

She made a muffled noise that she hoped they would interpret as an apology or explanation, and dashed for the kitchen. She stood there, over the stove, staring down into the muddy remains of the steaming fresh pot of an hour ago—the pot she had started to make when Dr. Levy came creaking and rattling the boards of the back porch, and finished making when he left.

She filled the kettle once more and took the coffeepot over to the sink, letting hot water flow into it. She picked up the plastic robin that went on the kettle spout. Cheer up! she thought hysterically. Cheer up! Cheer up!

Veda came through the swinging door and brushed past her, the ridiculous overalls flapping as she walked. Almost at the door of the little back room, she turned back to the sink and deliberately turned off the hot-water faucet.

"I was rinsing that pot!" Gladys said too sharply, and immedi-ately regretted it. There was no sense taking out her feelings on Veda.

"Thought you might be wanting to save yer hot water." Veda's stony assurance was so normal it was incredible. "There's no tellin' how long you'll have it," she finished patiently, as if explaining matters to a small child.

"No telling . . . ? Yes, of course." Gladys looked curiously at the other woman. "Veda, how are things . . . outside?"

"Purty bad," she said laconically. "If you don't mind, Missus Mitchell, I'd like to kinder change my things, an' we kin talk afterwards."

"Oh—is there anything you need? I don't know if my things would fit . . ."

"Thank you jest the same, Missus Mitchell, but I got everything I need. Lucky thing I allus kept some things here."

"Well, go ahead." Gladys smiled. She surveyed the cold food and scattered dishes on the table. "I'll start some more breakfast. You must be hungry too."

"I could use a bite to eat." She disappeared into the back room.

It was a shock, on this strange morning, to see Veda emerge, ten minutes later, looking exactly as always: cotton house dress, white apron, shiny black shoes, gray cotton stockings, smooth hair severely pinned back in a braided bun—no different from a thou' sand other mornings.

Gladys became acutely conscious, once more, of her own di-sheveled appearance, remembering the unbelievable moment when the man had interpreted her desire to escape upstairs as part of a deep-dyed plot. And now Veda wouldn't let her escape. She started off with a vague murmur about washing up, and Veda reminded her tartly that there was a sink right in front of her.

"Who you fixin' up fer?" she demanded pointedly. "You sit right down an' have some of that fresh coffee. Plenty of time fer primpin' all the rest of your life. You look about beat right now, ' an' you need a little coffee in you more'n you need a comb."

Gladys lacked the will to disagree. She rinsed her face in clear cold water and sat down once again at the white-enameled table, letting Veda take over at the stove.

"I don't know how you do it," she said plaintively, watching the older woman move briskly around the room. "You must have had a worse night than I did."

"I dunno." She cleared off dirty plates swiftly and replaced them with clean settings. "Look like you been up all night, an' you must of had a hard day yestidday, with me not in." She set bacon to sizzling on the stove, cracked an egg in the white bowl. "You want more French toast, I guess? I'll mix up a little cinnamon sugar. The little one goes crazy for it. All I did was sleep all day," she went on, "right up until them men come an' dragged me out of bed, an' that wasn't till the middle of the night. Had myself three days' sleep before that happened."

"Dragged you out of bed?"

Barbie was standing at the door, holding it open, and Gladys. saw ninny's head peeking out around her. Both children were clearly enthralled by the picture of the two heavily suited men **in**-vading that prim boardinghouse bedroom and *dragging* her out. Gladys thought she saw the older woman's face crimson, too, but Veda was turned away.

"Some people are never happy without they're asking ques-tions," Veda told the wall. "Good way to get into trouble, too," she informed the frying pan. Finally, turning to Barbie, she finished, "I'll tell you everything you want to know. Wasn't for

your mother, and you too, the Lord knows where I'd be now. But I ain't goin' to tell it more'n once, so you better wait till I got my breakfast on the table, an' then I'll tell you once and fer all." She slid the spatula under a piece of egg-puffed bread and flopped it over to expose a thick golden crust. "Once I finish up, I ain't answerin' *no more questions.* That clear?"

"Um-humh." Barbie knew when to mollify Veda. "Okay. Only you have to really tell us the whole story."

"She'll tell you," Gladys said firmly, "just exactly as much as she wants to, not one word more. Is *that* clear?" She was watching Ginny, who was standing there soaking it all in, wondering how much the little girl had already understood, how much she would understand of Veda's story, how much Veda would say in front of her.

While she wondered Ginny found her tongue. "Did my daddy save you from the accident in the city?" she demanded.

"Your daddy?" Veda turned around, surprised, then shocked. "You mean your daddy never come " She caught herself, then finished the sentence. "He never come after me at all, he didn't. Can you imagine him savin' other people and never thinking about poor old Veda?

"Mr. Mitchell ain't home yet, then?" Veda chose her words care-fully, and Gladys was grateful, but she couldn't play up. Not now, not any more. Later maybe. All she could do was sit there **and** think about the dead birds in the grass, about the squadmen's

heavy suits and Veda's airtight room. And Jon, Jon who was in the city . . . still in the city.

"No," she said, "no, no, he didn't come home yet. No, he

"Missus Mitchell." She felt Veda's hand firm on her elbow; the coffee cup in her other hand was shaking. "Missus Mitchell, you must be jest about wore out. Think you kids'd have more sense an' consideration fer your mother . . ." She directed a scathing, un-warranted attack on the children, transforming their uncomfort-able wonder promptly to outraged defense. "Poor woman's been up all this time, all wore out, and never one of you had sense enough to know she'd need some rest. Come on now." She took Gladys' arm and steered her toward the door.

"But I don't want to "

"You stop that now, Missus Mitchell. You sound jest like Ginny. You got to get some sleep."

"I can't . . ." Somehow they were in the living room. She *couldn't* go to bed. Something she had to find out. About Barbie. She pulled her arm loose from Veda's guiding grasp and headed for the couch. "I'll just rest awhile in here," she said as firmly as she could. "1'11 be fine right here."

Veda tried to make her get up, but she wouldn't. After a while the other woman relented and even brought her her half-finished coffee. She had to stay up; she *had* to.

Regretfully she put the empty coffee cup down. She wanted more, but the kitchen was an endless number of steps away. She shrugged down in the corner of the sofa, inside the red wool robe, away from the invading chill in the air, away from loneliness and fear, inside the warm wool present from Jon.

She wanted more coffee, and she wanted a blanket, but it was too much effort to

get up for either. She had started shivering, and now it was increasing. She called out, but something was wrong with her voice. She tried again and this time it worked, but a burst of laughter from the kitchen drowned out her efforts. She felt in-finitely sorry for herself.

"Oh, Jon, I need you," she whispered out loud. "Jon darling,please come home. Come home quick. I can't stand any more." Tears welled up in her eyes, and she dabbed them furiously away. They were all laughing in there. Everybody else was all right; they had slept and rested, and she alone had lived through every minute of this horrible night. Barbie was all right too. She couldn't imagine, now, what had possessed her to let that crazy teacher in. She hoped someone caught him before he got into any real trouble. With her own daughter safe, she felt sorry for him. She hoped he wasn't really sick and would be all right.

She got up to get the blanket from the chest in the corner, and the tears still standing in her eyes made it hard for her to see; she stopped where she was and wiped them away, glancing guiltily toward the door, relieved to find nobody had witnessed her foolish scene.

She heard the radio droning on, turned down low. It was right in front of her. Once more she brushed away the tears, until she could see the dial, and made it a little louder, to catch the evasive words that had been tickling her ears since she sat down on the sofa.

They were reading off a list of names. She sank down in. Jon's big chair near the radio and tucked the blanket around her shoul-ders, and under her feet. Warmth flowed over her. The names stopped on the radio, and the announcer repeated what she had not quite heard before.

"We will continue to deliver personal messages of importance on this station, and to give out lists of survivors and casualties. Keep tuned to this station, and keep listening. There will be no more telephone messages to relatives of survivors and casualties. If you live in middle Westchester and are waiting for news of someone in your home, you will receive it on this station. Keep listening.

"Mrs. Hanson Delaney, of 104 Bracklane Street, to her son, John Delaney. Mrs. Delaney is safe at her sister's home on West Hope Street.

"Bob Bellowes, to his wife, Nita Bellowes. Mr. Bellowes is an

emergency squadman and is safe and at work but unable to come home.

"Message to Mrs. Lydia Johnson. Your two daughters, Jenny and Ruth, are in the Emergency Hospital in this area, being treated for radiation disease symptoms.

"To Mrs. R. L. Petronelli. Your son, Peter, is in the hospital in this area, being treated for radiation disease.

"To Mrs. Harlan Frame, of Purchase Street. Your sister, Amy, and her daughter, Gladys, are in the hospital, being treated for radiation disease and shock.

"To Mrs. Emory Bar . . . We interrupt these messages for the latest list of survivors from this area, rescued in the city. All of the following persons have been checked into an emergency station and will be evacuated as soon as their condition is diagnosed.

"Please listen carefully. Someone you know may be among the persons found. John Damien, 1413 Broad Street; Alexander Emory, 105 Haimes Street; Cynthia Evy, 1214 St. Clare Avenue; Michael Foucek, 479 North . . ."

Gladys listened curiously as the names, foreign and familiar, harsh and melodious, individual and undistinguishable, rolled out of the radio in a steady procession. From time to time a thrill of compassion or of sympathetic joy would move her, when the name of a friend or neighbor penetrated the gray haze in which she was wrapped, inside the warm blanket in the soft chair.

The butcher's son (in the city buying meat?) was reported safe at a checking-out station. Old Mrs. Cross, down the street, was dead of a heart attack, found in the street by a rescue truck. Tim Claragh, who was Peggy Turner's cousin, was doing rescue work in the city. "Watch out for looters and rioters. Refugees have gotten through part of the barricade around the city. Admit no strangers. There will be music for fifteen minutes. . . ."

They never said Jon's name. They never said anything.

Jon! Jon! It was like a knife, cutting the soft protective haze, cutting away the fog and fuzziness too. She struggled out of the suffocating blanket, reached over, and twirled the dial frantically.

All she could get was static. She managed to climb out of the chair and crouched, shivering, in front of the radio.

"Mother!" The surprise in Barbie's voice was fresh and almost amused; then immediately it was terrified. "Mom! What is it? What's the matter, Mom?"

"Nothing." Gladys was irritated. She must look ridiculous.

She stood up, trying to do it easily and gracefully, almost lost her balance, and had to grab the arm of Jon's big chair for sup-port. She saw Barbie's face, drawn into a tense peak of fear.

"Morn, what is it? What did they say, what did it say on the radio now?"

"Nothing. I'm all ri" Then the sense of the girl's question penetrated. "Nothing, it's nothing at all. They were reading things off, and I lost the station. I was trying

"Lost the station?" Barbie was incredulous. "But you couldn't! They "

"Well, I'm sorry." Even to herself, Gladys sounded peevish, but she couldn't think how to do anything about it. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it. They started playing music, and I tried to get another station, and then I couldn't find anything at all." It was all so perfectly simple.

"But you couldn't lose it," Barbie repeated too patiently, "be-cause it's the only one we can get. All you can get on the others is static."

Well, I know that, all right, Gladys thought. She looked across the vast space to the sofa, thinking how many footsteps it would take to get there, and that she would have to let go of the chair arm to do it.

"What made you think . . . ?"

"I don't know," she answered shortly. Why didn't Barbie leave her alone? "I guess I'm just too tired to think." She couldn't re-member now why she had wanted to keep hearing names. Some-body wasn't going to call up. She sat down again in the chair. "It's chilly in here, isn't it?" she asked, marveling at how her voice had cleared up. It was normal and distinct now.

"Mom . . . Mom, are you all right? Mom, you're not Barbie was terrified about something. Her voice sounded pulled out, tight, like a rubber band about to snap. " You're not . . . sick?"

"Don't be silly!" Gladys didn't want to be annoyed. She laughed, but it didn't

sound right.

"But, Mom, it's not cold in here at all. It's warm, and . . . you seem so funny. Mom, you're not sick, are you?"

Someone was tugging determinedly at her arm—Veda.

"C'mon, you're goin' upstairs, and wash your face and go to bed." Resisting, her fingers tightened on Jon's chair, and she remem

bered, her fingers remembered for her, what her dazed mind

refused to hold.

Personal information no longer by telephone. They would not call. They'd never call. It would be on the radio. They would tell her about Jon on the radio.

"Somebody will have to listen all the time . . ."

Veda tugged again, and Gladys stopped trying to explain or protest. She'd told them now; she'd remembered. Obediently, childishly, she let herself be led up the stairs.

"Come on now," Veda urged her. "You wash your face, and we'll get you into bed."

She floated through the bathroom door and kept on floating. She was in bed, but she remembered she was in the bathroom. No, in bed. Floating.

He was walking toward her and he kept coming, very slowly coming on, but he never got any closer; she couldn't see him clearly, although the light was very bright, red and bright, but she saw a shape, not his shape, and still she knew who it was; he was coming on all the time, walking toward her,'and if she waited long enough, if she could keep her eyes on him, on the shape that had to be him, everything would be all right.

She was floating, but he was coming, Jon was coming. It was hard for him, and she didn't understand why, until the clouds cleared away. The red light was on everything, and she saw the treadmillin between shredded wisps of pink marshmallow-fluff clouds. He was walking on the treadmill and trying as hard as he could not to let it pull him backward.

ELEVEN

The cries got closer, ringing in her ear, and the tread-mill let out a wailing screech as it disappeared from sight. Gladys sat up in bed, still holding the twisted damp sheet in her hand.

"There now, Missus Mitchell, you're awake all right now." Veda tugged the sheet gently away from her perspiring hands and smoothed it out. She started to lie back again, but Veda plumped out the pillows and put one in back of the other for a support, then fitted the breakfast tray neatly over her knees.

"Now *there,"* she said again, and lifted the coffeepot to pour it where the beckoning aroma would rise right under her nose. "You drink that an' you'll feel fine."

Gladys picked up the coffee cup and had to put it down on the tray again to steady it. She tried both hands next time. The cup was hot, but it felt good.

"You could of used a little more sleep, but that telephone **never** stopped ringin', and I heard you thrashin' around up here. Can't hardly seem that kind of sleep would do you much good."

The telephone kept ringing. Then part of the dream wasn't a dream. Jon . . . that part wasn't a dream either. Barbie!

"Who called?" She remembered too much now, she could tell just where the dream began and ended.

"Yer friend, Missus Crowell. She's been callin' all day. Seems mighty worried

"Who else?" She had no mind for Edie Crowell's worries now. "Wasn't nobody else."

"Not even the laboratory? Didn't they call up? About Barbie?"

"Nope. Ain't nobody called about Barbie."

"What time is it?"

"Must be close on four o'clock. It was more'n half past three when I was in the kitchen."

So late! She didn't feel as if she'd slept that long.

"Did the truck come?"

Veda looked puzzled.

"Didn't they come yet?" Gladys asked again. "The squad truck, with the doctor?"

"Oh, them! With that Mr. Turner from across the way? They come . . . let's see . . . aroun' noontime. Ginny was takin' a nap. She was so cranky, with all the goings on this mornin', I fixed her lunch early—she didn't hardly eat a thing at that—an' it was right after I got her into bed that Mr. Turner come in."

"Did they have any news—about Barbie? Did they tell you anything?"

"Couldn't rightly say, Missus. The doctor, he talked to Barbie some, and Mr. Turner, he jest wanted to talk to you and there wasn't nobody else good enough."

"They didn't say anything about the analysis?"

Veda just looked blank. I never told her, Gladys realized. All that time, when she was so tired, she had been trying to remember something, something she had to tell Veda. She had remembered something, but it wasn't the right thing. I never told her about Barbie!

"Didn't Barbie tell you?"

"Mom!" A shout of joy vibrated through the house, and Barbara came pounding up the stairs and skidded to a halt just inside the door. "Mom, it was on the radio. Just now! About Tom!"

Gladys sat up so suddenly she almost spilled her coffee. "What?"

"He's all right!" Barbie had caught her breath. "He's in the Army. It didn't say where, but it gave a serial number. I wrote it down." She waved a scrap of paper triumphantly under her mother's nose. "Oh, Mom, he's all right!"

"Thank God!" It wasn't just something to say, a symbol ofrelief. It was a deeply religious thanksgiving. She put the coffee down on the bed table and let Barbie wrap her in an exuberant embrace.

"Mummmmmmmy—y." Barbie disentangled herself and dropped the scrap of paper on the blanket. "Here, you keep this. I'll go take care of Ginny. I got so excited, I forgot she was sleeping." She was gone almost as swiftly as she had come.

"Is Ginny just getting up? When did she go to sleep?" Her mouth put the question, but her ears hardly heard the reply, because of the whirling thoughts in her mind.

"She was all wore out. Jest couldn't keep up with ever'thing goin' on."

Thank God, thank God! He's safe! Gladys answered Veda with a smile, but inside

she prayed. Tom's safe; now Barbie. Please, God. Please . . . She couldn't remember praying for years and years, not really praying. She went to church and said the words, but this feeling, this—believing . . . Tom was all right. God could hear her prayers. Barbie, and . . . She stopped the thought, half formed. Maybe it was silly, but she thought God had enough to do, watching out for the children; she would have to worry out the part about Jon by herself. Prayers and thanks and fears swirled around in her mind, pushing Jon out, with only an instant's terrified half memory of seeing him disappear, once before, into shapeless, formless terror, on a road that moved forever away.

Veda was saying something. She wiped her hands on the sticky sheet and made herself think of Tom, nothing else. Thank God, *thank God.* She smiled brilliantly at Veda. Everybody'll be all right.

"Excuse me, Missus Mitchell, I don't mean to ask questions . . . but all this time you been so worried about Tom wanting to go in the Army. An' now he's gone an' done it, you're practically crying from joy."

"But he's alive, Veda! Of course I don't want him in the Army. He's all right, don't you understand?" Gladys stared at the other woman incredulously. It was so silly to have to explain. "He's all right," she repeated. "He didn't get *hurt!"*

Veda's mouth opened, but no word came out. "You mean," she said finally, "it's . . . *all over?* It's every place?"

"You didn't *know?"*

"All I knew was here in New Yoi•k. You mean there was bombs all over? In all the cities?"

Rapidly Gladys filled in all she had heard the day before, most of it news to Veda, who had known only of the disasters in the city.

"Didn't Barbara tell you anything?" Gladys demanded.

`"Didn't have much chance for talking," Veda explained. "Barbie jest hung onto that radio all day, except when she was tellin' stories to Ginny in the morning, and a little while in the afternoon when the doctor come." Veda smiled. "She sure enough told me ever' time they got some new rules out for what we had to do, but I guess she wore out her voice jest tellin' me that. She was kind of mad at me—I wouldn't tell nothin' about what happened to me, not till you got up. Seemed like you was kind of worried about that before you went to sleep." She smiled again. "So I jest told the kids I wasn't goin' to tell that story more'n once, and it'd have to wait till you got up. Guess she was kind of gettin' even. Anyways, I was too busy to do much talkin'." She explained that she had spent the day trying to do everything she could to prepare for emergencies. She had washed all the dirty linens, except those on Gladys' bed, and boiled as much water as she could get into the available jars.

Her voice went on, reciting a narrative of the day's activities, but Gladys was only half listening. Barbie had never even told Veda about herself! She interrupted Veda's report to explain about Barbie. "And the laboratory never called?" she asked.

"Ain't nobody called but Missus Crowell."

"Did she want anything special? She kept calling last night. First she wanted to come over, and then she was afraid to."

"Says she's sick," Veda answered laconically. "I kind of thought I might run over and take a look at her, but I ain't had time up till now. You think . . . ?"

"Sick?" Gladys demanded. "What kind of sick? *What's the mat-ter with her?"*

"Couldn't make out. Didn't know she was such *a particular* friend"—Veda clearly did not approve of Edie Crowell—"or I'd of found out more'n I did."

"She's not such a particular friend." Gladys pushed the tray away and reached for her robe. "I told you she kept calling up yesterday and . . ." She faltered. And what? If she has it, that doesn't mean Barbie does. "And I feel kind of responsible if she is sick," she finished weakly. "I kept telling her she was imagining it all; I kept telling her she didn't have it. *What's* the matter with her?"

"Told you, I couldn't make out, she kept talkin' so much. Nothin' serious, I don't think, but soon's you get up, mebbe I'll jest run over there an' see fer myself."

"**Is** it all right to go out?"

"Long as you stay near yer own house. They got some kind of curfew goin', though. Nobody allowed out after eight o'clock. Barbie kin tell you better. She heard it on the radio. When she told me, I thought we could mebbe lay in some supplies, and I went down to Monnassey's, but they got a big sign printed up, `No Business.' Said it was under the pertection of the Emergency Head-quarters."

Gladys shrugged into her robe, feeling again the familiar comfort of the soft wool. It was silly, having it mean so much to her, but in some way it had come almost to replace Jon in her mind. She pulled it tight around her waist and knotted the belt. She was fully awake now; there were things she had to think about.

"How can we get food?" she asked briskly. "There must be some way."

"The sign didn't say. Seems like Mr. Turner would know, but he jest couldn't be bothered talkin' to me."

"Did he say when they were coming back? Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You needed your sleep," Veda insisted.

"You don't think he had anything important to tell me, do you?" Gladys controlled her irritation with Veda. Veda was probably right. She had needed the sleep.

"No'm, I don't," Veda said sharply. It was too respectful. Gladys waited, knowing there was more coming.

"Tell you, Missus Mitchell, this ain't none of my business, an' I know I oughter likely as not keep my mouth shut, but . . . I don't like that Mr. Turner. I jest plain don't like the way he was askin' fer you, or the way he couldn't talk to nobody else. Never did think much, though I ain't one to gossip, the way he treats that nice wife of his. I hear plenty," she added as Gladys, sur-prised, started to protest, "that ain't talked about except in the kitchen, an' I ain't passed it all on to you neither. Like I said, it's none o' my business, but it wouldn't hurt you to keep an eye on him."

"Veda," Gladys protested, "I don't know what kind of talk you've heard " It was surprising enough to have her admit she had ever listened to idle gossip; in Veda's book, loose talk and aimless questioning were cardinal sins. "But I don't think you should say things like that about Mr. Turner. He's been very nice

and"

"That's jest what I'm talkin' about."

"He's been very nice," Gladys repeated firmly, "and you have to remember that those other men might have told him . . . might have said something to him . . . well . . ." Why did I ever get into this? "Well, they *could* have said something about you being under suspicion." She saw hurt bewilderment on Veda's face. "After all," she

added hastily, "just because you and I know that you didn't do anything, that doesn't mean *they* believe it. And what's more," she beat a hasty retreat to the original subject, "I suppose it's all those trips of his you were thinking of. Well, they weren't as mysterious as they seemed. He was

"No'm," Veda broke in again. "Mebbe I listened to some talk I shouldn't of, but I got some sense. What I'm talkin' about ain't what happened when he *wasn't* there
"

"Mommy!"

A flying wedge of five-year-old burst through the door and clambered into her arms, dripping large wet kisses all the way.

"Mommy . . ." Ginny voiced her grievance promptly. "They didn't let me go out *all day!*"

"Didn't they? I know what." Gladys freed herself from the smothering embrace. "I know something you can do—something you like."

"What is it, Mommy?" Ginny tagged after her to the closet. "What can I do? Can I go outside, Mommy? I'm tired of stories."

"Oh, something much better than that," Gladys teased. "Some-thing that's much more fun."

"What is it? Please tell me. Please, Mommy, please."

"Well . . ." There it was, last year's dinner gown; and the black sandals that were beginning to be too worn. She reached for a box on the shelf and found a filmy silk scarf with only two or three little holes in it. Another box produced an elegant sequined bag, shiny with silver and purple. And sequins to pick up all over the house, too!

"Well . . ." she temporized, not letting Ginny look past her. There—the big hat with the long pink feather.

"There." She turned and dumped the glamorous pile at Ginny's feet. *"That's* what!"

Ginny was, briefly, speechless. But she recovered before Gladys could get out into the bathroom, in time to ask, "Can I put on lipstick too? And *powder?"*

"And," Gladys finished for her, nodding, "perfume too—the little blue bottle, and don't use more than half of it!" Going into the bathroom, she wondered if the last bit of humor might have been too subtle, and almost went back. Oh, it doesn't matter! she decided recklessly.

Rinsing her face, Veda's worried words came back to her, and she chuckled at herself in the mirror, enjoying the picture of Gladys Mitchell, settled mother of three, being wickedly pursued by Jim Turner—beefy face, bedrock convictions and all. Veda really thinks

things like that happen! She tried to imagine herself cowering be-fore an amorous airtight suit. "No, no, a thousand times . . ."

The muffled ringing of the phone downstairs interrupted her private melodrama. She pushed the door open and saw Veda, loaded down with dirty linens, presumably from her own bed, going by on her way to the stairs.

"That woman again!" she tossed over her shoulder to Gladys. "I'll jest bet it's that woman again. . . ." She disappeared down the staircase, still muttering.

Gladys took the time to dry her face and run a comb through her hair, glad now that she had finally had it cut short. She glanced quickly in the mirror, surprised to

find that her face was still the same as it had been when she started down to answer Veda's phone call just—thirty-six hours ago. A day and a half . . . two days and a night since Jon had kissed her good-by.

She was downstairs while Veda was still waiting for a con-nection to be made.

"It's some switchboard operator." She handed over the phone happily enough. "She said, `Wait a minnit,' and then nothin' happened at all."

"Hello?" Gladys spoke sharply into unresponsive silence; but the phone wasn't dead. "Don't you know who it was? What kind of operator was it?"

Veda only shook her head.

"Hello, is this 1439 Maple Avenue?"

"Yes." Gladys hastily uncovered the mouthpiece. "Yes, who is this, please?"

"Emergency Headquarters lab," the young man's voice said concisely. "We got a report here on an analysis from your house. You want to take the report?"

"Yes, please." Gladys pulled open the little drawer in the table, rummaged for a pencil, and found the back of an envelope to write on. "Go ahead."

"We performed an analysis on Sample No. 2036C, on request of Mrs. Gladys Mitchell, and of James Turner, squadman for thearea," he reeled off monotonously. "Sample was of fifteen-year-old girl, briefly exposed to radioactive rain, reported ill . . ." Briefly exposed to radioactive rain . . . radioactive . . . active rain . . . radioactive rain . . . The words kept ringing in her ears. ". . . quantity of alpha emitters present in the sample, probably residual plutonium, apparently inhaled or swallowed. Insufficient evidence

"Excuse me." Gladys struggled for breath to form the words. "Could you repeat that, please? please, I'm sorry, but I didn't get all

"Okay. Try and get it this time." He didn't mind showing his irritation. "Analysis showed a small quantity of alpha emitters present in the sample, probably residual . . ."

Small quantity! She allowed herself the space of the words she'd already heard to savor that, knowing it probably didn't matter, that a little was likely as bad as a lot, but holding on, while she could, to the idea that Barbie might, after all, be all right.

". . . ficient evidence of lethal or dangerous dose. No hospitali-zation required." She had to hold onto the table for support, drop-ping the pencil from her free hand, as her tensed body went limp with relief. She almost missed the rest. "Blood count will be neces-sary for final diagnosis. Please request the medical assistant on your squad truck to take blood counts as indicated, and submit to lab."

"But . . . I don't understand." This last threat was meaning-less, absurd. He'd just said Barbie was all right. "What are the blood counts for? Why "

"You got all that information handed out to you in mimeographed sheets," he told her acridly. "Don't *any* of you take the trouble to read 'em?"

"I'm sorry," she appeased; he had to answer one more question. "I should have seen that, I guess, but could you just tell me, please, whether this means that she's . . . *sick* . . . or not?"

"It means I don't know. It looks like not; but she still could be. If you don't understand what it says on that sheet you've got, the doctor will explain it to you when he comes around. I can't give

courses in radiation disease over the telephone. I wouldn't even have called,

except that your squadman specially asked me to. He'll explain everything to you."

The phone clicked emphatically at the other end.

"It's okay, Mom." Barbie's voice, so close by, startled her out of all relation to its timid tones. "I read up all about it, and Dr. Spinelli—that young doctor in the truck," she reminded Gladys anxiously, "explained it all to me; probably we won't know any-thing till tomorrow " She stopped, alarmed by the horrified look on her mother's face.

"You read . . . ?" Gladys began, then realized the more urgent part of what her daughter had said. "*What* did Dr. Spinelli explain to you?"

"About radiation sickness." Defiance tinged the hesitation in her voice; she had known Gladys wouldn't like this. "When he took the blood count he told me just what I should

"*Took* the blood count?" Gladys demanded. "But they just called now to tell me he should take it. What made him . . . ?"

"I told him, that's why," Barbara retorted. "I told him all about being sick last night, and how I didn't tell you when I should have, and how you called Emergency Headquarters when you found out, but we hadn't heard anything, and I couldn't find the information sheets they kept talking about on the radio, and I asked him how come we didn't have any, and he said he was sure we did, but any-how, he gave me another one about radiation disease, and told me just what would happen to me if I was sick, what they'd do at the hospital and everything." She stopped, out of breath, and watched for her mother's reaction.

Gladys stood still, silent. She remembered seeing the sheets on the sofa in those hectic sleepy moments in the morning, and hiding them. She remembered how they had frightened her when she read them. If Barbie had read . . . "hair may fall out . . . itching, burning, skin discomforts . . ." That's what it said on that sheet. ". . . hemorrhages . . . boils, blisters . . ."

Maybe Barbie thought she knew a lot more than she really did;the doctor couldn't have told her too much. In any case it was ridiculous to get angry now.

"Well!" She searched for, and found, a small smile. "So you're an expert on radiation disease, are you?" She managed to turn it from sarcasm to a friendly joke in mid-sentence. "Come and tell me about it while I get something to eat."

She could smell bacon on the stove in the kitchen, and found her anger and bewilderment both melting under the sudden attack of ravenous hunger.

She almost made it, but not quite. The pounding on the front door was both loud and urgent.

Gladys turned, took one step forward. But they can't! They can't be here already!

That was foolish. It didn't even sound like the way the squad-man knocked. It could be—it could be *good!*

The pounding didn't stop even at the noise of the bolt shooting out, not until the door was actually opened. Even then the woman at the door had her hand raised to knock again, and almost fell against Gladys before she grabbed the doorpost and managed to stop the swing of her own momentum.

"Tried to call," she said. "Tried and tried. Couldn't call, so I came." A caricature of a smile said clearly, Wasn't that clever of me?

She withdrew her hand from the doorpost and steadied herself on high-heeled

gray satin mules. *"May I* come in?" she enunciated elegantly.

"Edie! My God!" Gladys stared, uncomprehending, at the mud on the little satin slippers, at the dusty train of flowing gray chiffon gown, at the stains that chased down the front. "For God's sake, come in!" Automatically, now, she locked and bolted the door before she turned around to find Edie wavering unsteadily, right behind her in the hall. In the living room Barbie and Veda both stood watching.

Edie stayed where she was, waiting—for what Gladys didn't know; but she seized the opportunity.

"Edie!" She slipped in between the visitor and her family, and breathed one quick horrified question. "Are you . . . sick? Is it the *disease?"*

"Of course it is!" Edie answered hrilly.

She's got to keep quiet! Gladys took Edie's arm, tried to lead her toward the stairs, away from the living room. Don't let her say anything else, not yet! She'd find some way to explain it to Barbie.

"I told you I was. I told you and told you, and I told them, and nobody would believe me." Still that elegant painstaking enuncia-tion of each syllable. "Nobody!" She sat down abruptly on the bot-tom step, almost tripping on the hem of the long gown as she turned. "Nobody!" Then she covered her face with her hands and proceeded to cry, in stagy, articulated bursts of sound. It was the first time Gladys had ever heard anybody really cry, "Boo-hoo."

At just that moment a strange vision appeared on the stairs over Edie's head. Small feet in wobbling high-heeled shoes came first, reaching uncertainly for placement on the treads; voluminous wine velvet folds of skirt swayed precariously above the bare ankles, and finally small, clenched fists came into sight, struggling to hold the bunched velvet fabric high above the shaky footing. Eventually Ginny was completely visible, all the way to the tipmost peak of the plumed hat.

She was so preoccupied with the problem of the descent that she almost tripped over the woman on the stairs. But as soon as she became aware of the obstruction she forgot all about her fabu-lous finery. Dropping one whole fistful of velvet, she pointed an inquiring index finger and opened her mouth wide.

"Who?"

Gladys turned appealingly to Veda, who had made no move throughout the scene, but stood grimly sniffing and disapproving. Now, apparently determined to misunderstand, she did nothing about the children. Instead she took a step forward.

"You leave that one to me, Missus Mitchell," she said almost menacingly. "I know what to do fer the likes of her."

Gladys turned to the child on the stairs. "Will you stop staring your eyes out?" she demanded. "It's none of your business. Bar-bie!" Inspiration hit her. "Run downstairs and get some clean linens. I want to put Mrs. Crowell to bed. And take Ginny with you," she added as the older girl started off reluctantly.

"Veda." Gladys turned back to the maid angrily. "For heaven's sake, she's

"She's nothin' but stupid drunk," Veda finished for her.

TWELVE

"Mommy . . . will Miss Crole die?" Ginny perched on a favorite chair by the

kitchen table, munching a cracker and waving her feathered hat in front of the window.

"Why, baby, don't be silly!" Gladys dumped the contents of a can of soup into a pot and measured out a canful of boiled water from a pitcher on the table. I've got to stop jumping every time one of them says anything. I ought to be used to it by now. She put the pot down on the stove, sniffing. The reek of alcohol still seemed to cling to her nose, but through it there was a faint odor of gas.

"But, Mommy, will she be dead—like the birdies?"

"Like the . . . ?" Oh! She had forgotten, forgotten all about that. "No," she said sensibly. "Of course not. She just isn't feeling well. She'll be all right."

"Will they take her away to the hospital?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't think she's really very sick."

"Did she throw up?" Ginny climbed down and moved closer to her mother. "She smelled funny, like she threw up."

The stove wouldn't light either. That accounted for the smell; the pilot was out. Gladys reached for a match, struck it, and had trouble getting the flame to light. She kept hunting for the right answer to Ginny's questions and struggling with the stove at the same time.

"Did she throw up like Barbie?"

Gladys forgot all about the stove. "What do you mean, like Barbie?" She put down the blackened match and reached for the little girl's face, turned it up so their eyes met. "What do *you* know about Barbie being sick?"

"She throwed up—threw up," the little girl corrected herself hastily. "In the middle of the night." Any time after dark was the middle of the night to Ginny. "I had to go to the bathroom, to make Number One," she added, explicit as always, "and she wouldn't let me come in, and I said I'd holler, because I never wet my pants any more, do I? I knowed you didn't want me to wet my pants, and I told Barbie I'd holler so she let me in." It was all coming out fast now, in a virtuous rush of confession. "And I looked and looked to see what made such a funny smell, it was like part of the smell on Miss Crole. Is she going to the hospital and die like the birdies?"

"Of course not." She couldn't stop to consider niceties of the answer now. "Why didn't you call me when you woke up? Why didn't you tell me Barbie was sick? How do you know she was?"

"She didn't clean up good. I looked and looked and then I saw some on the floor, and she made me cross my heart an' hope to die, but I could tell you now, because she told herself, didn't she, Mommy? Mommy, how do you *know* Miss Crole isn't going to be dead?"

"*I don't* know it," Gladys had to admit. "I don't know anything like that, but I don't see any reason why she should be. She isn't even very sick." Thoughtfully Gladys turned back to the stove. The soup still sat, lumpy and solid, in the lukewarm water; underneath the pot the flame was weak and blue. She reached to turn the burner up and found it was already turned all the way. That didn't make sense. She turned it off and tried lighting another one. Some-where she could remember a gas stove that acted that way. Of course, the one in the Quonset hut, where they used bottled gas. Whenever the pressure got low . . .

"Mommy."

"Just a minute, baby." Worried now, she tried the other burners. They were all the same. She lit the pilot again, watched to see that it stayed lit, and turned on the weak flame under the soup again. It would just take a little longer, that was all. But why should the pressure be so low?

`"Mommy, please . . ."

She recognized urgency, but she could still smell gas from the pilot. Should she open a window? Maybe just for a little while. If people could go out now it must be all right.

"Mommy, you won't answer me!"

"Of course I will, dear." She patted the small head abstractedly and pushed the window casement out a little. "What is it?" The pilot flame sputtered in the small breeze.

"Mommy, will *Barbie* be dead?"

"Will *what?"* Instinctively she bent down and wrapped her arms around her baby. "You silly, silly girl." The child was shaking, now that the question was out at last. "Who's been putting ideas like that in my girl's head?"

"Nobody," she said. "I thought it for myself. Mommy, are you sure, Mommy? Even if they take her away to the hospital?"

"Who said she was going to the hospital?" Gladys was furious. She tried not to show her anger, aware that the child would take it as directed against herself. But she *had* to know.

"Nobody," Ginny insisted. "Nobody said so, only I know. If you throw up you have to go away to the hospital. They were all talk-ing about it, all the people, the funny men and Barbie and Veda, they was all talking about it."

"When?" She could straighten out Ginny's ideas later. Right now she had to find out who'd been talking to the child.

"Well, I couldn't sleep," Ginny said defensively, "'cause they made so much noise. It wasn't my fault if I couldn't go to sleep." In a minute she'd start crying.

"No, baby," Gladys said wearily, "it wasn't your fault. Was it nap time?"

The child nodded dumbly.

"And you were listening? You were up on the stairs?"

She shook her head. "No, I wasn't. I just had to go to the bath-room, I had to make *Number Two!"* It was triumphant.

"It must have taken you a long time to get there," Gladys com-mented dryly. Well, that was that, and nothing anyone could do about it. But they'd all have to be more careful what they said and where they said it. She let Ginny go and stood up again. The room still smelled of gas, but she'd have to close the window or the tiny flame would never stay on. There ought to be some way to discon-nect the pilot. She sighed and closed the window. The soup was just beginning to steam a little bit, not yet simmering. She stirred it automatically, her mind on Ginny, who sat now, contentedly chewing on her cracker. How much did the child understand? Or misunderstand?

Steady, solid footsteps approaching. The swinging door opened to let Veda in, her arms piled with towels, a basin, and soiled linens.

"Finished changin' all the beds while I was at it." She headed for the cellar door. "

Thought I might's well get these washed while we still got water."

That's what's doing it, Gladys thought, that kind of talk. But she couldn't say anything then, not with Ginny right in the room.

"Got yer flame on?" Veda maneuvered the basin onto the table and stood still, sniffing. "Mighty smell o' gas in here."

Don't you think I can smell? Gladys dropped the spoon into the soup and had to get the tongs to fish it out. "I know it!" She tried not to snap. It was silly to be so upset. "The pilot was out," she explained, stirring furiously. Veda shrugged and declined to quarrel. She started for the door.

"Is Mrs. Crowell feeling better now?" Gladys asked meaning-fully.

"She's one sick lady." Veda refused to understand or co-operate. "There'll be questions." Gladys inclined her head ever so slightly in the direction of her daughter.

"And I've got answers!" Gladys lifted one eyebrow inquiringly."Never saw the time yet the truth wasn't good enough," Veda said sharply.

Gladys was fuming inwardly, but there was nothing she could say, not in front of Ginny. Veda stood still, waiting for a reply. When she got none she sniffed audibly and started once again for the cellar door. With both hands full, she had to struggle to open it. Gladys made no offer to help, but stayed at the stove, monotonously stirring her soup.

Then the door came flying open, and she forgot the whole ridicu-lous quarrel.

She had presence of mind enough to turn off the flame on the stove first, before a spark could catch. Then, even while she was thinking, realizing that the gas escaping from the pilot light couldn't possibly have smelled so much, she shrilled at her daughter.

"Ginny! Get out of here! Upstairs quick! Tell Barbie!" She pulled at the catch on the casement, flinging both windows wide open.

Ginny didn't stop to ask questions. Only four or five times in her memory had her mother screamed at her that way. She ran.

Gladys turned from the window to see Veda pulling open the door to the porch, a trail of dirty linen marking her rush from the cellar door. She got to the window over the table, the one that always stuck. Without waiting to find if it would open this time, she banged the frame heavily, with a pot picked up on the way. It rattled satisfactorily loose, and she heaved it violently upward.

Together they headed for the swinging door. Gladys was almost through the dining room to the front, where the living-room door could be closed tight against the foul-smelling poison, when she saw Veda stop and go to one of the dining-room windows.

I wouldn't have thought of that! She went back to the other one herself. She remembered she had been angry with Veda about something, but the memory itself didn't last long enough for her to do or say anything about it.

They slammed the living-room door behind them, and it became possible to think about what had happened.

"Mom!" Barbie called from upstairs. "What happened? What's the matter?" Her voice was small and scared. Behind it they could hear Ginny whimpering quietly.

"Gas," Gladys called up. "The cellar's full of gas."

"Should we come down?" Ginny had stopped crying. The expla-nation would

carry no meaning to her, Gladys realized, but Barbie understood.

"You might as well come down," she decided. "We've got the door shut. You'll be just as safe here." The radio was making too much noise. She went over to turn it down.

"Don't," Barbie called from the foot of the stairs. "Don't turn it off, Mother."

"Well, we're not listening to it. I can't think with all that noise."

"They're reading the names again," Barbara insisted. "If you just leave it on low we'll hear it, if they say any name we know. I was reading before, and I heard it every time they said anything that mattered."

"Well . . ." She let it go; there was no time tc argue. Now they had to do something, quickly. Why, the house could explode! The whole house!

She almost dropped the receiver, trying to pick the phone up too quickly. She had to wait forever for a dial tone, but this time she didn't try to dial. She whirled around the red 0 for the operator, and waited again while it rang five, six, eight, nine times, before a tired voice answered.

She didn't have to think what to do: Jon had told her over and over. "I want the Fire Department," she said.

"Lady," the operator said with a bright interest that overcame her weariness, "are you nuts?"

"Am I . . . ? No!" Gladys said indignantly. "I want the Fire--"

"Mother—Mom." Barbie was shaking her head vigorously. "Mom, there *isn't any* Fire Department. They're all in the cit

"I'm sorry. Give me Emergency Headquarters," Gladys told the operator. Jon had told her, over and over, what to do if any-thing like that ever happened, so she wouldn't have to stop and think, so she could act right away. And now she hadn't stopped to think. In a curious way she was almost angry at Jon.

"Hello!" It was the switchboard again, and she couldn't think whom to ask for, so she explained her trouble to the bored young man who answered.

"Just a minute, lady."

She got another connection, an older, deeper masculine voice, and repeated her story.

"Address?" he asked brusquely.

Thank God! They're actually going to do something! She told

it to him and listened to paper rustling in the silence that followed. "No trouble in that neighborhood, lady," he said last.

"But there's trouble right here!" she exploded. "I'm right in the

house, and I *know* there's

"Yeah, I know, you just told me. But we can't send a repair truck out for just one house. I mean the mains are okay." "That's nice to know! What am I supposed to do?"

"Wait till your squad truck comes. They'll help you if they can." "But the house could explode! We—anything could happen!" "You said you opened up the windows, didn't you? The house

won't explode. Just watch out for fire and you'll be okay. Did you

turn off your electric equipment?"

"No, I didn't. I opened all the windows I could, and shut off the gas from the rest

of the house, before we all passed out, that's what I did. Maybe you don't understand. I've got *a cellar full of gas.* Am I just supposed to stay here, with my children, and just let it keep leaking?"

"You could try and fix it," he suggested. "Or you could go stay with a neighbor. Don't take it out on me, lady. There's nothing I can do. Your squadman'll have to fix it." It was decisive.

"Thank you!" Gladys said bitterly, and hung up.

"What did he say, Mom?"

"Nothing. He said we should fix it. Or go to the neighbors'." "Why don't we?" Barbie liked the idea. "We could all go over

to the Crowells'—and take Mrs. Crowell along. We could all stay there till we got somebody to fix it."

"Well . . . I don't know." Gladys tried to think.

"Then, if anything happened"—Barbie was increasingly ex-cited—"you know, if the house blew up or something, we'd all be okay."

"No! We'll try fixing it first. If that doesn't work we'll have to get out. But I'm not leaving this house till I know I have to." Her mind was made up now. If the house blew up! And even if it didn't, everything would be ruined by gas.

"I'm going down and see what I can do," she announced. "I'll get the windows open, anyhow. And the cellar door. That should clear it out enough so I can look around."

"Daddy was always saying something about the valve," Barbie suggested. "And we could break the windows, couldn't we? From outside? That's what the Fire Department does. That's why they have those axes. Then you wouldn't have to go down till

"I don't know that's such a good idea," Veda broke in. "They been warning us all day on the radio about these crazy folks run-ning around, an' the curfew and all. We wouldn't be able to lock up . .."

Gladys didn't give anybody, including herself, any more time to think about it. Whatever was done had to be done fast.

She ran up the stairs to her room, shed the red wool robe, and went out to the hall closet for the slacks she had piled there the night before.

She found a work shirt of Jon's, much too big; but, buttoned up, and tucked into the slacks, it covered her all over. In the bath-room she soaked a big towel in cold water. That's what they do, isn't it? She tried to remember, to think of stories, movies, news-reels where people had to fight gas. All she could remember was wet towels **over your face.**

THIRTEEN

Of course there wouldn't be anything to see. She kept telling herself that. She held the sopping towel close against her face. Through it the air had a laundry smell and nothing else. And the haze she had expected wasn't there.

She went straight across and through the furnace room to the outside cellar door. At the nearest window Veda's legs were clearly visible out in the grass. There was nothing to it, she kept reminding herself. Just push back the bolt, and after that the rest is simple.

It was an ordinary slanted double door at the top of a small flight of stairs. She

strained at the bolt overhead until the muscles in her arm ached, clear to the shoulder, but she couldn't budge it. She tried to remember whether it had been opened since they had painted. But whitewash didn't make things stick, did it? She didn't know.

She needed both hands, she found. Maybe she could release one by tying the towel around her face. She stopped pulling at the stubborn bolt and fumbled behind her head with the bulky ends of the heavy towel. It wouldn't knot, and cold drops began trickling down her spine. Veda rapped on the window, bending down to give her a worried, questioning look, but she shook her head.

The whole thing was ridiculous. Even through the towel she'd smell gas if it was so bad she really needed the towel. She wriggled to dislodge a clammy rivulet playing waterfall down her spine, and impulsively ripped the towel from her face, tossed it on the win-dow sill, and used both hands to pull back hard on the bolt.

She must have been holding her breath at first, because she didn't notice anything right away; but, using all her strength on the door, she took a deep breath and got it all at once.

Choking and gasping, she grabbed for the towel again and bunched it up against her face till she couldn't breathe at all. Veda was rapping at the window again. She shook her head, which made her feel dizzy. She stopped and concentrated on getting the towel straightened out. This time she paid no attention to the chill trickles under her collar. She knotted the towel firmly behind her head, covering her whole face up to her eyes.

Her head began to clear. The dizziness was going away, but the faint sour odor remained; it seemed to be right in the towel now. Grimly she reached up again. Why wouldn't it open? They'd never had any trouble with it before. Some light would help, but she didn't dare turn one on. "Don't use your electric equipment," the man had said.

She ran her fingers all around the bolt, trying to make them see for her.

There was, of course, a safety catch. She felt her face flush warmly under the damp towel. She turned the small knob on the bolt, out of the locked position. When she pulled on it this time she almost fell over backward, it opened so easily.

The towel seemed to be soaked in gas instead of water. She pushed the double doors open and stumbled up the stairs.

She sat down on the grass in the sun and didn't ever want to get up again. But the job wasn't finished yet.

"Are you all done? Did you fix it already?" Barbie danced around her with questions.

She shrugged the girl away and started up to the bathroom. Then she thought better of it and explained to Barbie what she wanted: a fresh towel, soaked through, but only in the middle.

". . . and leave the ends dry, so I can tie it."

Barbie got back almost too soon. Gladys' back and shoulders ached all over, and she was still drawing in great gulps of air.

She didn't want to go down there again; she didn't want to. She had to force herself to go down the stairs, one step at a time, with-out thinking about anything but the necessity for getting to the bottom.

She went to the first window along the wall and carefully turned the latch first. It stuck, just a little, but it wasn't too hard to do. Then suddenly it was all very easy again. Just one window at a time, take it easy, don't get panicky.

It was done. She went up and dropped into a chair to rest while she waited for the air to clear. She hadn't done much, but it seemed as if she'd been down there for hours. She got a fresh towel and the biggest wrench she could find in Jon's toolbox.

He had said something about a valve. Which valve? She didn't see anything that looked like a valve. The meter was smooth-surfaced. Whatever was supposed to turn the gas on and off must be inside, but how did you get to it? She remembered seeing the man do it once—or was that the electric meter? *That* one opened up; she could see the little door on it. She hit the front of the meter box with the wrench. Nothing happened, except that she dented the smooth metal front. She was surprised that she could hit so hard.

The towel was beginning to smell of gas.

Up above the meter the pipe turned, and at the elbow a thick screw jutted out. It wasn't a valve; she knew what a valve looked like. But maybe it did something. She reached up and tried to turn it with her fingers, but it was set firmly in place. Maybe she could knock it loose with the wrench.

It couldn't do any harm anyway. She hit it once, a glancing blow, and thought it moved a little. She hit at it again. It *had* moved—just enough to show it could. But hitting wasn't the right way.

She got a box to stand on and looked at it more closely. It stuck out of the pipe about an inch, and wasn't more than a half inch through, probably less. The part in the pipe was smoothly round, except for the thread of the screw, and she could just see the edge of that, where it met the pipe. But the end near her wasn't round; it was squared off, and she remembered that was the kind of thing they used a tire wrench on. She tried the wrench she had, but it was too big; it wouldn't grasp the screw at all.

She'd have to go back upstairs and find something else. The towel was soaked with gas now.

She couldn't come back again; she just couldn't.

On top of the oil burner she found an ordinary small pliers and grabbed it up. She was beginning to be dizzy again. She should have gone back upstairs for a new towel.

She got the jaws of the pliers around the square end of the screw, but every time she tried to turn it, it slipped off. Only she had felt it move; she knew she had. It must be what Jon had meant by a valve.

She held the jaws onto the screw with her fingers and pulled down hard with her other hand. It moved. Just a little.

She hung on, straining down. The smell kept getting stronger, and she had to get out of there. With every bit of strength she had left she pulled down on the pliers handles.

This time, when it gave, she was expecting the reaction, but she had been pulling too hard. She couldn't stop herself, and for a moment her arms waved wildly, then she was on the floor, and the towel had slipped out of place.

She heard Barbie calling from upstairs, and Veda from outside. The box had

made a lot of noise. She couldn't answer them; the towel was off her mouth, but she was afraid to open it. She got her arms out from under her and yanked the towel back over her face. It didn't seem to do any good at all any more. Gas was in her nostrils and her throat. Strangely enough, she wasn't dizzy any more, but her eyes were tearing and they smarted. She set the box back in place. She seemed to be moving very slowly, but every-thing was getting done, quicker than she expected, too. She didn't quite understand it, but she supposed it was all right. She knew she had to turn that screw some more. It had been in one way, now she had to get it all the way the other way.

She had to stop and remember which way she had turned it. This time it responded easily. She kept turning until the whole length of the round part had disappeared inside the hole in the pipe. When she couldn't make it go in any more at all she gotdown off the box and went upstairs. She felt very calm in spite of the awful smell. She was surprised to find she was sobbing.

FOURTEEN

She was still dizzy. She sipped once more at the whisky, but it tasted awful. Ginny was crying monotonously on Veda's lap. Barbie squatted in front of the radio. Gladys lay still on the sofa, wanting to get off and remove the dirty slacks, wonder-ing if there would be grease stains on the pale green upholstery.

She tried to lift her head, but it made her feel woozy again. The radio was forcing itself on her consciousness. She didn't want to hear it.

"Do you know where the hot plate is?" she asked Veda. "I don't remember seeing it around."

"That little one from the Silex is right in the kitchen cabinet." Veda kept on rocking Ginny, answering Gladys without changing the tone of voice she used to soothe the little girl.

"I mean the big one, the two-burner."

"Ain't seen that one in a long time."

"Daddy took it to the office once," Barbie contributed over her shoulder. "Did he bring it back?"

"Don't know as he did," Veda said thoughtfully. "We got the electric broiler, though, could work like a hot plate upside down." "The waffle iron?" Barbie threw in.

How can she listen to two things at the same time? Gladys was having trouble focusing her attention on one conversation.

"There's a Sterno stove in Mr. Mitchell's camping kit," she told Veda.

"I dunno. We might need the Sterno stove worse later on." "For heaven's sake, Veda!" Gladys protested. "How much worse can it *Ref?"*

"Waffles." The word had penetrated slowly into Ginny's sleep-sodden head. "I want waffles for supper."

Veda looked questioning, and Gladys shrugged.

"Might's well," the maid said. "Waffles on the iron, an' coffee in the Silex, an' we ain't got no problems at all."

"Are we *really* gonna have waffles?" Ginny sat bolt upright. "Right now?"

"As soon as we can get in the kitchen," Gladys promised.

"I'll go see." Barbie jumped up restlessly, but she didn't have to do any more than

open the door. The smell made her slam it shut again.

Ginny surveyed her suspiciously. "I want waffles *now."*

"Well, you can't get them *now,* so quit being a baby about it." Barbie was feeling intoxicated with adventure and a whiff of gas. Ginny, feeling only sleepy and hungry, promptly burst into a fresh flow of tears.

"Come here, baby." Gladys found she could sit up now, and she stretched her arms. Still crying, Ginny made her way across the room to her mother, stumbling on the hem of the velvet gown she still wore. Safe on Gladys' lap, she defied the world.

"Am *not* a baby!"

Barbie opened her mouth and closed it as promptly when she saw Gladys' emphatic headshake. Her challenge having gone un-answered, Ginny gathered courage for another sally. "I'm hungry," she said firmly. "Want my waffles."

"Shush." Gladys patted the defiant shoulder absently, ignoring the repeated demand.

"I want my "

"Oh, shush up, Ginny." Barbara, still listening with one ear to the radio, turned it up so they could all hear.

". . . special police are constantly patrolling the area. There is no danger, except through carelessness. Keep your doors and win-dows locked and admit *no unauthorized strangers* to your homes after curfew hour. These precautions are concerned *only* with pro-tection from acts of larceny and violence. There is no foundationin fact for any rumors you may have heard to the effect that these gangs of lawbreakers are made up of contaminated refugees from within the city limits. It is virtually impossible for anyone to leave the city area now, except by way of the decontamination stations.

"Evacuees from the city are not entering the Westchester resi-dential area. They are being sent directly to evacuation camps up-state, on special trains already in operation.

"This station will continue to announce the names of persons released from the city through decontamination centers. . . ."

Veda snorted with rich contempt but refrained from any com-ment. Gladys was grateful. Whatever Veda had seen in the city, Gladys didn't want it discussed just then.

"Mommy, what's commamminashun?"

"Contamination," she corrected automatically. "It's—well, it's being hurt. The people who were hurt by the accident in the city are contaminated

"Mother!" Barbie was shocked. "That's no--"

"Barbara! I am perfectly capable of answering Ginny's ques-tions. You pay attention to the radio, and let me"

"Listen!" Barbara had already returned her attention to the radio.

". . . still need homes for a number of children whose parents are in the city, or whose homes have been broken up as an indirect result of the attack. Adequate supplies for the care of the children will be issued to you. If you have an extra bed in your house, and any adult capable of providing supervision for a small child, please get in touch with Emergency Welfare Headquarters *now.* Pick up the telephone and ask for Emergency Welfare. The operator will connect you.

"We have just received a new list of evacuated persons from the Washington Heights Headquarters. The following persons . . ." "Mom—Mother, we've *got* to take some of them."

"Take some children, take some children!" Ginny chanted glee- fully.

"We got room, anyhow," Veda pointed out. "Can't say I'd want

to depend on them food supplies they're promising—but we could make do with what we got."

"We've got plenty!" Barbara insisted. "We can manage. You said yourself," she appealed to Gladys, "that it couldn't very well get any worse. We'll be able to get food, **even if they *don't* bring it** along."

"That's enough," Gladys said flatly. "I'll have to think about it.

"Children, children, gonna take some children," Ginny chanted. "See?" Gladys demanded. "We'll talk about it later."

"But, Mother

"I said *later!"* She saw the bright red color suffuse her daughter's face and added quickly, "Do you want to take a look now, Barbie, and see how the kitchen is?"

Wordlessly the girl got up.

"You set still, Missus Mitchell." Veda got up stiffly. "I'll bring the makin's right in here. Save a lot of fuss and trouble." She nod-ded toward the little girl, curled up on her mother's lap, hypnotiz-ing herself with a barely audible chant, "Children, children, gonna take the children . . ."

Gladys smiled thankfully and let Veda follow Barbara out to the kitchen.

The radio chattered on. Names and addresses, this one evacu-ated, that one hospitalized, another safe at a friend's home. Three dead in the city, one rescued, a whole family found alive under a burned building. The names went endlessly on, and they meant nothing. Ginny's chant turned into a quiet sleepy murmuring. It was beginning to get dark outside. Gladys wondered what time it was, and thought of turning on a light, but the gloaming was too restful. She wouldn't listen, she *wouldn't* . . .

"Mrs. Tod Graham, and son, Tod Graham, Jr., three years old, of 1482 Orchard Boulevard, found trapped in burning building in midtown Manhattan . . ."

Mrs. Tod Graham! Annie!

`"Mrs. Graham is being treated for shock and burns at the hos-pital base in Washington Heights. Tod, Jr., is being treated for radiation and minor injuries . . ."

But they were home. I saw Tod in the garden. With difficulty she brought that morning back to her mind, remembered Annie's chagrin at not being invited to that luncheon, the luncheon Gladys herself hadn't gone to. Annie had said she always had lunch in town on Mondays, anyhow, with her husband.

. . now repeat a list of the identified casualties in the city today. Please listen carefully. There may be no way of notifying the friends and relatives of these persons except by radio announce-ments. Dead: John Anderson, Main Street, White Plains; Hilda Allderdick, 42 Green Lane, Henley; Anthony Ameranto, 2205 Hartley . . ."

Now she couldn't stop listening. Every name, every syllable, penetrated her senses. She didn't feel Ginny's weight on her lap; she didn't know whether it was dark or light in the room. She just listened.

". . . friends and relatives may not be notified . . . today's casualties . . ." Annie Graham . . . hospital base . . . Jon!

She was only dimly aware of it when Veda and Barbara came back in, arms loaded with food and equipment.

". . Alden Gramercy, Hope Street, Tappan . . ."

Veda snapped on the big lamp on the reading table.

". . . R. Jardiniere, Marley Avenue, Plainstown . . . "

They got through the list. Somehow, finally, they finished read-ing the roll call of the slaughtered.

. . hospitalized for today. For the sake of speed we will read only the names and not the addresses of these persons: Avery Ab-bott, James Abbott, Kenneth Abbott . . ."

She realized she could stop listening. It was alphabetical. She didn't have to listen any more until the M's.

"Barbie, you forgot the syrup." Veda looked up from the bowl where she was mixing waffle flour and milk. Barbara ran out to the kitchen and came back with the syrup, already opened.

"Smells okay," she announced.

"Better leave me have a taste before we use it," Veda offered. Barbie immersed a finger delicately in the sticky stuff.

"I said *me,* not you. Now give that here."

"It's fine," Barbara insisted, licking off her little finger with evi-dent relish.

"You give that here," Veda said angrily. "Got no more sense than that little one. Done everything you wanted all your life, an' now we got real trouble you can't stop. Well, believe you me, you'll be learning to do what yer' told the next few days. Like to see you act that way jest once with that young doctor 't was here stick-ing needles in you."

"Veda!" Barbara's face blanched at the reminder, and Gladys got angrily to her feet, easing Ginny, now asleep, onto the couch.

"Lissen, Missus Mitchell." The maid stopped stirring and turned to her purposefully. "I think we could use some plain talkin' around here. You keep tryin' to make out nothin's the matter, when we all know there's plenty that's the matter. Every which way I turn somebody's trying to keep something back from the next person. And some of the lies I heard on that radio! They got no busi-ness

"What lies, Veda?" Barbie broke in excitedly. "What did they say on the radio that

"Keep quiet, Barbara. Don't interrupt. I don't know what you think you heard on the radio that wasn't so, Veda, but I'm sure the people up there know more about what's going on than you do."

"Mebbe so—an' mebbe there's plenty they ain't tellin'. I keep tryin' to do like you want—an' don't think," she added stiffly, "that I ain't grateful fer you helpin' me out when them men came drag-gin' me in here. I ain't fergot that, nor I won't. But it jest ain't in my nature to keep coverin' things up that ought to be aired out."

"Well, *I'd* be grateful," Gladys retorted, "if you'd leave it to me to decide what needs airing and what doesn't. Barbie," she addedas she saw the girl prepare to speak again, "Veda was perfectly right about your being too careless, and about how

important it is for you to do what you're told right now. There's probably nothing to worry about any more, but until Daddy comes home I'd rather be a little extra careful. When he gets here he'll know what we should do."

"You goin' to keep right on " Veda clamped her mouth on the words and vented her feelings on the waffle batter. Barbie went sulkily over to the radio and squatted down again in front of it.

". . Andreas Popoulisk, June Quest, B. K. Quiller, Lionel Quist . . ."

They've passed it, she thought. They went right by M, and I wasn't listening.

She cleared her throat. "Barbie," she called quietly, "Barbie." The face that turned to her was still sullen. "What do you want?"

"Please keep your voice down. I want to know . . . were you listening? I mean, when they read the names."

The girl motioned impatiently toward the radio.

"I know, they're reading them now, but . . ." *Why* wouldn't she understand? "When they read the M's, was . . . Daddy's name there?" Barbara shook her head. "No *what?* You weren't listening or the name wasn't there?"

"I was listening," Barbara said briefly, and turned her attention back to the radio.

Gladys forced herself to stay calm. There was no sense in letting the quarrel enlarge itself. She walked back across the room, to where Veda had established the temporary kitchen on the hall table.

"What can I do?" she asked, trying to sound as if nothing had happened.

"Everything's done." Veda pointed to the indicator on the waffle iron. "One of 'em'll be ready for Ginny in a minute."

Gladys went back again across the room and roused the little

girl. "Waffles!" she announced as soon as Ginny had one eye open. That brought the other one wide open right away.

"Come on, we'll get washed up" She led the little girl up the stairs, past the enticing odor that was beginning to bubble out of the top of the waffle iron. When they got down again Veda was pouring fresh batter, and Barbie was already settled with a plate and cup.

"Waffles?" Ginny called from halfway down.

"And cocoa too." Veda answered her.

"That was a good idea." Gladys smiled at the other woman.

"Thought I'd try an' save the milk. That hot chocolate you got, it's got powdered milk already in. Seems to me like we could keep what fresh we got for the mornin'."

They got Ginny settled next to her sister, with a syrup-laden waffle and a cup of steaming cocoa.

"Now that's hot," Veda warned. "Don't you try an' drink it too fast." She went back to the waffle iron and brought out a crisp new one. "There's fer you, Missus Mitchell."

"You take it," Gladys urged her. "I'll wait for the next one." "Now you ain't had a thing to eat since you woke up," Veda

protested. "You take this one. I'll have another one ready in a jiffy."

"We'll split it," Gladys decided, and cut it down the middle as she spoke. She moved one half to an empty plate and found a cup of coffee waiting for her. Veda

poured a second cup for herself.

"Good thing you got used to drinking it black when you was on your diet," Veda said, almost with a smile. "We got to hang onto our milk now."

And suddenly it was all right. The quarreling and confusion were over. She sat down next to the children, and Veda came to join them a moment later, with a fresh waffle to divide among them.

"I'll watch the next one." Barbie had already finished her first and refused any part of the reinforcements. She felt the change in the atmosphere too. Passing in back of Gladys, on her way to the improvised kitchen in the hall, she stooped suddenly to hug hermother, for no reason at all. Then she turned on another light. There was music on the radio again. Ginny looked up and smiled a sticky, syrup-encased smile at the world in general.

"This is fun, Mommy," she announced. "Why doesn't Daddy come home?"

the rescue

"1'm lost," he said. "I've got to get home." They couldn't hear him; they wouldn't listen. It was like a dream, trying to say something and never getting it out.

It was a dream. He *remembered,* ***in the dream, that he'd had them before, times when he had to talk about it*** *or* ***bust,*** *and* ***there was*** *nobody* ***to talk to. Nobody wanted to talk about it. Nobody wanted to think about it.*** *Then he'd* ***go to bed and dream.*** *Great* ***pink clouds and searing fires exploding. He'd wake up in a sweat and reach out to touch her. He'd feel her breathing evenly***

under his hand, and see the shadow of the trees outside, and every-thing would be all right.

"Just tell me how to get home," he said in the dream. "I'm all right. I'm lost, that's all. Listen, bud, how do I get home from here?"

They kept dragging him along, pulling him when he didn't walk. They wore suits like divers, but more like asbestos than rubber, and they had helmets closed over their faces. They couldn't answer him; they couldn't talk through the helmets. Maybe they couldn't hear him either.

They pushed him into a big truck and shut the door behind him. There were a lot of other men inside, standing up, and sitting on the floor. Some were lying down, stretched out on the floor. One of them looked dead, maybe only unconscious. Some of the men were talking, and some were swearing. A lot of them had burns or cuts. There was blood on everything, and a had smell. Somebody was crying.

A little light came through the truck from a pane of glass set in front, near the driver's cab. He edged his way through the crowd to the pane of glass and began tapping on it. A man on the seat turned around and shook a fist at him, but he kept tapping, pa-tiently, till the man turned around again.

"I've got to get home," he said then. "Let me out. I have to go home."

FIFTEEN

It was already dark when Gladys left Ginny asleep upstairs. She came down to find Barbie lying flat on her stomach in front of the radio, intent on the pages of a heavy volume she had found in Tom's room. From time to time she flipped a page

with one languid finger, moving no other muscle except her bare calf, which waved with pendulum regularity in the air. She abandoned the book long enough to greet her mother with the news that the fifteen-minute curfew warning had just been announced.

"I guess we better get the door and windows closed in the

cellar," Gladys decided. "I hope it's all right down there now."

Veda came in, drying her hands on her apron. "Kitchen's okay," she said. "I was washing up, an' I shet up ever'thing in there. Got the door down to the cellar open, an' it smells like it'd be all right to go down."

"Well, I guess I might as well get it over with."

After that she could go up and change. She wondered why she hadn't thought of it before she came down, and decided it was just as well. She hadn't looked in a mirror since she'd got out of bed; out of long habit she raised her hand to her hair, trying to smooth it into place, but it was too tangled; it felt gritty and nasty under her fingers.

"I could go down, Missus Mitchell," Veda offered. "Don't mat-ter if I get a bit dusty, this bein' a work dress."

"Don't be silly. I'm all dirty anyway."

She left Veda at the head of the cellar steps and groped for the light switch. He never did fix it! she thought, and went cautiously down the stairs, planting each foot in the precise center of the narrow tread, sniffing at every step for traces of gas.

She put foot at last on solid cement flooring and flipped another switch, flooding the whitewashed laundry room with light. That wasn't very smart, she thought. Suppose there was still some gas . . .

But she didn't smell anything, and nothing had happened when she used the light. It must be all right.

The door that led through to the meter, in the furnace room, was closed. She was sure she'd left it open. The latch was rusty, and she had to struggle with it. They never used that door. I'd remem-ber if I'd closed it, she thought.

She stopped fighting the latch and stood still a minute to drive the tenseness from her muscles. She tried to think back to the last time she left the cellar, but all she could remember was the won-derful moment when the outside door opened and she stumbled up the stairs to breathe sweet air again. The rest was a blur.

Suppose she had closed it then? It was almost worse that way. Thedoor was tight; it would keep out the gas. If she hadn't really got it turned off before, if it was still leaking, then when she opened the door,' there'd be that sickening smell again.

Oh, Jon! Jon wasn't there. He was in the city, and he couldn't help her. In the city! It was a shock to realize she could think that much now, think it in so many words, without trying to deny it.

She put her hand firmly on the latch and pushed down. Some-thing made a scuttling noise, and instinctively she stepped back.

I told him there were mice down here, she thought angrily, and forgot to be afraid. She tried once more and ignored the noise when it came again. Maybe it was something the latch did. Anyhow, it was silly to be scared by a fleeing mouse. She shoved the door open before she had a chance to become frightened again.

Bracing herself against the doorframe, she reached her arm around to the light

switch.

Scraping, scuttling noise, and something fell loudly. No mouse did that!

"Who's there?" she called, knowing it was the wrong thing to do, standing there in the lighted doorway.

"Me—it's just me, Mrs. Mitchell."

A man's voice . . . a stranger . . . but he knew her name! With the light at her back, she couldn't see more than a few feet in front of her. From every object in the room, small or large, a deepening shadow stretched to inky gloom in the far corners. Over all, her own shadow bulked. She tried to find him by his voice, but muted echoes spread the sound too much.

A dark shape detached itself from the looming black furnace and turned gradually into the figure of a man. She wanted to scream, to run, but, without knowing why, she knew she had to stay quiet.

He was close now, and she couldn't see his face. There was nothing familiar about him.

"Who are you?" The panic-sharp whisper bounced back at her from the echoing walls.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Mitchell, it's just me—Garson Levy."

Of course! The voice had awakened recognition, even before she could fit a name to it.

"What are you doing here? How did you " That was silly. It was perfectly obvious how he had got in. "I was just coming down to lock everything up," she finished.

"I'm terribly sorry." Gladys was startled to see her own distress honestly mirrored on his face. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I shouldn't have broken in this way, but I had to get in someplace during the curfew patrol."

"I better get things closed up here before someone else gets the same idea," Gladys said dryly. She walked over to the nearest window and slammed it down.

Silently he went to the next one and closed it himself. When the door was closed and bolted and all the windows locked, he turned to her again.

"I can leave now if you prefer, Mrs. Mitchell," he said stiffly. "I'm afraid I rather took advantage of Barbara's offer. But I hope you understand that I didn't expect to stay here."

"Barbara's offer?" she broke in.

"Yes, to come ba—oh, I see. Of course I thought you knew. *I am* sorry." He hesitated. "I can go right away, but if you don't mind too much, I'd like to wait until the patrol is over. It's just another twenty minutes or so—and for your sake as well as mine it's better if I'm not caught leaving here."

"Well, why on earth did you come out again?" Gladys asked irritably. "If you keep wandering around when you're not sup-posed to you're bound to get caught sooner or later."

"I didn't have much choice. My landlady was under strict orders to notify the Security Office when I came in. She gave me a bed in her own apartment instead, and got some clothes from my room, but she could hardly keep me there."

"You mean you don't have anyplace to stay?"

"I'm afraid not," he admitted.

It was hard to stay angry at him. If he hadn't come to warn them about Barbie . . .

If he hadn't come the urinalysis would have told them anyhow—a little later. Perhaps too late.

She studied the man in front of her. Nothing extraordinary about him. Nothing, that is, except the fact that he was in her cellar. He didn't look like a madman, or a hero either. He looked like a scholarly middle-aged man who never remembered to have his suit pressed.

He ran his hand nervously through the thick gray waves of his hair and she saw why he always had a slightly wild look.

"What are you going to do when you leave here?" She tried to be stern. "Where are you going to go?"

He shrugged. "Try to find a place to stay . . . try to get some papers . . . try to get into the hospital." He dismissed the subject. "Have you heard anything about Barbara yet?"

"They're taking a blood test," she told him briefly. "They called up about the analysis and said she was exposed, but they didn't seem to know whether she's sick yet. Why shouldn't you be able to get into the hospital?"

"A matter of identity. When they found out who I was they decided they'd rather have me in jail. I'm dangerous," he added bitterly. "Because I kept saying this was going to happen. Worse yet, I tried to prevent it. That makes me a public enemy."

"Well, surely they won't refuse to take care of you!"

"Maybe not," he agreed. "But, frankly, I don't care to make the experiment. From my earlier experiences, I think they're shooting first and asking questions afterwards."

Gladys remembered the men who had brought Veda in that morning. The one with the notebook might ask questions. The other one—there was no way to tell what the other one would do.

Suddenly she wanted to help him. But she *couldn't* keep him in the house.

"Are you . . . hungry?" she asked inadequately. "If there's anything at all I can do for you before you go . . . ?" She was ashamed, but she couldn't help it.

Surprisingly, he smiled. "That's very kind of you, Mrs. Mitchell, but I had something to eat just before I left . . . home."

"Well, if there's anything at all .. . ." Anything, anything, she promised him silently. Anything except staying here.

"There's really nothing." He glanced at his watch. "I can leave in a few minutes now. Tell me about Barbara."

"They have to wait and make two tests before they can tell."

Levy nodded. "Did they say anything else about the urinalysis?"

"They said there was some alpha emitter present," she quoted carefully, "but it didn't seem to be a sufficient quantity to make her sick." A question came to her mind. "But if it takes two blood counts, how could *you* tell right away? Is there some other way?"

"I don't know for sure how sick I am," he explained. "But I could tell I'd been exposed to heavy radiation because I know what my normal blood count is. And I also know I haven't been exposed recently to any other diseases or infections that would cause a drop in the white-cell count—flu or a strop infection, for instance. The doctor doesn't

"Missus Mitchell!" The call, shrill and imperative, came from far away. Veda was in the living room, Gladys thought, and then heard the approaching footsteps. "Missus Mitchell!"

"Get back there." She pointed to the far corner of the furnace room, where she had found him. "Hurry, please. Where she can't see you."

She turned and ran for the stairs. Hot and breathless, she met Veda at the kitchen door.

"What is it?"

"That Mr. Turner jest come in, an' the doctor with him. Mr. Turner's about ready to take a fit, he's that hot on talkin' to you."

What am I going to do? Veda in the kitchen, Edith Crowell sleeping upstairs, and now the squadmen in the living room—with a hunted man hiding in the basement!

"Somethin' wrong, Missus Mitchell? You run up here like the devil was after you, an' now you can't catch yer breath to walk in there."

"Oh . . . one of the windows," she improvised. "I couldn't get it closed, and I got mad at it." She smiled. "Then I got scared when I heard you call. You sounded so *urgent.* I didn't know what " She had to think of something to do; she had to think
fast.

"It ain't me that's so urgent," Veda retorted. "Only I don't think that Mr. Turner'll last the day if he don't see you soon. You better go on in. I'll fix the window."

"I guess I better." But she didn't move. She stood solidly where she was, blocking the doorway and the stairs.

"Barbie!" she called wildly. She couldn't think of anything bet-ter; this would have to do. Barbie wanted to help the man. Here was her chance. "Barbara!"

"Mom, it's the squad truck," the answer floated back. "Mr. Turner and Dr. Spinelli. They're waiting for you."

"I'll be right out. Come here a minute, will you?" Veda was watching her with a puzzled frown. "Barbie can fix the window," she explained hastily. "I don't want her around when I talk to the doctor." *That's* true enough, Lord knows.

She ignored Veda's silent stare of disapproval. One thing at a time.

"Barbie, there's a window down there I couldn't shut. Will you see what you can do?"

"But, Mom, I *told* you—they're here, and they want another blood sample."

"I'll go see Mr. Turner." Gladys overrode her protests. "That window's got to be closed."

"But I have to give Pete some more blood—I mean Dr. Spinelli." The slip tended to spoil the patiently tolerant quality of her explanation, but it didn't stop her. "Veda can

"Pete can wait a minute. You go fix that window," Gladys said firmly. "I want to talk to your Dr. Spinelli too."

"Oh, Mom, I wish you'd stop worrying so much." Barbara was sure she understood now. "He doesn't know anything yet. He would have told me if he did." There was a tinge of pride in her

assurance, just enough to bring Gladys' earlier irritation at the doctor back into focus.

He would, would he? I'm going to have a few words with that young man, she promised herself. "I'll worry just as much as I want to," she told her daughter blithely. In spite of all its dangers, there was a certain relish in the situation.

"As a matter of fact that's not what I was worried about. Per-haps you'll understand when you're older." A few minutes older, I mean. "Can't you manage the window by yourself?" She was being deliberately provoking, making it essential for the girl to do the job herself. But she had to give some sort of warning too. How, in front of Veda?

"Be careful," she called as Barbic started angrily down the stairs. "I think there are"—the word popped into her mouth of its own accord—"mice down there."

SIXTEEN

"Hello." The two men waited for her in the living room, ominous in their heavy suits, their faces shadowed by the raised visors of their helmets. "I was just downstairs, closing the cellar windows."

She couldn't keep her hands quiet. Nervously she straightened lamps and ash trays, patted cushions into place.

Neither of them said anything. Even Jim Turner's hail-fellow was missing.

What's wrong? She stopped bustling and turned to face them. Fear gave way to amusement and then to acute self-consciousness, as she realized why they were staring. I never did go up and change! She yearned for a mirror and was glad she couldn't see one. Aggressively she turned to the doctor.

"I don't suppose you have any news yet about my daughter?" She was pleased to hear her voice stay steady, not too intense, not too worried.

"Not really," he said. "If she were sick enough for the first count to show anything the analysis would have looked worse than it did. I want to take another sample now. We should have a definite answer for you tomorrow."

"Well then . . ." It wasn't so easy to keep her voice steady this time. "The first sample wasn't too encouraging?"

"In a sense it was," he hedged. "But I'd rather not raise your hopes—or hers either—until we know more. I hope Barbara's not getting panicky. I explained it all to her this morning, and I think she understands."

"Well, as long as *she* understands . . ."

He didn't miss the edge in her voice. "I hope she didn't get too worried by what I told her," he said unhappily. "She seemed to take it all right, didn't get flustered by the needle or anything, and then she began asking questions. You weren't around"—he was floundering now—"and the lady who was there—I think Barbie called her Veda " Barbie! Barbie and Pete. Gladys raised mental eyebrows and lost her grip on the mood of irritation.

He felt the change and gathered assurance. "She said you were sleeping and she thought you shouldn't be awakened. I didn't want to wait to take the sample, and I just explained as much as I thought Barbara could understand."

Turner was getting impatient. "That's okay, *Doc*," he said, and turned to Gladys. "I told him to go ahead, soon as the kid told us her story." The subject was closed now; he made that clear. She had lost the initiative as soon as she stopped being angry, and the squadman was taking over.

"Where'd the kid go to?" he asked. "We got to be running along in a minute. Just

finished curfew patrol, and we have to check in at headquarters. I figured it would speed things up some for you if we took another sample back to the lab on our way."

"Barbie's just finishing up in the cellar," Gladys said quickly. "I'll get her right away."

"Don't you bother. Doc'll find her," Turner insisted. "1 want to talk to you a minute. They wouldn't wake you up when I was here before. You stay up all night?"-

"No—that is, yes." She edged toward the door, staying in front of Spinelli.

"Oh, Doctor, I wanted to tell you

"Yes?"

"I'm worried about Ginny," she blurted out. "Veda said she didn't eat any lunch, and she seems so listless—it's probably just nerves—being shut in and no one to play with, but . . . 1 don't know. Maybe I'm just getting jittery now?"

"It doesn't hurt to be a little extra careful. I could take a blood count now," he said doubtfully, "but there's no sense bothering her unless we have something definite to go on. Suppose I check with the lab on her urinalysis?" he suggested. "Then we'll know whether there's anything to worry about."

"Thank you. I'll go get Barbie now," she said breathlessly. "I'll be right back."

"Ain't that just like a woman!" Turner's laugh boomed good-naturedly. "Up all night, slept all day, and now I bet she's wor-ried how her kitchen looks. You sit down an' take it easy, Miz Mitchell." He took her arm and led her to a chair.

"Go on, *Doc."* He threw the words over his shoulder impatiently. "You can find the kid, can't you?" He settled Gladys in the chair and turned to face the younger man. "You'll be using the kitchen to take that sample, won't you?" he asked meaningfully. The doctor nodded, but still hesitated, standing irresolute in the dining-room door.

Gladys had a sudden horrified memory of the moment that morning when the Security man thought she had some nefarious reason for wanting to go upstairs. Was that why Jim Turner made her stay here now? Were they suspicious? Had anyone seen that man come in?

"Barbie!" she called.

There was no answer. And under the pressure of Turner's willthe doctor started slowly through the door. She *had* to warn Barbara.

"Veda!" It was a risk, but less than the other. "Veda, will you tell Barbie the doctor wants her?"

It was all she could do. She had to pay attention to Turner now. "How come your cellar windows were open?" he asked. Was it interest or suspicion? There was no way to tell.

Belatedly she explained about the gas and about what she had done. "I don't know if that was the best thing to do," she wound up, "but maybe you could take a look at it later on? Next time you come. I know you're in a hurry now."

"I guess we could take time to look at it right now," the big man decided.

"It could wait," she said doubtfully, trying to sound as if she didn't care. Why did *everything* have to lead to the cellar?

"I'm not so busy I can't do that much for a neighbor," he said, waving aside her protests. "I'll just take a look. Might be you shouldn't stay here. And I don't know if I'll have a chance to get back tonight. I was wondering," he chuckled, eying her

greasy slacks again as she stood up, "what you got yourself up in that rig for. You look like you could be Barbie's sister instead of her ma."

"I'll have to wear it more often." She produced a smile and raised her arm again in the futile habitual gesture, patting and pushing with her fingers at the tangled waves of her hair. Turner stood still, staring at her, and she didn't know why she was blushing.

She couldn't see, as the big squadman did, how the motion of her arm accentuated the curve of her body inside Jon's big work shirt; or how the loose shirt, tucked tightly into her slacks, flared out above the waist; she didn't know how the rough clothes and rolled-up sleeves, the grease stain on her leg, the smudges on her arms, created an absurd and delightful effect of femininity on mas-querade—or how the uninvited color, flooding up under her clear skin, heightened the contrast of her clothing.

She saw only the dust on her hands after she had touched her hair, and felt the steady eyes of her neighbor's husband staring at

her. And she knew it was not suspicion that made him so anxious to help.

She took a step forward, for the first time with assurance. She could hear Barbie and the doctor in the kitchen. Surely any danger was past. Barbie must have gotten the man out.

Turner stepped forward as she did, brushing close to her, too close, before either of them could check the momentum of the stride. Even as he stopped and balanced himself, waiting for her to go ahead, something far below the conscious level of her mind leaped up in frenzy.

Jon, oh, Jon! Come home!

With heavy footsteps following at her heels, she went into the kitchen, forced the cry of need from her mind. She had known Jim Turner for years, and there were more real things to worry about right now. Veda had started it, Veda with her silly talk in the bedroom, when she was only half awake. A man had brushed against her—not, she told herself, purposely. He had stopped as soon as he could. That was that. Forget it.

But the self-assurance she had gained in the moment at the doorway didn't leave her. Going through the kitchen, she ques-tioned Barbie casually.

"It's okay, Mom, I got it fixed."

Gladys went on to the stairs with no show of hesitation. She was again acutely aware of Turner's bulk right behind her, and just before the light flashed on, she had an instant's fright as to what it might reveal. But both fears passed, and after only the hastiest eye-sweeping, she led the way into the furnace room.

The squadman sniffed the air and went over to study the meter. "How'd you know what to do?" he asked. "I couldn't hardly do it better myself."

"You mean I did the right thing?" Approval tasted very sweet

after the day's frustrations. "I was just guessing," she told him. "Well, you guessed good. You got nothing to worry about." "But what about getting it turned *on* again? Would it be safe?" "That depends. Did you find out where the leak is?"

"No." She couldn't see how it would matter, but she told him about ,the pilot light on the stove.

"Out, was it?" He pulled at his lip thoughtfully. "I'll tell you," he said finally. "They

haven't got it on the radio yet, because they don't want to get people worried, but there ain't going to be any gas pretty soon. As long as you got it turned off, you might just as well leave it that way."

"No gas? But what happened?"

"The way I heard it, they had an explosion in one of the mains, that cut off the

"Explosion!" she broke in. "I didn't know anything was hit near here. When did it happen?"

"Now don't go getting worried," he said hastily. "No bombs up here in our neck of the woods. It was some kind of accident they had, that's all. The real trouble is manpower. They just can't make repairs and keep the gas going. Pressure's pretty low already. How're you fixed for something to cook on? I could get you

"We have a hot plate we've been using," she told him quickly. "We can manage with that all right. But our hot-water heater is gas too," she remembered.

"Well now," he sympathized, "that could make it kind of tough on you, but one thing, it won't be for long. That's what I wanted to see you about. It's classified stuff, really, but I know you can keep your mouth shut. Thing is, we're making plans right now for evacuation—cleaning out this whole section."

"There *were* bombs!" she breathed.

"Now, Gladys, *I told* you there weren't. It's supplies and man-power where the trouble is. Food's too hard to bring in. And we can't use the men we got to fix gas mains and things like that, when we need every one of them to work in the city. Matter of fact, phone service might be out, too, pretty soon."

She shook her head doubtfully, and remembered that Dr. **Levy** had said something about bombs directly overhead. What connec-tion was there?

"Now don't you worry about it," he said, misreading her

troubled expression. "Things won't get too bad. It looks like the move'll start Thursday—Friday at the latest. There's plenty of food till then. An' I can see to it," he promised, "that you folks get onto the first train out."

"But . . ." She stopped. But I don't want to go. That would be a silly thing to say. It wasn't a matter of what she wanted.

"I can get you settled up at the camp too," he added. "We're taking over the Navy base up at Sampson. Beautiful country up there. I think I can work it for you to get into the staff quarters. Find something to put you in charge of, and that would give you a priority for the train scats too. That way, you won't be too crowded, and you won't have to wait around down here if things get had."

"But " she began again. "That's very kind of you, but there's really no need to take all that trouble. We'll manage."

"A man ought to at least look out for his friends!" Turner broke in indignantly. "It's no trouble anyhow. All I have to do is put in your name for some kind of supervisor's job, and the resell take care of itself."

"But there's nothing I can do," she protested. "I don't have any kind of training."

"You just leave that part of it up to me." He smiled and winked. "I'll figure something out."

I won't go. I won't. She almost said it out loud.

"Now, you understand," he reminded her, "you got to keep this to yourself. Even the boys on the truck don't know about it yet. We'll put out a warning on the radio

pretty soon, but even then you better not say I told you. This is strictly confidential. Mean-while," he went on, "you're better off not to bother with the gas or anything."

She couldn't listen any more. She thought she'd smother if she didn't get out of there, but he kept talking, rambling on about preparations and baggage limits, offering warnings and reassur-ances, to which she replied with forced monosyllables.

I won't go. I won't!

"Wouldn't hurt to get these windows boarded up, either," he wassaying. He had gone over to look at the locks. "That maid of yours could do it for you. You got some lumber?"

Slit nodded, and he came back and looked down to see, for the first time, the horror in her face.

"Now, Gladys," he urged, "you got to be sensible. It's only a couple more days, and there's probably no danger at all. But if you board up the windows, then you're *sure.* No sense asking for

trouble."

"You mean those gangs they've been talking about?"

"Well, what'd you think I meant?"

She shook her head. Everything was too confusing.

"Now you come on upstairs," he said. "There's nothing to get so scared about. Come on."

She nodded gratefully. That was what she wanted, to get out of the cellar, up to where the other people were, to where she could breathe again. When he reached out his hand to pat her shoulder reassuringly she turned swiftly, before he could feel the shudder his touch evoked. She ran all the way upstairs.

SEVENTEEN

Veda was in the kitchen, cleaning up, but Gladys didn't stop there. The heavy footsteps were too close behind her, and she swept through to the living room where Barbie and the doctor were waiting. Blessedly the footsteps paused in their pur-suit. She dropped into the big armchair and pressed her fingers hard against the rubbed nap of the upholstery. She was safe.

Muted conversation from the kitchen. She smiled a little, think-ing he must be telling Veda about those windows, wanting to make sure it got done without frightening her any more. Then he came in, and through the hasty good-bys she used weariness as a defense, stayed in her chair, and let them go without a word.

Then Veda came in, stared at her curiously, and called Barbie out to the kitchen. She heard again the snatches of a quiet conver-sation, and then her daughter's careless feet on the cellar stairs. Then for a few long minutes there was absolute peace, and nothing to think about, time for her tortured mind to rest.

Too soon, Barbie was back again, dancing around the room with a suppressed excitement Gladys couldn't understand. Pete, she re-membered. Barbie and Pete. Maybe it wasn't so funny. Maybe she should take it more seriously.

"Mom!" Barbie saw her eyes were open now. "Mom, I'm going down the cellar to fix the windows. Do you want to come down?" "I can't, darling. I'm too tired."

"But, Mom, I'm going *down the cellar!"*

"Well, you've been there before!" She didn't want to sound cross. She smiled.

"Very recently." It was something they shared. "I'm worn out, Babsy. You go down." She closed her eyes again, but Barbara didn't go.

Instead the girl came over and took both her hands, pulling a little, playfully.

"Please come down with me, Mom. You don't have to do anything."

Gladys opened her eyes in astonishment. Why should it mean so much?

"Please, Mom, it's . . ." She lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "It's Doc!" she said.

For a moment it didn't make sense, then Barbie added, "Doc Levy!"

Gladys was instantly fully awake. "What about him?" she demanded.

"He wants to talk to you."

"Where is he?"

"In the cellar, of course," Barbie said impatiently.

"Did he come *back?* When?"

"Come back?" The girl was bewildered. "He never *went any*-where."

"But when I sent you down—before they first came—didn't you *warn* him?" That was impossible too. "He wasn't there when I went down with Mr. Turner," she finished.

"Oh, wasn't he?" Barbara was clearly delighted with the effect she was producing. "Of course I warned him," she teased, and added more soberly, "That's what he wanted to do—go away. But he didn't even know where he was going, and the truck was right in front of the house, so

"You mean he's still down there?"

`"Sure!" Barbic totally misunderstood her mother's horrified in-tonation. "Now will you come down?"

"I certainly will!" Grimly Gladys followed her daughter through the dining room and into the kitchen. When she got down to the bottom of the cellar steps the air was already crackling with ques-tions and confusion.

"But you told me you didn't have any place to

"Just a minute, Barbara," the teacher interposed. He turned to Gladys. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Mitchell. I'm afraid I didn't make things quite clear enough to Barbara. I shouldn't have come in at all, I suppose, but I really thought it would be all right
"

"Well, it was all right," Barbie insisted.

"It just happened to be," he said wearily. "Or rather, your mother made it so. But she can't keep on hiding me from Mr. Turner indefinitely. This time he was in a hurry. Next time he might not be."

"Well, next time you won't be in the cellar."

"Barbara, *will* you stop arguing? Dr. Levy knows what he wants to do."

The girl stared at her incredulously. "Well, don't you *want* him to—"

"You heard what your mother said, Barbara!" His tone was sharp. Gladys saw hurt succeed surprise on her daughter's face. "I'm sorry I chose such a bad time for my—visit, Mrs. Mitchell," he went on. "I didn't mean to endanger you, or even to cause a family upset." He was, oddly, being suavely polite, here in the

basement, with his clothes dirty, a hammer dangling from his hand —and the police after him.

"I really meant to leave as soon as the patrol was over, but Barbara convinced me

it was unwise to go out while the truck was parked in front of the house. Then when she came down again . . ." He smiled a little sheepishly and waved the hammer in his hand to indicate the one boarded-up window. "Maybe I just took the first excuse I could find to stay a while longer, but

"Mother, he did *everything,"* Barbie insisted. "All I did was hand him nails. *I tried* to do it myself, but everything kept going wrong."

The man's apologetic smile broke into a grin that gave his broad face, under the thatch of gray hair, a look of impish merriment. "I'm afraid Barbara's quite right," he said. "I couldn't stand watching the way she held that hammer, and I started out just to show her how. Then it seemed the least I could do, to pay for my keep, as it were, was to stay and finish the job. But"—he was serious again—"when I realized you didn't know I was still here I sent her up to get you."

Well, what am I supposed to say now? Gladys wondered. How could he take it all so casually, make jokes, and find cause for laughter? His own life was forfeit, and he was endangering theirs every minute he stayed. Get out of my house! her mind screamed at him, but she couldn't say it out loud.

"I see," she managed. "That was very thoughtful of you."

"Well, what are you going to do, Mother?" Barbara demanded coldly. "Are you going to make him go away after all he--"

"I think," he smiled ruefully, ignoring the girl, "I'd better go now. But there was another reason I wanted to talk to you, Mrs. Mitchell. I took a grand tour of your gas pipes while Barbara was upstairs, and I think I found your trouble. I don't know if you'll want to bother with it now, but it's just possible you could get it going again."

"Why, that would be wonderful! Is it safe, you think?"

"If I've diagnosed it right, it is." He walked over to the hot-water healer. "I have a hunch all your trouble was in here. Of course it could be in the pipes," he added, "but I just don't think so."

"What could the heater have to do with it?" Gladys wanted to know.

"I think that's where the gas was escaping from. It occurred to me when you mentioned the pilot light went out. From what Mr. Turner said

"You heard all that?" Gladys interrupted. *"Where were you?"*

"Oh, I never told you!" Barbara seized the opening. "I ought to make you guess!" Delightedly she stretched out the moment. "You'd never think of it. He was in the clothes drier!"

"And a very dry, clean drier, too," he put in. "I'm afraid I *did* overhear most of your conversation—or rather," he smiled, "Mr. Turner's."

Gladys flushed, remembering the nature of Turner's conversa-tion. But Dr. Levy went on without giving her a chance to be embarrassed.

"From what he said about trouble in the mains, and from the way you described your trouble with the stove upstairs, I think that when the pilot light went out, upstairs, the one down here in the heater must have done the same. Only the big flame in the heater was on at the time, and that stayed open. It shouldn't," he added. "These gadgets are supposed to be foolproof. But something didn't work when it should have, and as soon as the gas came through again it began pouring out of the burner. If I'm right, then it's perfectly safe to turn the gas on again, just so the heater's off first."

He walked over to the meter and examined Gladys' handiwork.

"Will it go on again?" she asked. "Frankly, I don't know just what I did to it."

"You did the right thing anyhow. And a thorough job, too," he told her. "What did you use to turn it off?"

"There was a pliers." She looked around, trying to remember what she'd done with it.

He was back at the heater, fooling with handles and knobs.

"That should do it," he said finally. "This thing's off tight now. You can turn on the gas any time. All you have to do is screw that valve out—the one you closed before—but you better check up carefully after you turn it on, and make sure I'm right. If you come down every half hour or so you'll be able to notice the smell long before there's any danger, just in case there really is a leak some-where."

"I don't know . . ." Gladys hesitated. "I'd—isn't there any other way to tell?"

"No safe way," he said, "unless you're sure you know what you're doing. You'd have to crawl all over the place to follow the pipes."

"Well," she said doubtfully, "we'll sec. But thank you, anyhow. It was very kind of you."

"Of course," Barbara said coldly, "it wouldn't occur to you that Doc—oh, never mind," she finished helplessly.

Gladys looked wearily from her daughter to the teacher. The man ran his hand through his hair, brushed off the dusty sleeves of his jacket, and straightened his tie.

"I " It was his turn now to be embarrassed. "In spite of my perhaps ill-placed humor before, Mrs. Mitchell, I hope you realize I wasn't really looking for an—excuse. I've stayed too long already."

"You've been . . . very kind," Gladys repeated inadequately. There must be something she could say or do, something that would help. "1'm afraid," she said weakly, "I haven't exactly—well, I certainly haven't thanked you for all you've done."

"Please, Mrs. Mitchell," he said uncomfortably, "that's not nec-essary. Believe me, I realize just how difficult it's been."

"The only difficult thing anybody's done," Barbara said bitterly, "was your coming here last night to warn us."

Gladys felt miserably ashamed of her own fears. She was tired and mixed up, torn between pity for the man and terror of having him in the house. And things would only be more complicated if she admitted to herself that she was beginning to like him. What

Barbara wanted wasn't really so unreasonable. What if he did stay a little longer? Turner certainly wouldn't be back again soon. In the end it was her weariness that won.

"It might be a good idea if you took a look outside, Barbara," Dr. Levy said. "I'd hate to add any more to my sins by involving you people now."

Wordlessly the girl started for the stairs, but Gladys put out a hand to stop her.

"Dr. Levy." She turned to the man and gave him a pleading look, begging him to understand just what she meant. "I want you to know," she began cautiously, "that I really do appreciate all you've done. I'm awfully tired, and I'm not sure I'm being very clear, but if—well, if you would like to stay awhile, I'm sure it would be a big help to us. I . . ." She tried to make it easier. "I know I could never manage the gas

myself," she added.

She was grateful when Barbara took it upon herself to override his protests, leaving her to escape to the comfort of Jon's big chair upstairs. She could rest now, without quarrels or exertions. She didn't have to think about windows or gas; she didn't have to argue with Barbie.

There was music on the radio again. She closed her eyes, trying to bring Jon back into the room, as she had tried the night before. But he wouldn't come; she couldn't imagine him there at all. He was gone.

In the last war there had been a day when, suddenly, she couldn't remember what he looked like. She had stared at his pic-ture and the face on it had been a stranger's. But that was after months of separation. This was just . . . not even . . . two days.

Veda came in, and Gladys opened her eyes in greeting, then closed them again when she saw nothing was required of her. Veda picked out a magazine and sat down on the sofa. She must be tired too.

Everything was extraordinarily peaceful. Music on the radio, down low, pages turning once in a while, Ginny asleep upstairs.

Edie Crowell is asleep up there too. Ginny asleep. Barbie, board-ing up windows . . . a stranger hiding in the cellar . . . She wouldn't think of those things. A man fixing the gas, she corrected herself. Turner couldn't fix it, she thought, but Jim Turner was one more person she didn't want to think about.

She wouldn't answer the phone either. She'd just let it ring. But it made too much noise.

"Missus Mitchell!" She was supposed to get up now. Veda had answered it.

"I don't want to talk to anybody."

"Yes, you do. You come talk now."

It was something good. *It was good news!* She ran to the phone and took it from Veda's extended hand.

"Yes?"

"This is Peter Spinelli, Mrs. Mitchell. I had a minute before we left headquarters, so I thought I'd let you know. Barbie's all right."

EIGHTEEN

"But how could they know so *soon?"* Barbie left a thoroughly embraced Veda brushing off cellar dust and spun back to her mother. "I thought it took hours!"

"He said it didn't take long to make the count—just waiting for them to get around to it. But Dr. Peter Spinelli, for some unknown reason, wanted to find out about Miss Barbara Mitchell right away, so he went right in and did it himself."

She did not add that Squadman James Turner had been so con-cerned about Mrs. Gladys Mitchell that he had procured the diffi-cult lab pass that made the quick test possible. Watching Barbie's glee, she dismissed the disquieting obligation. Time enough to think of that later. She felt as if she had just awakened from a long, lonesleep—far more refreshed than when she had actually got out of bed, five hours earlier.

"Hey, I've got to finish those windows! It's getting late." Barbara stopped prancing. "Come with me, Mom. Keep me company." "All right," Gladys agreed.

"Missus Mitchell." Veda restored her magazine to its precise spot in the rack. "If there's nothin' special you want me for, I think mebbe I'll get to bed now." She covered a yawn. "Looks like there ain't no call fer me to set up no more."

"Do you mean to say you were staying up just on account of me?" Gladys asked indignantly. "You shouldn't have."

"Yer' feelin' pretty chipper now," Veda stopped her, "but you didn't look so hot a ways back. Anyways, Mr. Turner, he give me strict orders to look out fer you. I jest didn't dare do nothin' else."

The remar! brought a general laugh, but made Gladys acutely aware of another worry she had deferred. Something would have to be done about Jim Turner.

The music on the radio ended with a noisy flourish, and a man's voice announced the ten o'clock news. For the first time since the speeches the afternoon before, Gladys found she really wanted to hear a broadcast all the way through.

"Let's go downstairs after the news is over," she suggested. The two of them settled down together in front of the radio, and Barbie accepted the decision willingly.

To Gladys' surprise, most of the news was encouraging. No fur-ther attempts at bombing attacks had been made. Retaliation was already in effect. Then the startling, unexpected information that all action against the enemy was by means of remote-control aircraft; land forces would be used only for mopping up.

Tom was safe! Whatever they had him doing at address un-known, he was not landing in enemy territory or fighting the dread sort of man-to-man battle they'd had in the last war.

There were reports of communication hookups to all parts of the country, of trains and rails repaired for evacuation purposes, of supplies being brought into big-city areas.

The national news was followed by a series of brief reports on local matters. There was something about the explosion in the gas main that Turner had mentioned; and there was also a report about the preparation of the Navy base for use as an evacuation camp. There were new hospitals opened up, railroad lines put in use, telephone services repaired.

The broadcast ended with a repetition of the request for tempo-rary homes for homeless children.

Impulsively Gladys got up and went to the phone. When she came back, after the now familiar struggle with operators and switchboards, she felt obscurely pleased, even while she reckoned up the new difficulties the decision would bring upon her. But now that she knew Barbie was all right the whole thing seemed much easier. It might, in fact, give Barbara something to do when bore-dom and confinement began to tell on them all. Arid certainly it would be wonderful for Ginny. All in all, it might save more trouble than it made.

They started reading off the long lists of victims and survivors found in the city, and Gladys let her thoughts drift away. The news all sounded so good, she reflected, things seemed to be im-proving every hour. Then it occurred to her that nothing had been said about the imminent failure of the gas supply or about the pos-sible discontinuance of telephone service. The news of the evacua-tion camp's preparation did not include any mention of the pro-jected mass evacuation. It wasn't

all quite as good as it sounded after all; maybe the other part, the big news about the whole coun-try, was weeded out the same way.

"Mother?" Gladys raised her eyes from the tufted carpet and looked at Barbie inquiringly.

"I just wanted to tell you, I think it was awfully nice of you to change your mind about those kids—and about Doc Levy."

"I didn't exactly change my mind about him," Gladys told her. "It bothers me, just having him in the house. Maybe I'd feel better if I knew what it was that he did that makes him have to hide, but —well, I just don't like the whole thing!"

"But you *said*

"I know what I said. I said that if he wanted to stay awhile it would be a big help to us. It was perfectly true, and I don't sec what else I could have said at that point. I know he's done a lot for us, but frankly I'll be a lot happier when he's gone."

"You mean you're still going to make him go? You're not going to let him stay here?"

"Suppose *you* tell me where we'd keep him—if not in the clothes drier? And how we'd keep Ginny from finding out? Or Veda?"

"He could stay up in the attic," Barbie insisted. "You know how Tom and I used to play up there when we were kids? There's plenty of room for a man to hide behind those boards, too, if he had to."

When we were kids! Staring at her daughter in mingled shock and amusement, Gladys almost missed the rest of what Barbie said.

"Anyhow," the girl finished, "I don't see why they shouldn't know."

"Barbie, you know Ginny would never be able to keep quiet about it. Even if we could make her understand it was a secret she couldn't keep it. And now," she added as inspiration struck her, "with those children coming—well, it's just impossible."

"And what about *Veda?"* The question did not come from Barbie.

Fully dressed, and not looking the least bit sleepy, Veda was firmly planted in the dining -room door, arms folded on her chest, eyes flashing.

"How long . . . ?" Gladys started.

"Not long enough," she said. "I don't yet know his name or what he's doing down there."

"Have you *seen him?"*

"Yes, I seen him. Crawlin' all over the floor down there like an animal. This one," she said, pointing a long arm accusingly at Barbie, "tryin' to tell me she fixed that gas up her own self. *You're* right smart at keepin' things to yerself," she accused Gladys. "But

if Miss Snippity here wants to know your secrets, my advice is, don't tell her. She can't keep 'em."

One baleful glare stopped Barbara's retort before it got fairly started. "Now, lissen, Missus Mitchell, I ain't forgettin' you did me a favor this mornin'. But I've had to do some fancy remindin' myself the last couple of hours. Mebbe you think what them fellers said about me is true, an' so I'll put up with anything. Well, it ain't true. I never did a thing in my life I'd be afraid to admit out loud, an' up till right now I thought the same about you. But if it's got so you'd set your own daughter to lyin'

"Veda!" Gladys protested. "I know perfectly well you haven't done anything wrong. And neither have I. You ought to realize that."

"Well, I'm right glad to hear you say so. But just don't you mind, I want to have my say out this once. If you folks kin make up yer minds to let me know what's goin' on around here, and if it don't seem wrong to me, that's one thing. But if you can't see fit to tell me what that man is doin' here I don't see nothin' for it but to get out even if it means I got to call up the Security men an'

"Veda!" Barbara, appalled, forgot to be cowed. "You wouldn't *tell* them! You wouldn't tell about Dr. Levy?"

"No'm." Veda directed her answer to Gladys, seeing the same question in her eyes. "No'm, I wouldn't. I told you I ain't forgot about this mornin' and ain't like to. Only I jest can't stay here unless we get things straightened up. I'm sorry, Missus Mitchell, but it ain't *jest* that man. I tried to talk to you before and didn't get nowhere. But it ain't in me to keep on

"Of course you're going to stay, Veda." Gladys had finally re-covered her self-possession. "You know we wouldn't let you go. Now sit down, will you, and give me a chance to tell you about it?"

Reluctantly the maid crossed the room and sat down. She listened, stiffly at first, while Gladys went over the whole story, some parts of which Barbara, too, was hearing for the first time. In the course of the tale Veda's indignation died away, but by the time it was done she was afire once more.

"You mean to set there an' tell me you let that man stay down in thit cellar all this time," she demanded fiercely, "and him sick, too?" She got up and headed briskly for the kitchen.

After that Gladys felt she had lost all ability to be surprised. If she were still capable of it, nothing could have been stranger than the immediate warmth of the friendship between Veda and Garson Levy.

The woman, almost uneducated, opinionated, practical, and warmly emotional; the man, well informed, scientific, precise of speech and mannerism, a little too erudite, almost pedantic—it seemed there could hardly be two people with less in common.

Gladys sat and marveled, while the teacher weeded out his vocabulary, choosing words Veda would be sure to understand, taking care not to offend her, drawing her out. He wanted to know everything that had happened to her, what she'd seen and heard in the city and in the decontamination center.

It took a long time for the whole story to come out. Some of it they heard while Levy tested the kitchen range, and some while Veda filled all the remaining empty containers with boiling water. The teacher kept her talking while he devised airtight seals for jars and pitchers that had no tops, and longer still while they all sat drinking coffee and cocoa in the living room.

Veda told them how she had turned away the first people who tried to rouse her—two of the roomers who had taken it upon themselves to get everyone out of the house. She even told, with a deprecatory smile, how she stood cowering in a corner of the room, wrapped in her bathrobe, angrily convinced that her fellow tenants were drunk and violent in the middle of the afternoon.

She had steadfastly refused to open the door, and apparently the neighbors' interest in her welfare had not extended to knocking it down. She went back to bed

with a firm resolution to have a long talk with the landlady, and went promptly back to sleep. The steady downpour of radioactive rain all that afternoon did not dis-turb her. It was after two o'clock in the morning when an official rescue crew came through the building, broke down the door, and

dragged her out of bed and out of the house, with barely time to get her bathrobe on.

The rain was over by then and the street was bright with fires, raging in defiance of the lingering wetness. She didn't see much oatside, however, because she was led directly from the house *door* to a big closed truck only a few feet away.

She shared the interior of the truck for more than an hour with the few other female survivors rescued in that neighborhood. She was the second one in, and when the truck started rolling steadily westward there were nine altogether—three cripples, one idiot, two drunks, two senile old ladies, and herself. As near as she could make out, everyone who was conscious and capable, as well as most of those who weren't, had fled the poisoned streets long ago.

The nine of them were unloaded in front of a big stone building that might have been a college, a library, or a museum, and taken through a little side entrance to a series of small rooms where they were subjected to indignities which Veda passed over without detail. These Gladys shrewdly guessed to be connected with a change of clothing and an assembly-line medical examination.

They had then been led through a series of rooms where un-familiar machines, big and little, quiet and noisy, were aimed at her.

Levy explained that these must have been the testing devices for radiations and fission products. He seemed impressed at the num-ber and size Veda reported, but Gladys was inclined to discount some of it. She was familiar with Veda's impressionability where machinery was concerned.

In any case she had been separated from her truck companions immediately afterward. Something was said about a hospital, so she assumed that was where the others were taken. She herself, it seemed, was in excellent health—considerably better than she had ever thought. She was taken to another large building, located within the same roped-off area of several city blocks. This one was easily identifiable as a public school.

The entire place, Dr. Levy said, was undoubtedly the Washing-ton Heights Decontamination Center.

In the school she was taken to a brightly lit room where several men questioned her, over and over again, about her reasons for sealing her room. In endless embarrassed succession she repeated the same answers to the same questions, until eventually one of them decided on the trip to the Mitchells' to check on her story.

It was almost midnight by the time Veda finished. Then, when Levy found out how long she'd been without sleep, he did some-thing Gladys would have sworn to be impossible, and persuaded her to go off to bed, leaving the dishes for him to do.

Barbara was half asleep, too, but reluctant to leave a gathering where she had acquired such a wealth of information. Gladys let her stay up for the twelve o'clock news, then sent the girl off to bed. She herself went up to the attic to fix a cot for Dr. Levy. There was no longer any question that he had become a semipermanent guest.

When she had finished she called down to let him know it was ready, but she

didn't go back to the living room.

For all his redeeming traits, she still found the teacher hard to talk to. Perhaps it was because, even now, she felt so strongly the indefinite menace that his presence in the house implied, perhaps because everything connected with him continued to be so un-realistically melodramatic. She wanted to know more about him—a great deal more—but she could not bring herself to go down and question him.

She opened up the hall closet again and began working through a pile she had started the night before, reflecting uncomfortably on the fact that while he was drawing out Veda's story Levy had told little or nothing of his own.

She dug down among the old work clothes and camping things, refusing to think about the extra baggage she would be allowed if she took Jim Turner's offer. She was going to *have* to do some-thing about that.

Ruefully she wondered which man was more of a problem. Then,

underneath Tom's old tennis racket, she found Jon's *Camper's Manual* and opened it curiously.

NINETEEN

The crash caught her in the middle of the chapter on first aid. She dropped the book and flew downstairs before she could think about it and get too frightened to go down at all. It was not loud enough to be an explosion; it was too loud to be furniture or a lamp. There was a battering sound to it and, mixed with it, the tinkling shatter of glass. Everything was all right in the living room, but Dr. Levy was nowhere in sight.

Gladys went back to the kitchen and pushed open the swinging door into darkness.

"Close it!" That was Dr. Levy. "For God's sake, shut the door. Don't let the light in." He was shouting in a whisper, if that were possible. He seemed to be across the room, down near the floor, and moving around. It felt as if she stood in the lighted doorway forever, but she realized that she must have acted quickly to close it when she heard his grunted "Good.

"Get down," he ordered, still whispering, and she obeyed. On the other side of the room the door to Veda's bedroom creaked cautiously open, but no light showed through.

"It's all right, Veda," Gladys called. "We're out here." Another thundering crash at the kitchen door and the little glass that was left in the panes fell tinkling to the floor. It's all right . . . what made her say a thing like that?

"What's the matter? What's happening?" Veda's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Come over here," Levy told Gladys. He was moving around again. "And keep low. Stay down as close to the floor as you can." Something hit the door again, and the whole room shook.

Veda came up next to Gladys. "Is it that gang they was talking about on the radio?"

Gladys nodded, then realized it was too dark for Veda to sec her. "Yes."

She felt something being put into her hand. `"Give it to Veda," Levy said. Dutifully she passed on the heavy iron skillet. He kept handing her things. Another

skillet, a carving knife, the iron and, ludicrously, a rolling pin—anything he could lay his hands on that could possibly be a weapon.

"Pile them up in front of you."

Gladys did as she was told, simply because she knew nothing better to do.

"I'm going over behind the door on the other side," Levy whis-pered. He was kneeling down right in back of them, so they could both hear. "You stay here together and when the door comes down throw the lighter things first, as fast as you can, and as much as you can. If there aren't many of them the confusion might be enough to stop them. If that doesn't work, use the heavier things, but you haven't got many of those, so don't waste them. If you do have to use them, aim to hit."

He started crawling across the floor, rattling some unknown kitchen utensils behind him. A few feet away he stopped.

"Just try not to hit me," he pleaded, and continued his slow progress across the floor.

It had been a long time since the last crash. Were they recon-sidering the plan of attack? Or going away? Or gathering strength for the final blow?

"Dr. Levy!" It was absolutely quiet outside, and even her whis-per sounded *loud.*

"Yes?"

"What do we do with the knives?"

"Nothing more than you can help," he *said* tersely. "If they get in, you may need them."

He had barely finished making his way to his self-appointed station on the far side of the door when the crash came, louder

and more violent than any before. It hit the door and continued hitting it, until the frame, boards and all, shook, shivered, and fell.

Gladys' rolling pin flew from her hand toward the first shape that loomed in the doorway. By a miracle of bad aim, it went straight by him to bring forth a yell of pain from someone right in back. A moment later Levy brought a heavy skillet down on the foot of the man in front, putting him out of the battle completely.

Later on Gladys remembered those two opening incidents clearly, but the rest was a chaos of flying fists and kitchenware, from which only an occasional incident stood out. The first flurry of flying objects from Gladys and Veda caused a hesitation in the ranks that made it clear the intruders had not expected resistance. But they raffled quickly and surged into the room. One of them had a flashlight.

"Oh, it's just a couple of dames," he shouted, and the others rushed through. The swath of light had completely missed Levy, crouching beside the door. The teacher stood up, raised his arms over his head, reached forward, and brought down the pot in his hands—upside down. He snatched the light easily, while its former owner struggled out of the tight-fitting helmet he had acquired. Gladys was aware of herself springing up from the floor with a skillet in one hand and a carving fork in the other; afterward, also, she remembered Veda breathing heavily, jumping forward and, later, shouting. She knew that she hit out blindly in front of her, over and over again. And she knew that after a while the noise and movement stopped, and the intruders were gone—all but one.

Someone turned the light on then, and she was standing in the middle of what had been a clean, orderly kitchen, looking down at a motionless body on the floor in

front of her, memorizing it.

Dr. Levy was moving the kitchen table in front of the broken door. Veda held the door in place until the table was set to brace it.

The man had blond hair, beginning to go bald at the temples. He was very thin and his suit had been light gray when it was clean.

Levy said something about wood and went off down the cellar stairs.

There was a clean cut on the man's forehead, not a very big one. Just a little bit of blood trickling off into the blond hair. It didn't seem like enough to kill a . . .

"Missus Mitchell, stop that now, Missus Mitchell! It ain't goin' to do no good, havin' you stand over him like that. You go on and sit down."

The words broke the spell. "I don't have to sit down," Gladys said. "What are you doing?" Then she looked. "Fixing the door?"

`"Doc Levy went after some wood so we kin nail it shut. Seems to me we ought to shut up all the windows on this floor, same as in the cellar."

Gladys nodded and bent down to pick up a pot, feeling herself unpleasantly close to the body she didn't want to think about. Not looking to that side at all, she crossed the room and began picking up scattered utensils near the door. Everything was lightly spattered with blood and mud and sprinkled with splinters of wood and bits of plaster. She straightened up and let Veda take the arm-ful of utensils from her, her eyes searching for the spot the plaster had come from. She found it finally, clear across the room, near Veda's door, where someone had aimed wild with a food chopper.

She walked over and picked up the chopper, trying to remember whether it had been hers, wondering if she had reached such a pitch of excitement that she could have thrown it unawares. The worst thing was being unable to remember. She didn't know what she had done in those minutes. She didn't know whether she had used a knife. She raised her fingers to the hole in the wall, exploring its contours curiously, feeling what the chopper would have done if it had hit the man.

The teacher came back, loaded down with pieces of board, a ham-mer, and nails. He dumped everything on the kitchen table in front of the door and went back again to survey the man on the floor.

"We'll have to do something about him."

Gladys and Veda looked to each other and to the two men.

"We can't just leave him there," Gladys stated foolishly. "The children will be coming down in the morning."

"Well, we could start by bringing him to," Levy proposed. "Do you have any ammonia in the house?"

"Bring him to?"

"You mean he's not . . . ?"

Both women spoke at once with a swift return of vitality. It was Levy's turn now to look from one face to another, uncompre-hending.

"I mean," he said when he finally understood, "that he's quite enough alive so that you'd better have something ready to tie him up with before you get the ammonia."

Veda produced a quantity of rope from a hidden hoard, and Levy put aside the problem of nailing up the door while he secured the knots around the unconscious body. When he was certain the man was safely tied he picked up the hammer and

nails and started for the door again. He climbed up on the table and got the board into position while Veda fished out the bottle of ammonia from the back of the cleaning closet. Gladys went over to hold the board in place for him, but he changed his mind just as he was about to start.

"Wait a minute," he called to Veda, who was already bending over the prostrate form. "You can put that down," he told Gladys. She lowered the board onto the fiat surface of the table, and watched, puzzled, as he bent over the blond man and moved the ropes so that the hands no longer covered the suit pockets. Neatly he turned the pockets inside out, one after another, turning up a grand miscellany of items from brass knuckles to half a sandwich.

Speechless, Gladys continued to watch as he stood up, tri-umphantly holding a battered wallet, and went systematically through the contents of the billfold.

Veda was anything but speechless. "Now, listen here, Doc," she said indignantly, "you kin go too far. There's some things a man shouldn't do."

Levy smiled more than ever like an imp and, ignoring the money in the wallet, slid a small white card out of a cellophane pocket.

"Veda," he said sternly, "you're too suspicious. You should have more faith in human nature."

She didn't want to be joked with. "I know what's right," she said stubbornly, "and I know what's wrong, and what you're doin' ain't right."

"What do you think, Mrs. Mitchell?" The teacher turned to her. "Are you voting against me too?"

"Why, I don't know." She watched him fold the wallet closed, still holding the little white card in his other hand, and at last she realized what it was. "No," she smiled, "but you might introduce us."

"I see by the little card," he said, "that my name is Albert Carney. I live at 5813 Grand Concourse, in the Bronx. I have served two years of compulsory military training and am a member of the Reserve Army Corps."

That was when Veda stopped looking stonily disapproving and understood what he was doing.

"And furthermore," he finished, reading the draft card, "I have had a very sad life."

"I'll bite," Gladys smiled. "Why have you had a sad life, Mr. Bones?"

"Bones?" he asked. "Bones, indeed! In my heydey I used to be referred to as skin-and! The reason why I have had such a sad life is that I am only"—he had to check the card again—"only thirty-two years old, and *most* prematurely gray."

In the reaction to the strain, all three of them went off in shouts of raucous laughter. They laughed till it hurt, till all the strain and tension were gone out of them. Then they set to work boarding up the door, meanwhile considering what to do with their victim.

Gladys didn't want to keep him in the house, for the children to find in the morning. Veda objected strenuously to the risks in-volved in reviving and releasing him. They thought of just putting him out on the porch, out of sight, and calling Emergency Head-quarters to pick him up, but it was a heartless procedure, and one by one they found excuses not to do it.

"Seems to me, with Doc here in the house, we're a sight better off not askin' any

extra cops inside," Veda added.

"We could untie him," Levy proposed, "and put him outside. Then when he comes to, he'll be free."

The last thing Gladys remembered of that incredible night was Levy-Carney leaning out of the dining -room window, cautiously lowering an unconscious man into the soft earth of the flower bed below.

TWENTY

". . . simplified system of distribution. Your neigh-borhood food stores are now open, under the supervision of emergency squadmen. Supplies arc being distributed to the stores by emergency squad trucks. No money is necessary to receive . . ."

The announcer's voice rushed up the stairs to greet her with the day's new problems—the third day of the third war of her life. Gladys didn't want problems. She wanted breakfast. Even more, she wanted to go back to bed.

". . . birth certificates if possible. Driver's licenses or Social Security cards will also be acceptable. But remember, you must have absolute proof of the number of persons in your household."

Edie Crowell sat on the living-room sofa, desultorily turning the pages of a magazine. She was wrapped unbecomingly in Gladys' old pink nylon robe. When she looked up to nod, her face was unnaturally pallid. Her general appearance finished the job the radio announcer had started, and removed the last vestige of relaxation left over from the long night's sleep.

"Good morning," Gladys said quickly, and turned to the radio as an excuse to postpone further conversation.

". . . may be some delay, but there is enough for all. Remember,others are also waiting for supplies. This concludes our eleven o'clock news broadcast. We will continue to . . ."

"Hello!" Edie stood up, stretching, and dispersing some of the gloom settled around her. "I thought you were never going to get up!" She smiled and looked more like herself.

Memory came into focus, and the events of the day before lined themselves up for Gladys' inspection. A wave of relief swept her as she realized that Edith had, incredibly, slept through all the excitement of the night.

"I slept so late yesterday, I couldn't get to sleep last night," Gladys lied happily. "You must have been up early. What's been happening around here?"

"Nothing," Edith laughed. "Nothing at all. It's the most *peaceful* morning I've had in ages! I haven't seen a living soul since break-fast. If I had anything to put on I'd have gone home, but I under-stand my dress isn't exactly . . ." She let it drift off.

"It's not in very good shape," Gladys admitted, "but Veda could have got you something of mine. I don't know why "

"I'm afraid your Veda doesn't exactly approve of me." -Edith began to look better as animation returned to her. "I was given to understand it would be perfectly all right for me to wear your robe home"—she plucked at the worn pink material humorously—"pro-vided I did it quickly. I decided to be a difficult guest instead, and wait around till you got up, in hopes of a better offer."

"Oh, of course. Anything you want. I'm sorry about Veda. I hope she wasn't—unpleasant?" But Gladys couldn't help smiling; she was too familiar with

Veda's uncompromising attitude toward alcohol.

"She wasn't." It was a relief to see Edie's answering smile. "She was just . . . uninterested. So I kept out of her way, and she left me alone. Anyhow, I think I agree with her. When this mess is over I'm going to join the anti-liquor league. Or at least a temperance society. I had enough of it yesterday to last the rest of my life!"

At least she'd mentioned it first. "Don't be silly," Gladys said

weakly, and was saved from having to think of anything else to say.

"That you out there, Missus Mitchell?" Veda emerged from the dining room. "You comin' in to eat now? Ought to get yer break-fast before lunchtime." She smiled, pointedly ignoring the other woman.

"Have you eaten yet?" Gladys hesitated, looking from one to the other.

"Hours ago," Edith told her.

"You're sure? You won't join me?"

Veda shifted her weight impatiently. "I got the coffee heatin'," she told no one in particular. "Mebbe I better go turn it off." She turned on her heel and marched off.

"Well, if you're sure?" Gladys apologized to her guest. "I am awfully hungry." The swinging door wafted the smell of bacon from the kitchen. "I'll get you something to wear as soon as I'm done. Veda seems to have everything all ready," she fumbled.

"That's perfectly all right. You go ahead. I don't want to put you out."

Why can't I send her up to get it for herself? Somehow that was impossible. Irritated at Edie and at herself, Gladys started for the door.

"Oh, by the way, Glad." The other woman's voice called her back. "I'm sorry—I don't want to keep you. But I was wondering if you had any cigarettes around? I know you don't smoke much, but your husband does, doesn't he?"

"They're in the drawer," Gladys broke in.

It was hopeless. No matter how firmly she made up her mind, she couldn't keep from playing hostess for Edie. To her intense chagrin, Gladys found herself recrossing the room, opening the drawer in Jon's desk, and bringing forth a fresh pack of cigarettes. She hunted for matches and found them pushed away in the back.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance, but you don't have to worry about me now. I've been sitting around all morning, dreaming about a cigarette, but I didn't see any, and I didn't want to go hunting through your things. That's half the reason why Iwanted to get home." She held up the full pack, smiling. "This makgs me feel positively luxurious."

In the kitchen Gladys found her place already set. She sat down at the white table and felt the sun streaming in the window over her shoulder.

"Where are the kids?" she asked.

"Up the attic. I could call them," Veda offered, "only I thought mcbbe you'd want to eat yer meal in peace, without them to bother."

"You couldn't have had a better thought," Gladys agreed. She had planned to send Barbie for the dress, but it could wait. Right now she was hungry. When had she last eaten a decent meal? Not Tuesday. Monday, supper was spoiled; she'd had a sandwich for lunch. That was a long time.

It didn't matter if Edie Crowell spent a few more minutes in the house. Just

concentrate on the table, the sun, the smell of the bacon, and the tall glass of orange juice that was waiting for her. Time enough for problems later.

She picked up the juice and took a long drink. It was canned. Veda smiled at the face she made.

"None of the frozen left," she explained. "Ain't done a big marketing since last week. That's jest as good for you," she added. "You drink it up."

"I don't want to," Gladys pouted, in imitation of her youngest daughter. *"Will* you stop taking such good care of me, Veda? Ever since I got a little gas into my system yesterday you've been acting as if I was likely to fall apart."

"Well, you sound more like yerself now," Veda admitted. "I was thinkin', if you kin manage all right with lunch for the kids, it would mebbe be a smart idea fer me to get down to Monnassey's, right away, an' try to get up at the front of the line."

"I think I can probably muddle through," Gladys smiled at her. "But don't stay away too long," she warned. "I could easily melt."

She finished the juice and worked her way happily through pan-

cakes and bacon, while Veda got ready to go. By the time she got to her coffee Gladys was beginning to feel prepared to face some of her problems.

"Is Mr.—Carney upstairs?" she asked.

"No, he went out a couple hours ago. Said he'd likely be back around three. Said he had to get some things fer himself an' pick up some parts for the kerosene stove."

Gladys looked up, startled. "What on earth is he going to do with that?"

"He got a plan figured out to rig up that kerosene stove under-neath the hot-water burner where the gas went out. Says he kin fix it so's we'll have runnin' hot water again. He's a right handy man around a house, Missus Mitchell," Veda said with satisfaction. "Never would've thought it of a teacher like that."

Dr. Levy, Gladys reflected, was getting to be a household prop. She wished she could resolve her mixed feelings about the man. Mr. Fix-it . . . in a fix!

"Did *she* see him?" Gladys nodded toward the living room. Veda shook her head. "He told Barbie to watch out fer when she went in her room, an' then went out."

"And Ginny? Did she sec him?"

"Couldn't help that. That's why I thought mebbe it was jest as good if she stayed up the attic till yer friend goes home. I told 'er he was a friend o' mine, jest in case."

Gladys looked doubtful. "We'll have to try and think of some-thing to keep her from talking about him."

"Don't really matter too much," Veda pointed out. "If he kin go out, he kin come here. Jest so she don't know he's sleepin' here."

"That's true." Gladys sipped thoughtfully at her coffee.

"I'm about ready to go now, Missus Mitchell. I got lunch all fixed on the stove there. All you got to do is warm it up. I think they said on the radio I got to take some kind of identification with me. You know where I kin find something?"

Gladys got up and started for the living room."I didn't mean fer you to get up."

"Well, I am up. Will you stop babying me, Veda?" It didn't seem funny any more.

Barbie was in the living room, talking to Edith Crowell and looking superbly secretive. I'll have to speak to her about that, Gladys thought, and remembered about the dress.

"Barbie, could you take Mrs. Crowell up to my room and help her pick out

something to wear?" Veda could feel bad or disap-prove or just ignore it. "Take whatever you want, Edie. We can offer you a complete assortment. Barbara knows where everything is."

Veda said pointedly, "Mehbe Barbie would know where "Where what?" Barbara turned back from the stairs.

"I came in to get the birth certificates," Gladys explained shortly.

"I'm sure I can find them."

"For heaven's sake, Mother, don't you ever remember where you put anything? They're in the bottom drawer in Daddy's desk. That's where they always were."

There was no use hoping Barbie was wrong. Gladys had long ago stopped trying to compete with her daughter's memory. Rebel-liously she went to the drawer and found all the family birth cer-tificates in a neat pile, probably put away by Jon, not, as Barbie said, by herself. She was sure she would have tucked them in a cookbook, or in a vanity drawer, for easier reference.

She bolted the door after Veda and went back to her rapidly cooling coffee. Ginny came running down a few minutes later, de-manding to know why no one had told her her mother was up. She seemed in better spirits than she had been the day before, and certainly her appetite had returned. Not until she had stuffed down the last mouthful of dessert did she stop to ask the burning question.

"When are the children coming?"

"Soon, I think." She'd completely forgotten about that. They had told her twelve o'clock on the phone, but it was after twelve already. Better not to be too definite about it with Ginny.

"How soon?"

"They'll probably be here when you wake up from your nap," Gladys told her.

"I don't want a nap."

"Of course you do. You want to be wide awake to play with the children, don't you?"

"No, I don't." Ginny shook her head vigorously. "I'll be asleep when they come."

"Maybe I'll wake you up."

"Maybe, if what?"

"Maybe, if you go to sleep *right away.*" It was half promise, half threat. In any case it was adequate inducement. Meekly Ginny let herself be led upstairs, washed and de-shoed, and put to bed.

And then there was nothing to do. It was astonishing how a house that had always kept two women busy now seemed to take care of itself. She thought of getting lunch for the others, but Bar-bara came down and fixed a sandwich for herself, and Gladys didn't know whether Edith would want to eat before she left. She had another cup of coffee while Barbara ate her quick lunch, and the dishes were being cleaned when they heard the gauntlet-muffled knock of authority on the front door.

Gladys left Barbie in the kitchen and flew to open it.

But instead of the appealing small faces she had expected, she found only the impersonal surface of Jim Turner's squad suit. By the time he came in, and the doctor behind him, she had covered her disappointment, and greeted them cheerfully.

"I didn't have a chance to thank you last night, but I'm sure you know how much

it meant to us to get the news so soon." She turned to Spinelli. "I'm afraid I didn't thank you properly either. I was so excited and I wanted to tell Barbie."

"There's nothing to thank me for. I wanted to find out too. By the way, I brought you some more good news. We got the check on Ginny's urinalysis today—nothing in that one at all. It's per-fectly all right. Yours hasn't come through yet, but I don't see how there could be anything wrong there."

Gladys laughed. "I suppose I'm not supposed to thank you noweither. 1 know," she forestalled him, " `I didn't do anything.' Well, I have to thank somebody, and it might as well be you."

Jim Turner took a step forward impatiently. "Well now, that's all cleared up, how are you making out with your other troubles? Didn't have any more trouble with the gas, did you? 1 could take a better look at it now, if it's still leaking. Would have come back last night if I could, but they kept me busy up at headquarters almost all evening. Can't get anything done up there without six conferences first."

He sounded very important. Gladys asked demurely, "Don't you ever get any rest? They keep you so busy."

"Well, we've got a big job to do," he responded happily. "There'll be plenty of time to take it easy afterward. There's some-thing big in the air right now," he added meaningfully. Gladys re-fused to let him catch her eye. "You'll be hearing about it pretty soon on your radio, I guess, but the only thing released so far is, the regular squad routes are breaking up. Now that it's okay to go out, you're supposed to file some kind of notice at your neigh-borhood food store, if you have any troubles. Then the squadman comes around later on to check up."

"Oh, then you won't be making regular visits any more?" She tried to sound unhappy about it.

"Now, Gladys," he reassured her promptly, "I'm not so busy I can't stop by here once in a while. I told you I'd look out for you, didn't I?"

Barbara was directing frantic questioning looks at the young doctor. Gladys, watching her, almost missed her cue to murmur an appropriate, "Thank you," and missed entirely Turner's sudden look of astonishment.

"Well, I'll be God damned!" she heard him say. "Pardon me, ma'am, but we been looking for that lady all over town since last night." He was staring over Gladys' head and into the hall. "How long've you been here?" he demanded.

Gladys turned to see Edie Crowell looking spruce, if startled. Combed and washed, dressed in Gladys' new spring suit and Bar-

bie's freshly cleaned brown and white pumps, she seemed prepared to face down any quantity of Jim Turners.

"She came over yesterday," Gladys explained quickly. "She didn't want to stay all alone in that big house, so I asked her over here." She laughed inwardly as Edith nodded a stiff assent.

"You mean to say she was here all the time last night and you never said a word?"

"Let's see, I don't know whether she came before you did or not . . . yes, I guess she must have. You came after curfew, didn't you? I guess I just didn't think about it. I had so much on my mind."

"I went to bed early," Edith added. "I didn't have a wink of sleep the night before."

"Well, we were just about ready to bust your door down this time, Miz Crowell.

You could've let us know."

"I wasn't aware that I had to keep you informed."

"You mean you never heard anything? I told them to put it on the radio. Now, Miz Crowell"—he turned suddenly exceedingly solicitous—"just don't you get all wrought up."

"I'm sure we don't have to worry about how Mrs. Crowell takes the news." The interruption by the young doctor was startling. Gladys realized it was the first time, since she had seen the two together, that young Spinelli had taken the initiative from the older man.

"Of course you really knew it all along, Mrs. Crowell," he added. "It's a good thing you persuaded me to take that blood count. We realized you were right as soon as we checked it."

Gladys forgot to be surprised by the news, she was so flabber-gasted by the combination of blatant flattery and forthright bru-tality in the doctor's brief speech.

Jim Turner was shocked and disapproving, both. "Now, Miz Crowell," he picked up where he had been interrupted, "there's no need to get all wrought up."

"I am not the least bit likely"—this time Edith didn't let him finish—"to become, as you put it, wrought up." She turned to

Gladys with just a hint of her old arrogance. "I told you all along," she accused. "But you didn't believe me; none of you believed me."

"Wu don't have to worry about a thing," the squadman re-peated doggedly, and Gladys thought, I have never seen anyone less worried in my life! "They'll take fine care of you up at the hospital. Won't they, Doc?" Turner appealed to the younger man.

"They tell me our hospital is one of the best equipped in the country for this kind of thing," Spinelli told her.

"I'm perfectly well aware that the hospital is well equipped, young man." Edith was completely herself again. "I've certainly done my share to make it so, and I assume that since everyone in authority seemed to know this was going to happen"—she turned to the big squadman with a look that made clear her opinion of him and of the authority he represented—"some of the funds raised for the hospital were used to purchase the necessary equipment."

It didn't make sense. Monday night Edie Crowell had had screaming mimis on the telephone because she was afraid of just this thing. Yesterday she had walked into the house dead drunk and ready to pass out because she wasn't able to face the worry. Even this morning, before she got the news, she had been a little sub-dued. Now that she knew for sure, she was entirely restored.

"If there's nothing else you have to tell me," Edith addressed Jim Turner coldly, " perhaps I'd better go on home and get ready to go. When do you suppose they'll be ready to take me to the hospital?"

"Well, if you're in such a hurry to get in there"—he was very obviously annoyed—"we can take you along to headquarters in the truck right now. They'll send you along with the next load."

"Do they ship us by freight or parcel post, Mr. Turner?" Her voice was venomously saccharine. "I should tell you, by the way, that I intend to see to it the proper people are notified of the dangerous delay I suffered." She turned to the

young doctor and went smoothly on. "I want you to know that I am aware it was not *your* fault."

Without waiting for a reply from either of the men, she turned

her attention to Gladys. "I wish I knew some way to thank you properly. I do realize that I must have inconvenienced all of you, and"—impulsively she took Gladys' hand—"I think I ought to thank Veda before I go, too. In her own way, she was good to me also."

"She's not back yet." Gladys was still too dazed to attempt any more complicated reply.

She followed Edith to the door, bolted it behind her, and re-turned to the living room.

"Well, I'll be God damned! Excuse me, ma'am." That was Turner, of course. "I just can't figure that woman out." He shook his head in heavy bewilderment. "Listen, before I forget. Did you say something about your maid not being *back* yet? Did you let her go out?"

"Why, yes, she went down to the store when we heard the an-nouncement on the radio." Out of the corner of her eye Gladys saw the doctor incline his head ever so slightly toward the far corner of the room. Barbie began drifting slowly over there.

"Well now, you know you shouldn't have done that, Gladys. I can understand it's hard for you to believe she could've done any-thing, but you got to remember she's still under suspicion. You know they told you she wasn't allowed out without a clearance from Security."

"How did *you* know about that?"

"That's my job around here. I'm responsible for the safety of this whole neighborhood. It's only natural I'd get reports on any-body under suspicion. Matter of fact, if it was anyone else I'd feel like I had to take some action right now, but being it's you," he smiled beneficently, "I'll just pretend I never heard a thing. Only you got to remember after this, she can't go anywheres out of the house without a clearance. You can get it from the Security Office, or from me, either one."

The whole thing was fantastic. "Well then, why don't you give me a clearance now? That would take care of the whole nonsensical business."

"I can't do that." He looked horrified. "You got to understand, she needs a special written pass to go out anyplace. Right now she could get picked up any minute by a Security officer. Now, I'm sure you're going to be more careful about that." He looked around and found that Barbara and the young doctor were clear across the room, out of earshot. Lowering his voice, he went on, "You remem-ber what I told you yesterday? About the evacuation?"

"Yes." She nodded. `"I've thought a lot about it, Mr. Turner, but I haven't made up my mind

"Just call me Jim," he said. "No need to be formal now. We've been neighbors all these years. It's high time we got to know each other a little. Now, what I wanted to tell you . . . I've got every-thing just about lined up. Turned out to be easier than I figured, because I'm gonna be in charge of that train myself

"But, Mr. Turner," she broke in, aware of the other two drift-ing back toward them. She had to make him understand quickly..

"I told you you should call me Jim."

It was useless. He just wouldn't listen, and now Barbie and the doctor were right next to them.

"You bear in mind what I told you," Turner admonished cheer-fully, "and don't start worrying again. Just let me take care of everything."

"Mother."

Gladys looked questioningly at her daughter, but Turner said, "You tell your ma after we go, Barbie. We got to get moving now if we're gonna get Miz Crowell back to headquarters in time for the next truck."

"I only wanted to ask," Barbara said stiffly, "whether you knew anything about those children."

"Oh, that's right." Gladys turned back to the man. "We called up last night and offered to take two of those homeless children they've been talking about on the radio. They were supposed to, come at noon, and we were wondering if anything was wrong."

"Oh, now, I don't think that's such a good idea, Gladys. They sent me in a form to check off whether your house was okay. Of

course I know it would be nice for the kids here, but you got to remember what I told you before. It wouldn't make things any easier to have a couple of extra kids here."

"Maybe not," she said firmly, "but I do want to have them. Did you—check off the form yet?"

"Haven't really had a minute to do it so far today," he admitted.

"That must be what held it up, then," Gladys persisted. "Do you think you'd have a chance to take care of it when you get back to headquarters? I would like to have them here for supper, so I can get them settled."

"I'll fix it up the best way I can," he promised. "Come on, Doc." He turned a good-natured smile on Spinelli. "Say good-by to the girl. We got to go."

Barbara's angry blush was clearly visible, but the young doctor was unperturbed. He walked back the few steps' distance to Bar-bara, took her hand, and said, "Good-by, girl. We got to go."

Delightedly Gladys watched him pat Barbara's shoulder in sober imitation of Turner's reassuring gesture. He seemed to have some perspective on the whole crazy business that she wished she could share. She was still smiling when she closed the door after him.

"I don't like that man!"

"Why, Babsy, what's the

"He's got you doing it too!" Barbara burst out miserably, her voice trembling on the brink of a sob. "First he treats me like a baby, and then he has to make a nasty crack

"Oh, *him!"* Gladys put her hand on Barbara's shoulder. "I was thinking about Dr. Spinelli. He certainly handled Edie Crowell. I didn't know he had it in him. He seemed so—diffident." She laughed. "Maybe that's how he handles *me.*"

There was no more fortunate choice of subject where Barbie was concerned. She forgot her resentment immediately in contempla-tion of the young doctor's many virtues. "Wasn't that terrific, the way he figured her out? It all sounded crazy at first—I couldn't understand how she could take it that way. It was easy enough to

understand afterwards, but Pete had it all figured out beforehand."

"Well," Gladys smiled, "it's really not too difficult to figure out that Edith Crowell likes to have her own way. But I should think it would take a certain amount of courage to take advantage of the fact the way he did. `Of course, you knew it all along, Mrs. Crow-ell!' That's my idea of bravery under fire. You better watch out for that young man, Barbara," she teased. "If he could talk Edie into thinking radiation sickness was her very own idea, I hate to think of the effect he must have on the younger generation of females."

"Oh, don't be silly, Mother. He's old!" she disclaimed him com-pletely. Barbara was obviously delighted at the thought that Peter Spinelli might sometime try to talk her into anything at all. "Any-how"—she cast loyalty to the winds—"1 don't think it was *just* what he said that made Mrs. Crowell change so much. I was think-ing about that when she was telling Mr. Turner off, and I remember how I felt—before."

Gladys looked at her curiously. The girl was dead serious now.

"It seems to me," she went on, "that it wouldn't be nearly as bad to *know* you had it as to worry about whether you did or not. It's like—well, like the jokes *they* always make about going to the dentist. When you get there and something's being done, it's not nearly as bad as when you're thinking about it before you go. I think," she finished with an air of ultimate discovery, "the worst thing in the whole world is not knowing—about something impor-tant, I mean—or, well, I'm getting all mixed up, but you know what I mean, don't you?"

"You sound just like your father," Gladys laughed. "I mean your father with two drinks in him at a cocktail party. He gets very serious about the state of the world. Once he made a half-hour speech on the subject of ignorance."

"Well, I hope Daddy likes it when you laugh at *him,"* Barbara cried, and ran from the room. But at the foot of the stairs she turned back to aim a bombshell at her mother. "I suppose you're not interested either that Pete told me she's probably going to *die!"*

TWENTY-ONE

She knew where it had happened. She knew where Edie had been at the critical time.

If Veda hadn't been sick . . .

If Barbie hadn't insisted on the laundry . . .

If Edie hadn't refused to understand the difficulty . . . *If I had gone to the luncheon . . . !*

It was silly to think about it. She hadn't gone, and there were other, far more pressing problems. Jim Turner and Garson Levy, Barbie, Veda, Edie Crowell, the Security officers, and the evacua-tion. And those children. Ginny was going to be impossible if the children didn't come.

If Jon were here . . . That was silly too. All the ifs were silly. Jon wasn't there. For more than two days Jon hadn't been there. The other time, the other war, it was different. Then she wrote him cheerful, encouraging letters, telling him all the little troubles that came up each day, the little things he customarily solved, that she had to learn to cope with. But these were not little problems now, nor were they the kind that anyone customarily solved.

What would Jon do?

That was the old formula, the way it had worked in the last war. She'd ask herself and get the answer. Now there was no answer. If Jon never came back . . .

Another if!

She had longed for a few minutes of solitude, for time to think. Now it was a relief when she heard Ginny, waking, call her up-stairs. She ran up, afraid Barbie might get there first. Then she would have nothing to do again.

Ginny was grumpy. "You said they'd be here when I woke up. You said they would.""Well, darling, I can't help it if they're late."

?Yes, you can, too." Ginny was definitely being unreasonable. "Come on," Gladys said as gaily as she could. "We'll put your

shoes on and go downstairs and see what there is to play with." "Well, I don't want to play by myself. There isn't anything to

play with."

"I'll play with you. Where's your other foot? Did it get lost?" She tried an old game, casting her eyes around the room, searching for the other foot, which had supposedly vanished.

"Can't find it," Ginny announced. "It isn't anyplace. I'll have to hop all day."

"That would be a terrible, terrible tragedy, wouldn't it? I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll just pretend to put the shoe on and when you find the foot the shoe will be on it already."

Ginny didn't co-operate, but she did submit, and the shoe was laced on the missing foot.

"I don't want to play with you either," she decided. "You're no fun. Why *didn't* the children come yet?"

"I don't know." But she was afraid she did. "Maybe they found their own homes again," she said hopefully. "Wouldn't that he nice?"

"No, it wouldn't."

Gladys gave up. "Let's go down and have some cocoa," she sug-gested brightly.

"Don't want cocoa. I want the children. I don't want them to find their own homes. I want them to come here."

Downstairs the front door banged.

"Come on, we'll go see what Veda brought home." Ginny fol-lowed her silently, not wanting to admit any interest in Veda's activities or in anything at all except the coming of the other chil-dren. But when they came in sight of the hall she objected vio-lently.

`"You said it was Veda."

"Well, I thought it was Veda," Gladys said wearily. "Hello, Mr. Carney. I didn't think you'd get back so soon."

"It was simpler than I expected. There are a lot of people outside with bundles from the stores, so my bundle wasn't terribly con-spicuous." He pulled up an ancient shopping bag from the hall table and displayed it proudly. "Doesn't it look convincing?" He started up the stairs.

"Didn't you bring me anything?" Ginny was incredulous.

"What sort of cad do you take me for?" he asked, outraged. "Of course I brought you something. But you can't have it yet. If you come up to my very private room in about half an hour I shall make a formal presentation."

"You mean you'll give it to me?"

"You understand me perfectly," he told her, "but remember, you have to wait half an hour."

Out in the kitchen Ginny studied the toy clock soberly, and finally made up her mind to ask for help.

"Will you tell me when a half an hour is?" she demanded sus-piciously. "Will you tell me right?"

"Of course I'll tell you right. What's got into you?"

"Well, you didn't tell me right about the children."

Again! "Do you want cocoa or juice?"

"Don't want anything." Then, after a moment's reflection, "Co-coa."

The stove didn't light. For just an instant Gladys had a night-mare sensation that all this had happened before. Then her mind separated the sequence of events in an orderly manner. This was simply the gas failure Turner had predicted.

She tried the other burners to make sure and, with the memory of the last time still entirely too clear, couldn't resist opening the cellar door just a crack.

There was no smell of gas. It was all right. She got out the hot plate again and fixed the cocoa for Ginny.

"Well, why don't they call up if they're late? You told Barbie people should always call up if they're going to be late." "Maybe they're someplace where they can't call."

"You mean they really and truly don't have any homes? They're not anyplace at all except outside?"

"That's not exactly what I mean. They're staying at a place like a school, but if they were on their way here they couldn't call up. Anyhow, nobody's supposed to use the phone except if they really have to."

"Why not?"

"Well, because—because it said on the radio that we shouldn't." "Why?"

This could go on forever if she let it. "Just because," she said firmly. "I don't know why. It just said we shouldn't, so we don't."

For fifteen minutes after, that she managed by dint of concen-trated effort to keep Ginny from mentioning the children again. Then at last it was time to send her upstairs.

Barbara came down with her when she returned to display the promised present—a big, brightly painted toy car which looked oddly familiar to Gladys.

"Mr. Carney bought it home for me," Ginny announced proudly. "It really runs. Look." She began winding busily.

"Brought, darling, not bought."

She kept trying to remember why the car looked so familiar. Then it came back to her, and she waited to see what would hap-pen when Ginny tried to make it go. To her surprise the car worked perfectly—but she could have sworn it was the same one that had been given to Tom at Christmas the first year they moved in there. He was—she stopped to think—ten years old at the time, and his first act after sending it on a trial spin around the room was to find a quiet corner where he could take it apart. Jon had firmly refused to fix it for him, informing him that when he took things apart it was smarter to be sure beforehand that he knew how to put them together again. The car had gone up to the attic, and by the time Tom knew how to fix it he

was no longer interested in toy cars. Gladys wondered whether the car had already been fixed when Dr. Levy answered Ginny's question on the stairs.

"Did you show it to Pallo yet?"

"I forgot!"

That was Barbie, trying to get rid of Ginny. What next? Gladys wondered. She was determined not to have any more bickering with the girl.

" 'Scuse me, Mommy, I'll come back. Only I forgot to show Pallo my car, and he'll feel bad."

"Mother!" Barbie could hardly wait till the little girl was gone before she burst out with her news. "You ought to see the things he brought back! He's got a Geiger counter, a little one that they used to make for prospectors, and

"Isn't that interesting!" No quarrel, thank goodness. Maybe she could get an answer to the question in her mind. "Barbie, do you know when Dr. Levy fixed that car? Was it after he told Ginny he had something? Or did he have it already?"

"I don't know. I guess maybe he was fooling around with it while I was looking at his stuff. He's got everything, Mother! He said he packed it all up at the school before he left on Monday. And he's got a gadget . . . Oh, he wants some boiling water. That's what he sent me down for."

She got a pot from the closet and filled it. "You know, he's got everything he needs to

"You better use the hot plate," Gladys told her. "The stove isn't working any more. I guess the gas really is all gone now."

"Mother, I wish you wouldn't keep interrupting me. I've been trying to tell you about all the things he brought, and you just won't listen!"

"All right," Gladys said wearily. "You just pretend I didn't in-terrupt you, and go ahead and use the stove instead."

"I didn't mean that. Anyhow, you could have waited just a min-ute." She plugged in the electric plate and put the water on. "I don't understand you, Mother. Aren't you even *interested?"*

"Of course I'm interested, darling. But I've got so many things to think about right now—and you know I don't know anything about Geiger counters and all that technical part of it. Now look." She did want to make friends with Barbie again. "Suppose you fixhis cup of tea, or whatever you're making, and take it up, and then

when you come down you can tell me all about it. We can

"His cup of tea! I'm boiling this water for Oh, never mind!
You don't understand. You don't know much about these technical things," s,._ -.rroted.

"Barbie, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"You didn't hurt *my* feelings."

"I " She didn't know what else to say. She fell silent, and
the silence lasted till Barbie went upstairs with the boiling water.

After that the girl just kept out of sight. She didn't even come down when Veda returned, laden with provisions, news, and wor-ries.

"Never saw such a time!" She went through to the kitchen to get rid of her bundles and Gladys went with her.

"People thought it was hard to get food in the last war," Veda said. "But there

never was anything like this before. I had to stand in line near three hours before I got inside that store and then I tried to tell about them kids that are coming, but that squadman wouldn't listen to nobody. He said I had proof fer five people, and five people was all I was goin' to get food for. Never even thought to ask was all five home. He took a look to see all the names was different, an' told Mr. Monnassey to give me fer five."

"You didn't have to tell him your name?" Gladys asked.

"No'm, I never did." She put down her bundles and found a seat on one of the white-painted kitchen chairs. "I'll get that stuff put away in a minute," she promised. "Jest want to catch my breath. That was real heavy carryin' home."

"You sit still," Gladys told her. "I'll put it away." She began unloading shopping bags, talking at the same time, telling Veda about all that had happened while she was gone. She skimmed over Turner's references to Veda as lightly as possible.

"The whole thing's a lot of nonsense," she insisted, "but I guess for the time being I better make any outside trips. Meanwhile we'll get this clearance he was talking about." Then she went into the story about Edie Crowell and drew it out for its fullest effect.

"But don't forget," she wound up, "that if I'd listened to you I'd be just as bad off as Mrs. Crowell right now."

"And what do you think you mean by that?" Veda demanded. " `Now don't you worry about the washin', Missus Mitchell,' " Gladys mimicked. " `I kin take care of that fine tome

Veda laughed with embarrassment. "I kin remember something else, too, proves you were tryin' jest as hard to get me sick." "What did I do?"

"I kin remember clear as day, hearin' you say, `Don't you suffo-cate yourself in that room of yours, Veda.' Mebbe I saved your life an' mebbe not—but I sure took care o' my own."

They were both laughing when Ginny came back with her car to show off to Veda.

Gladys finished putting things away while the toy was being admired.

"I don't see what you're worried about," she told Veda. "Seems to me you've got all the food we can eat in a week."

"I jest wish I knew fer sure would they bring some along with them kids," Veda said. "I don't see how we'll make out if they don't."

It was a tactical error. Ginny, reminded, wanted to know once more why the children didn't call up if they were late.

"They're supposed to call," she insisted stubbornly. "They *are!"*

"All right." Gladys surrendered at last. "I shouldn't do it, but I'll call up. Only remember this, Virginia Mitchell. After I call I don't want to hear it talked about any more. Whatever they tell us is final. That clear?"

Ginny nodded happily. But the bargain proved more difficult to keep than Gladys had expected.

She picked up the receiver, but no dial tone came through, and when she jiggled the hook nothing happened either. Forcing her-self to a patience she did not feel, she hung up, let it stay down a moment, and tried again.

Ten minutes of trying convinced her. She put the phone down and turned around

to find Barbara on the stairs in back of her.

"The phone too?"

Gladys nodded and turned tiredly to Ginny. "I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I can't call up. It isn't working."

Unexpectedly there was no fuss. With the sudden sympathy that little children sometimes show for adult troubles, Ginny offered her best reassurance.

"That's all right, Mommy," she promised. "They'll come."

Barbara laughed. "Time for the news," she said. "Let's all go in the living room and see what good news they have on the radio *now."*

"Come on, Ginny," Veda snorted. "We don't want to hear no news, good *or* bad. You an' me are goin' to go in the kitchen an' make some supper for these folks."

Gladys followed her older daughter slowly into the living room.

"Don't tell me you think those kids are still coming?" Barbara demanded bitterly. "Didn't Mr. Turner promise to fix it for you?"

"I told him I wanted them," Gladys answered sharply. "1 don't see what more I could do."

"I don't know." Barbara turned the radio up, and news of hos-pitals, trains, and armies filled the room. "I don't know," she re-peated miserably, "but you should have been able to do some-thing."

The radio intruded: ". . . since the official evacuation warning was issued for lower and middle Westchester. There is no cause for alarm because of the warning. You are not in danger from any kind of radiations. All danger zones within this area have already been evacuated. The new decision is due to scarcity of food supplies and imminent failure of utilities.

"Please remember, this is an evacuation *warning.* An evacuation *order* may come at any time within the next forty-eight hours. You will be assigned to an evacuation train by your neighborhood squad-man. There is no other way to get a seat. There is no quicker way to leave.

"We have just received a list of persons rescued. . . ." "They can't *make* us go, can they, Mother?"

Gladys turned unhappily to her daughter. "No," she said, "not exactly, but they can make it awfully uncomfortable to stay here." How much can I tell her? Jim Turner had said not to tell anyone, but now it was on the radio.

"Well, we could manage," Barbie said stubbornly.

"I don't want to go either," Gladys told her. "But . . ." gas .. . *phone* . . . *electric power* . . . *water* . . . "I'm afraid it's not going to be up to us." Never mind what he said. Barbie had a right to know. "Mr. Turner told me

"Oh, you and your Mr. Turner!" Barbara faced her mother furiously. "You'll do anything *he* says, won't you? Well, I'm not going," she announced. "You can decide for Ginny and yourself, but I won't be going."

"You'll be doing what you're told to do, young woman." Gladys was exasperated. "What do you mean, you won't be going?"

"I mean I'm staying here. I'm—going to go to work in the hos-pital."

"You're *what?"*

"They said on the radio they need volunteer workers," she de-fended herself.

"Barbara, for heaven's sake." Gladys controlled her temper with an effort. "What

makes you think they're taking children of fifteen to work in the hospital?"

"I'm not a child, and anyway, you only have to be seventeen to volunteer. Lots of people think I'm older than I am, and I can do just as much as anybody seventeen years old can do. I can tell them I'm seventeen, and I bet Pete'll back me up."

"Barbie! What kind of romantic nonsense are you building up? Dr. Spinelli's been nice to you—all right, that's how a good doctor has to be. It's obvious that he likes you too—he went to a good deal of trouble last night for your sake. But he's not a boy you can wrap around your finger. And he's not very likely to lie to the hospital authorities, just to help you get into trouble!"

"I happen to know he will. I asked him."

"Do you mean to say you asked him before you said anythingto me?" Gladys was getting very annoyed. "Well, I still don't be-lieve he'd do it. You're not going to work in any hospital full of people with radiation disease and heaven knows how many things you could catch. You just aren't going to do it. You may think you're not a child any more, but you'll find the people at the hospi-tal will agree with *me."*

"And you can't understand why I talked to him first!" Barbie retorted bitterly. "At least he *listened* to me. All right, have it your

way. I'll just stay here and play with Ginny, like a nice girl

"Wait a minute, Babsy," Gladys pleaded. "Don't get

"That's another thing!" The girl was working herself up to a fury. "I've told you over and over and over I don't want to be called Babsy. If you don't want to call me Barbie you could at least call me by my right name, instead of a baby nickname. You just don't ever want me to grow up! You want me to be a baby all my life! That's why you never tell me anything; you're afraid I'll know as much as you do!"

"Bab—Barbie," she corrected herself hastily, "listen, darling, there's nothing to get all upset about *now.* You're all right, and Tom seems to be. The bombing's all over. Everything will get better now. You'll see, and . . ." There was one thing she couldn't promise, one reassurance she dare not give. She compromised with, "And we'll hear something about Daddy soon. I'm sure we will. Is that what was bothering you?"

"No, it isn't!" the girl contradicted. "See, you're doing the same thing again right now. You try to make me think everything's all right when I know it isn't. I just wish you'd stop trying to hide things from me. You did the same thing with the information sheets you didn't want me to read, and when you tried to tell me Doc Levy was crazy. . . . And please don't try to shut me up by tell-ing me Daddy's coming home. I'm too old for lullabies, Mother. You know he can't come home even if he is all right. Yes, Pete told me that too. *He* doesn't think I'm a kid who can't understand any-thing!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Barbara!" Gladys stopped trying to con-

trol her growing irritation. "Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you that if I've tried to spare you at all it was because I knew you were just on the verge of hysteria. And the way you're acting now proves it. You get a little information, *some* of which is *partly* correct, and look what happens!"

Barbie's head shot up and her eyes widened at the preposterous charge. "I am not hysteri—Mom! *Listen!"*

". . . aplc Avenue, Purchase Village, being treated for shock and minor injuries. Bliss Mizzen, Central Street, Yonkers, held for observation in . . ."

"They said Mitchell!" Barbie broke the dazed concentration. "They said Mitchell! They did! I didn't hear the first part, but I know they said Mitchell. Oh, Morn, it's Daddy! Daddy's all right!"

the escape

He was lying down, and the cots stretched in a row

out of sight in front of his eyes. He was on a cot too. It hurt

when he turned his head, but there weren't as many

cots in the other direction. He could see the door. Some-body would have to come through the door sooner or later.

He discovered his hands, and began exploring his body. He had no clothes. There was a sheet over him and he wasn't cold, but he couldn't get home without clothes. There was a bandage on his head. That made sense; it hurt so much when he turned it.

A man got oft the cot next to him, and he realized he could get up too. He sat up and waited for the dizziness to go away. Then he stood up. He was naked. Down the row of cots he saw that the other man was naked too. Nobody seemed to care.

He followed the other man and went through the door. An old man was sitting right outside. The man who got up first had turned to the right. He looked both ways, and the old man told him, "Down that way," pointing to the right.

He followed again, and the other man went through a door marked "Men." He went in, too, but when he came out he kept on down the corridor. He found another door, and tried it, but it was another room full of cots. After a while, trying doors, he found a closet with overalls and shirts in it. He still needed shoes.

He went down some stairs, and some more, and he was in a cellar. He found some boots and put them on his bare feet. There was a little door that led out into the street. He walked a long time, carefully reading the street numbers to make sure he was going the right way.

190 . . . 191 . . . 192 . . that was right. That was the way home. He had to get home.

TWENTY-TWO

"Wake up, Mommy. Please, Mommy, wake up."

"Hello, baby." Gladys edged over in the bed and patted the empty space beside her, hoping Ginny would lie down and snuggle up, but the hands kept tugging at her.

"All right, I'm awake." Obstinately she refused to open her eyes. "I'm awake. Now just let me rest a minute."

"You'll go back to sleep," the child accused.

"No, I won't. I'm wide awake."

"Open up your eyes. If you're awake, why don't you open up

your eyes?" Ginny demanded triumphantly. "You are not either awake," she concluded.

Face it, Gladys told herself, and tried letting a little light into one eye. The sun wasn't too bright. It must be early. She let her eye open far enough to include a vision of her daughter's ink-stained hand tugging at the blanket.

"What happened to you?" she demanded. "And, anyhow, who told you you could wake me up?"

Ginny studied her mother's face and decided she wasn't really angry. "Barbie let

me use her fountain pen," she confided. "Veda said I should wake you up. Somebody's knocking at the door." Ginny read the curiosity on her mother's face for disbelief. "She did, too, say so."

"I'm sure she did, baby." Gladys pulled back the covers and sat up gingerly. To her own surprise, she felt fine. Then she remem-bered . . . Jon was all right! "Who is it? Did she tell you? What do they want? Is it Mr. Turner?"

"They want to come in. Who's Mr. Turner?"

"You know perfectly well who Mr. Turner is. He lives right next door, and he has a little baby."

"A brand-new baby?"

"That's right." She stood up and wrapped the cherry robe snugly around her. It was eight o'clock. She'd slept for eleven hours. She felt fine.

"Listen," she told the little girl. "I want you to do something for me. I want you to go downstairs and ask Veda who it is and what they want, and then come right back up without stopping and knock on the bathroom door and tell me what she said. Can you remember all that?"

"Sure." Ginny was disdainful. "That's easy. I can remember lots more."

"Well, you don't have to remember any more. Just remember that much and don't forget to come back up right away." Gladys headed for the empty bathroom. She washed quickly,wondering who it was. She was brushing her hair when Ginny knocked.

"Veda don't know what he wants," she yelled.

"Doesn't," Gladys corrected automatically.

"Wasn't what?"

"I said doesn't."

"I can't hear you, Mommy. What did you say?"

Impatiently Gladys went to the door. "Never mind what I said. What did Veda say?"

"I told you. She doesn't know what he wants."

"Well, who is it?"

"Mr. Turner," Ginny replied. "Just like you said."

"All right. Thank you, baby." Gladys went back for a last once-over in front of the mirror. "Will you tell him I'm coming right down?"

"Mommy's coming right down," Ginny obligingly shouted down the stairs. Hastily Gladys pulled her robe tight around her and ran down.

"Well now, you're looking a little more chipper today," Turner boomed.

"Oh, did you hear the announcement?"

"Now, therc've been a whole lot of announcements, Gladys. Just which one did you have in mind?"

"I guess you didn't, or you'd know," she said. "About Jon! He's all right! They had it on the list of people admitted to the Washington Heights Hospital last night. They said he was suffering from shock and minor injuries, and they never mentioned radiation disease at all."

"Well, that's sure good news," he said, but it seemed to Gladys his tone was just a little less hearty than usual. "I guess you won't feel so bad about leaving," he added, "now that you know your hubby's in good hands."

"Leaving?" She had actually forgotten about it. "Oh yes, I wanted to ask you about that. Does an evacuation order mean that

we *have* to go? I mean, what happens if I decide I want to stay?"

"What happens," he told her, "is, I talk you out of it. Under-stand, headquarters ain't going to-force anybody to go. Folks that want to stick around without food or gas or electricity, and maybe without water, are welcome to do so. That many less to take care of at the camps. But as far as you folks are concerned, headquarters has nothing to do with it. I'm not going to let you stay here. I told you I'd watch out for you, and as a matter of fact that's just what I came by to tell you now."

He moved closer and lowered his voice. "This is strictly on the q.t., Gladys, but they already got it fixed up that the first train is leaving tomorrow morning. It's a special for staff and families. I got seats for you and your girls, and I'm working on a fancy title for you now. So you just hold tight and get your things packed up. You got nothing to worry about at all."

Her impulse was to refuse, outright. She remembered laughing in the bathroom at the notion of telling Jim Turner, "No, no, a thousand times no." She might yet have to do it. But he had said without gas or electricity or maybe water. . . . She tried a less direct approach.

"For me and the *girls?* What about Veda?" she demanded. `"You know I can't go and leave her here."

"Looks like she'll just have to go to the detention camp. Now don't get all upset, Gladys. I told you yesterday about that, and I checked up on it for you since then. They won't give her a clearance to go with you, and that's that. You'll have plenty help up there, don't you worry."

"I'm not worried about *help!"* Politic or not, she had passed the point of self-control. "I'm worried about Veda! And what's more, I'm not leaving without her. I don't want to leave anyhow. I think we'll just make out as best we can until Jon gets home."

"Now, Gladys," he pleaded. "You got to calm down. Why don't you just sit down and take it easy a minute? I got everything all arranged, you know. You can't just stay here. I already told you that. And you got to get over thinking your hubby'll come backhere. You'll get to see him a lot sooner at Sampson," he promised. "You just leave it up to me."

How could she stay angry when she wanted to laugh? He was trying to soothe her and, perversely, succeeding because of the very clumsiness of his attempts.

"And you'll fix it?" she asked. She remembered something else and found she could still be angry after all. "Just like you fixed it about those children?"

"Now, how'd you know what I did about that?"

"That's easy. They didn't come."

"It's too bad," he said. "I know your girl was pestering you about that, but you got to see I had to decide according to what was best for everybody concerned."

"I'm afraid I don't see what it was you had to decide," she said stiffly. "I thought you said the form just asked you whether my house was adequate?"

"You sure do remember every little thing," he chuckled. "But you can't blame a man for doing his best. After all, if they were here now we'd have to be figuring on them going along with you when

"You mean *if,"* she broke in. "I'm not at all sure I'm going any-where."

"Well, one thing I can tell you for sure," he laughed. "You couldn't keep them kids here after an evacuation order. Now look, Gladys, I got to be getting on. Just stopped in to let you know things were comin' along all right, but I guess I kind of barged in on you too early. You get yourself some breakfast, and things'll look brighter to you."

It was infuriating, being treated like a spoiled baby. But what could she say?

"Kind of gloomy in here, too, with your windows all boarded up," he added. "It was a smart thing to do, though," he approved, moving toward the door. "I'll come back later if I get a chance," he promised, "but I couldn't say for sure. I wouldn't of come so early if I was sure I could make it later on."

It seemed as if he would never go, as though he would stay there at the door and ramble on forever. But at last she pushed the bolt to behind him and turned back to the dim interior of the living room.

The boards did make the place gloomy, she thought. She'd for-gotten all about them until Turner noticed. Maybe that did account *for* some of her rapid depression and trigger temper. She'd been feeling so *good* when she got up.

She found Veda, Barbie, and Ginny all in the kitchen.

They all had breakfast together, and then Gladys escaped up-stairs to the incredible luxury of a real bath with hot water out of the tap. Gar Levy had worked on his kerosene burner the evening before, while she and Barbie did the first-floor windows.

Now she could lie in the tub, and for a little while at least think about inconsequentials. Amused, she caught herself in the act of shifting her attitude toward the teacher. He had been Dr. Levy, and then Doc to all the others. And now she found herself getting used to a first-name basis by her old expedient of thinking both names together. It was foolish, perhaps, to resent Jim Turner's calling her "Gladys," and still be amused when she caught her subconscious mind scheming to have Carson Levy do the same thing. But Turner . . .

No problems in the bathtub, she told herself firmly, and con-centrated on Jon's chagrin when he came home and found all the wood for the new garage on the living-room windows, and the things that had happened to the plaster in the process!

But no bath lasts forever. She had to get out, finally, and get dressed.

in the bedrooms, at least, there were no boards, and the sun was bright through the sheer curtains. She decided she could stay up-stairs most of the day.

Gar Levy came by her open door and waved a greeting. His tie was knotted, and his hair was freshly combed.

"Are you going out again?" she asked, smiling. "You're getting to be pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Frankly," he told her, "I tremble and quake every time I have to take a step on the other side of that door. But it looks like 1'1l have to go this time. And if I'm lucky I won't be back—at least not until this mess is over and I can come to thank you with a box of candy, or some such small consideration, for saving my life."

"Oh, stop it! What do you mean, if you're lucky? Haven't you found the accommodations satisfactory?"

`"Very much so. When you decide to take in permanent boarders, put me first on

the list. I'm headed for the hospital, which I don't expect to be nearly so pleasant."

`The *hospital? I* thought you said you'd treated yourself with something. And Barbie told me about all that stuff you brought home yesterday

"That was mostly equipment to find out if I was getting better or worse. I found out," he finished with a wry smile, "so today I'm going to see if I can get into the hospital under my nom de plume."

"I hate to see you go," Gladys said slowly. "You've gotten to be almost part of the family. If there's—I don't know what—but if there's anything at all we can do . . ."

"As a matter of fact, there is." He smiled. "I haven't wanted to bring it up before, but just before I go—I've been wondering whether you've had any news at all about Tom. I've always been very fond of him

"No more than he was of you." She told him about the only news they'd had, on the radio, and he seemed almost as happy as she herself had been. "You know," she added, "when you first came in that morning, I couldn't place you at all. I didn't know whether you were a—well, a maniac or what. The name was vaguely familiar, but it just didn't connect. Not until Barbie woke up and said *Doc* Levy. *That* name I'd heard—approximately every third sentence, for a year or so, from Tom."

"I never thought I'd be glad to hear Tom was in the Army," he said thoughtfully. "We used to have long talks about Life and Science in the afternoons, and I think I spent more time trying to talk him out of joining up than I did teaching him anything."

Gladys was startled. Tom had never admitted to her that the beloved Dr. Levy shared her feelings about the Army. But of course he did. That's what he was in trouble about.

"Look, Gar " She hesitated, not knowing just how to put it. "I don't know exactly why it's necessary for you to go. You realize how little I understand about all this. But I know you feel rest is important, and it occurs to me," she smiled, "that you haven't had much here. If it's any reason like that—I mean if there's anything we can do that would make it unnecessary for you to go—you know we'd be glad to have you stay, all of us. When you first

came I "

"When I first came," he said for her, "you were most sensibly disturbed about the danger I represented. But once you made up your mind to let me stay, and realized I wasn't going to politely refuse, you did everything you could to make me comfortable. If there were any more you could do I might very well feel it was asking too much—but as it happens, there isn't. You don't have the equipment, and the hospital does. So, much as I prefer the company of your family to that of a lot of overtired, disagreeable nurses, I'm going to do everything I can to get in there. But don't be *too* sur-prised if you find me sneaking back into the clothes drier tonight. I don't know how it will turn out."

"Well . . . just be sure you do come back, if you want to."

"I've already made sure I had an excuse. I didn't leave my gloves, but my Geiger counter. Barbara hid all my stuff away in what she assures me is a safe place upstairs. You're not supposed to have things like that around, you know—it's all been com-mandeered. See?" The gentle grin broke across his broad face. "I may take my charming presence away, but I leave my menace with you. I hope I don't have to

add that if you think it advisable you are perfectly free to dispose of the stuff at any time."

"You know," she laughed, "every time I forget you're a teacher, and decide to treat you just like other people, you come out with a sentence like that. `If you think it advisable,' " she mimicked. "I wish I could talk you into staying."

"Not a chance. Anyhow"—he took her hand between both of his—:"what do you suppose your husband would say if he came home and found you were keeping a man in the attic?"

"At my age?" She smiled. "He'd be right proud of me."

"Not after he saw the man, he wouldn't. At least, not unless I get to that hospital soon and persuade them to patch me up a little. Good-by, Gladys, and . . . `thank you' is pretty inadequate. I'll try to find something better for when I come back."

She walked downstairs with him and waited while he said good-by to Veda. He had already taken his leave of the two girls upstairs, and asked them to stay up there till he was gone. He did not, he explained, want to have to warn them about loud good-bys.

Gladys thought to step out, before he left, and make sure there was no patrol truck in sight. Then he slipped out of the house, and possibly out of her life, very quietly, and with much less drama than anything he had done before.

TWENTY-THREE

The house felt strangely empty when he was gone. Gladys remembered how glad she would have been to see the last of him only two days ago, and thought, Now there's no man in the house again.

Knowing where that kind of thought could lead, she banished it by plunging into a fury of housework.

"We better use the hot water while we've got it," she told Veda. "Lord knows if we can keep that stove going by ourselves."

The two of them washed, scrubbed, and cleaned, with Ginny's dubious assistance, while Barbie took her turn at the bathtub. Then Gladys sent Veda off for her share of their greatest luxury—hot water—and found it was already time for lunch. She scouted the

contents of the refrigerator and found, next to the roast she had planned for Monday, a lone lamb chop which would do nicely for Ginny.

Moving around the kitchen, pulling things out, rearranging them, she felt busy and useful and almost happy. Then, from force of habit, she tried to turn on the gas range, and the happy illusion vanished when she had to take her pan over to the hot plate instead.

She sat with Ginny at the table while the little girl ate—or, more accurately, refused to cat—her lunch. Inactivity and confinement were beginning to tell on her. Maybe I could just take her for a walk, Gladys thought. Really, there was no reason not to. But she hesitated, and decided not to say anything yet.

Spurning her vegetables, Ginny bit ferociously into the chop. But after an experimental chew she returned the bite promptly to the plate.

"Ginny, I've told you about that, over and over again!"

"But itsh got stonesh in it," Ginny complained, and they both realized what had happened. "Mommy, my tooth!"

"Let me see," Gladys demanded.

Small fingers plowed through the mess on the plate and came up with ivory. Then Ginny opened her mouth proudly and pulled back her lip to show the hole. "I 'old 'oo . . ." She discovered that talking with her mouth open was even more difficult. *"I told* you it was loosh."

"I guess you did."

"And you didn't believe me. I told you, didn't I? You wouldn't even feel it." She was learning to negotiate the air hole.

But I did feel it. It was puzzling, till she realized that wasn't the one she had, after all, felt. She must have misunderstood when Ginny pointed it out.

The loss of a tooth at the age of five and not quite a half is a memorable occasion, but not one conducive to hearty eating. When Ginny refused to stay at the table any longer Gladys had to scrape a half-filled plate of food into the garbage pail.

Clutching the precious tooth in her hand, Ginny went off for hernap, and Gladys had her own lunch, together with Barbara, in the darkened kitchen. She wanted to get upstairs again, where the sun still came through the windows, but the inexhaustible radio stopped her on her way through the living room.

"The news for today in the lower Westchester area. All residents are requested to discontinue any unnecessary use of electric power. Electricity must be conserved. You are being asked to use electric power in your house for none but essential purposes. In those areas where the gas supply has failed, cooking by electricity will be per-mitted. You may continue to use your radio, but broadcasts will no longer be continuous. News broadcasts will be made once an hour on the hour, and you are requested to turn your set off when the broadcast is concluded, and leave it off until the following hour.

"There are to be no electric lights used during daylight hours. Heating devices of any kind are not to be used unless authorized in writing by an emergency squadman. I repeat: if you wish to use special heating devices, or any kind of special electric equipment, you must obtain written authorization from your squadman. This restriction applies also to electric irons, mixers, toasters, and simi-lar household equipment. A squadman or emergency policeman may visit your home at any time to check on the equipment in use. Please understand that this action is necessary in order to conserve power during the emergency. Violations reported by inspectors will be severely penalized.

"Emergency Headquarters for the lower Westchester area re-ports that plans for evacuation are now being completed. An evac-uation order is expected momentarily, and it is reported that the first special train to the Civilian Evacuation Camp, at the Sampson Navy Base, will leave sometime tomorrow.

"Your squadman will notify you when you are to be evacuated, and you will receive notice in ample time to prepare to leave your homes. You are urged, however, to consult your information sheets now and plan your preparations ahead of time. If you co-operate with Emergency Headquarters the evacuation can be conducted in a safe and orderly manner.

"News has been received here from Denver, Colorado, by way of amateur radio relay stations, to the effect that . . ."

"I guess it's no use asking how you feel about it," Barbie said. "This morning I

thought for a little while maybe you'd decide to stay here, but if the news yesterday made you want to go ... "

"I don't know, darling."

Barbara looked at her with quick surprise. "You mean you're not sure? You *might . . ."*

"That's right. Jim Turner was here this morning," she began. "I saw him. I didn't want to talk to him."

"Neither did I. He said we can't get a clearance for Veda to go with us. He also . . . I just don't know, Barbie, I don't know what to do."

She got up, paced around the room, and came back to where her daughter still sat on the floor. "Things are going to be bad here. I don't see how we can stay. And I don't see how we can go."

"Maybe . . ." Barbara stood up to face her. "Maybe it would be better to go—for you and Ginny. Mother!" Excitement flared in her eyes. "Mother, I'll bet Veda could go to work in the hospital! Then you wouldn't have to worry about me, if she was there. That would take care of everything."

"Not quite," Gladys said. "Barbie, please .don't make me quar-rel with you. I don't want to. But as far as the hospital is con-cerned, that's out, for you. I don't want to hear it discussed again. For Veda, it might not be such a bad idea. I don't know. I just *don't know."*

She turned and clenched her fists, fighting against weariness and fear. When she turned back Barbara was walking silently away. Maybe that was better, better than quarreling anyway. What you didn't say you didn't have to explain away.

She went to find Ginny. The little girl had to have a bath. She had to be ready, in case . . .

I don't know. How can I know what to do?

Ginny had gotten over her cranky spell of the day before. Sheseemed to have accepted solitude and had taken over the attic, since that morning, as her own domain.

Gladys found her there and whisked her through a tub, then buttoned the shiny-clean child into a freshly starched frock.

"And when," she demanded, looking the little girl over, "did you last brush your hair?"

"I don't know." Ginny refused to take it seriously until she saw her mother pick up the brush and comb. "Not the comb," she said firmly. "Just the brush."

"The brush," Gladys repeated, *"and* the comb. The way it is, you'll have birds building nests in your hair soon."

"Can't," Ginny pointed out with cheerful logic. "All the birds went away." She smiled hopefully at her mother, decided the argu-ment hadn't worked, and set her face again in firm resistance. "No comb," she said stubbornly.

"Well, we'll see." Gladys began pulling gently with her fingers to separate the tangled mat in back before she brushed it. "For heaven's sake, hold still, Ginny."

"But you're pulling."

"I am not pulling. *Will* you stay still?"

"Ouch!" Ginny jerked her head to the side, away from Gladys' probing fingers. Gladys couldn't let go in time.

`"I'm sorry, baby," she started to say, "but I have to--" Then she stopped. Ginny had jerked her head away. Ginny's head was no longer in her hands, but Ginny's hair was.

Gladys stared with speechless fascination at the mat of hair be-tween her fingers. Her eyes followed the wisps of hair out in all directions from the central tangle. Down here—the ends; up there —the roots.

"Ginny!" she cried. "Baby!"

Ginny promptly burst into tears. "I'm sorry, Mommy. I'm sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. I couldn't help it, 'cause it hurt."

"Oh no, baby. No, that's all right. Ginny darling, stop crying. Please stop crying," Gladys begged. "Stop crying and tell me some-thing. It's very important."

But the little girl didn't, or couldn't, stop. She put her head on her mother's lap and let the tears flow.

"There, baby, there." Gladys started to pat the shaking head and hastily moved her hand down to the shuddering small shoul-ders.

She had to get control of herself before she could stop Ginny, she knew that. "There, baby, it's all right. There's nothing to cry about."

Slowly the sobs diminished and the tears dried up. Bit by bit the child grew calmer. Finally Gladys picked her up and settled the little girl on her lap.

"Now listen, baby." She tried to talk quietly. "I want to know just what happened. Whatever it was, it's going to be all right, but I do have to know. Listen carefully now. You remember when Barbie got sick?"

Ginny nodded her head.

"You do remember? And you remember how she told you not to tell me? Remember how you promised?"

Again Ginny nodded.

"And then you remember afterwards it was all right to tell?" "Uh-huh."

"Well, now I want you to tell me whether you were sick too. Even if it wasn't all right to tell me before, it's all right now. You have to understand that. But if you were sick I've got to know."

She must have let too much urgency creep into her voice. She got no answer, but only a fresh flood of tears and protests.

"I'm a good girl, Mommy. I'm a good girl. I didn't do nothin' bad."

"You're sure you didn't throw up? Are you *sure* you didn't?"

"Mommy, don't make me go away. Don't let them take me away like Mrs. Crowell. Please, Mommy, I don't want to go away. I'm a good girl. I didn't do nothing—anything—bad!"

There was no use trying to find out any more. "All right, baby." Gladys gave up. "You go show Barbie how pretty you look."

"You mean I don't have to get my hair brushed?" Immediately the tears gave way to a bright smile.

"No, darling." The words were hard to pronounce. "You don't have to get your hair brushed. You go ahead and play."

She waited until Ginny had vanished into Barbara's room, and then headed straight for the telephone. She must have stood there, holding the unresponsive receiver to her ear for several minutes, before she remembered that there would be no answer.

The phone was still dead.

She found Veda in the kitchen, cooking supper.

"That child kin make more noise'n any ten men I ever heard," Veda commented as Gladys walked in. "She was screamin' so's you could hear 'er a block away."

"Veda," Gladys blurted out, "1 think Ginny's—sick. I think she has *it."*

The spoon dropped into the stew.

"You ain't—you—now, there just ain't no *way* she could've got it," Veda protested. "She's been safe in this house fer days."

"I know. I know that," Gladys said. "But . . ." She didn't know how to start.

"What's that you got in your hand?" Veda asked. And Gladys realized that she was still holding the matted strands of hair clenched in her fist. She opened the fingers to let Veda see. Then, bit by bit, she got the story out—everything that had happened, how Ginny had acted, and all her own fears and worries.

"We don't know nothin' fer sure," Veda said doubtfully when she had finished.

"I tried to call up," Gladys told her. "I forgot the phone wasn't working." Helplessly they stood there and looked at each other.

"We're supposed to go to Monnassey's," Gladys remembered at last, "and file a complaint."

"I'll go right now." Veda began taking her apron off. "An' I got an idea, too. Mebbe if I jest stop by Mrs. Turner's house she'd have some idea where Mr. Turner an' that doctor would be, an' I could fetch them."

"That's a good idea. You stay here, Veda. I'll go."

But Veda wouldn't hear of it. "You start running around askin' questions, you're goin' to go crazy," Veda told her. "I tell you what. You jest settle down here an' fish that spoon out of the stew an' finish makin' supper. That'll give you a little somethin' to do, with-out you goin' to talk to people. I'll go right over there an' be back in a minute." She had her coat, and she was already out of the kitchen.

Gladys retrieved the spoon and set to work, stirring the stew. When Veda came back to say that Monnassey's was closed, and there was no one at home at the Turners', Gladys received the in-formation without surprise or apparent disappointment. She ac-cepted, with equal lack of enthusiasm, Veda's offer to go out and look for the truck itself. There was nothing she could do, nothing —until the doctor came.

The front door banged behind Veda, and Gladys still stood at the hot plate, stirring as if her sanity depended on it.

TWENTY-FOUR

Six o'clock, and Veda not yet back.

She didn't come. The truck didn't come; the doctor didn't come.

There wasn't enough to do. Supper was all ready, and too easy to serve. The children ate well. Ginny's appetite had returned, and she was being determinedly angelic. She was out from under the spotlight and wanted to stay that way. Barbie insisted on doing the dishes. There was no way to keep busy.

Seven o'clock.

She would have to put Ginny to bed. It was getting late, and sleep could be important.

She did everything slowly, stalling for time, trying to convince herself that Veda

would be there any minute with the doctor. Butin the end she had to tuck Ginny in with the blue plush Pallo, kiss her, and turn out the light, just like any other night.

Shven-thirty, and she sat with Barbie in the living room again, in front of the radio, waiting.

"I wonder what's taking Veda so long?"

Gladys looked up from the little crystal circle on her wrist with its graceful mocking hands.

"She hasn't got much time before curfew. You wouldn't think the stores would stay open so late."

"The stores?" Of course, Barbie would have wondered about Veda's absence. Or had Veda told her that? The girl was waiting for an answer. What was it she had started to say? The stores? That gave it away, of course.

She looked down again, trying to think, and the hands of her watch were glittering spears, piercing her reserve. She hadn't wanted to say anything to Barbie, not till she knew for sure. But she couldn't keep it to herself any longer.

Barbara heard the story out with a combination of horror and suppressed excitement.

"Look, Mom," she burst out as soon as Gladys was finished, "I bet 1 could get her to tell me what happened. When I got sick she found out, and I made her promise not to tell. If I promised her I bet she'd believe me."

Gladys wished she'd thought of it before. It just might work. "It's too late," she pointed out to Barbara. "She ought to be asleep now. I don't think we should wake her up."

"I'll go see if she's really asleep. I won't get her upset. I can handle that kid."

"Sit *down,* Barbie! I said no, didn't I?"

"Well, don't you want to know?" she demanded.

"What I don't want is to wake her up. She has to have rest."

"Well, but that's " Barbara looked pleadingly at her mother. "You should have told me before anyway," she complained. "Then I could have talked to her before she went to bed." Barbie went back to her seat on the floor and picked up her book with a great

display of concentration on the printed page. Gladys made no effort to reopen the conversation. She just sat, now, waiting.

The radio announced the fifteen-minute curfew warning and, still in silence, the two of them made the rounds, checking windows and doors. That didn't take long enough either; everything was all right, closed, tight, secure; danger was locked out and fear sealed in.

She didn't hear a truck pull up, but at the first knock she flew to the door.

"Doctor!"

"Thought I'd never make it." Garson Levy pushed the door closed behind him and leaned against it, resting a minute. "Got held up by a patrol truck a few blocks away." He was breathing hard. "They start questioning people just before curfew, and then they let you go just in time to be picked up by another one for being out late." He straightened up and walked toward the living room, peeling off his dusty jacket and smoothing his wild hair as he went. Then the tension in the house caught at him.

"What did you say?" He turned back to Gladys. "Before, at the door? What's wrong?"

"Ginny. She's got—I mean I think—her hair " The words kept getting mixed up in her throat. "Her hair came out. I was brushing it, and it came out in my hand, and I think she's "

"Has the doctor been here?"

Gladys shook her head. "Veda went out. The phone isn't work-ing, and Veda went to find the truck. That was hours ago, and she isn't back yet. I don't know *what* to do."

"Where's Ginny now?"

"In bed. You said, I think you said once, that sleep would help. She didn't act sick or anything; she felt fine except for the fuss when it happened. I was brushing her hair, and some of it came out, and she started crying when I asked her if she threw up. It came out right in my hand."

"Is she asleep?" He wasted no time on sympathy.

"I think so. I don't know. Why?"

"I could take a blood count while we're waiting," he suggested."It wouldn't prove anything of course. But if it's gone that far al-ready . . . I don't know. I don't see how it could. But we might find out something."

Gone so far? She remembered the doctor saying ". . . if we catch it early enough . . ." but he had never told her how early that was.

"Did you say you can take a blood count yourself? Don't you need all those things, the little tubes and "

"I told you, Mom." Barbie had been waiting for a chance to get into the conversation. "I told you he brought all those things home yesterday: the Geiger counter and blood-count gadget and all that stuff. You just never listen to anything I say."

"But don't you have to be a doctor?" Gladys looked from one to the other with growing comprehension. "You mean anybody can take a blood count?"

"Not anybody, but anyone with a little training in lab work can do it easily." Levy loosened his tie and ran his fingers restlessly through his unruly hair. "It's just a matter of equipment, and I have everything here already. That's how I've been keeping track of myself. You remember when I asked you for the boiling water last night, don't you? That was for sterilizing the stuff. There's nothing difficult about doing it," he repeated. "If you put some water on to boil now, we could have some kind of result in less than an hour, I think."

"I don't think Mother would want you to wake Ginny up," Barbie put in primly, still nursing her grievance.

"Barbara, I don't believe you were asked "

"Oh, Barbara! I'm glad you reminded me," he said briskly, treat-ing Gladys' anger and her daughter's petulance with equal indiffer-ence. "There's one big thing somebody's got to do right away: the patrol trucks are still out now. If you go out and watch, maybe you can stop one and ask the patrolman to get a message to the doctor. That should be about the quickest way to get him here. They call in to headquarters at regular intervals, I think."

"But Veda " Gladys stopped herself and turned to her

daughter. "Would you start the water first, please, Barbie? I want to go up and see if Ginny is sleeping."

Gladys ran up the stairs after the teacher and caught up to him in the hall.

"Veda went out to look for the truck," she told him. "I don't know why it's taking her so long, but what good do you think it would do for Barbie to send the same message?"

"I don't know if it would do any good at all," he answered. "But I do think Barbara ought to have something to do, and it just might help."

"Do you really think it's safe for her to go out?" Gladys de-manded.

"I really couldn't say," he retorted. "Is she easily damaged by fresh air?" Gladys flushed with anger and saw his face relent im-mediately. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't be sarcastic right now, but that was pretty silly. If it's all right for me to go out, and for Veda, why wouldn't it be all right for Barbara?"

"I don't know," Gladys admitted. "I just feel as if nobody should go out unless it's necessary. That's what they keep saying on the radio anyhow," she added stubbornly.

"You're right, of course, up to a point. But what I said before was not strictly true, as long as we're splitting hairs. Has it oc-curred to you that something might have happened to Veda? The curfew patrol is remarkably efficient, and I expect she is on her way to some sort of trouble right now, for violating the curfew. Stopping a patrol truck might be our last chance to get a message to the doctor until the squad truck comes around—whenever that may be."

There was no possible answer to his array of arguments. Gladys simply absorbed the succession of shocks and reminded herself that it didn't pay to challenge this man. Every time she backed him into a corner he turned around and bit her with some new unpleasant information.

"Before you wake Ginny up," he said, "there's one thing I wanted to tell you. I didn't think of it when I first offered to makethe blood count, but the only good it will do is to let you know the worst—if it is the worst—a little sooner. All this kind of equip-ment has been commandeered, you know. It's illegal to have any of the stuff in your house. You won't be able to tell the doctor that a blood count was already made, and it won't save any time in his diagnosis. About the only concrete thing you can hope to get out of it is a personal knowledge of just how urgent it is to get the doc-tor here. Do you still want to do it?"

"I think so." She stared at the closed door to Ginny's room. "Suppose I go see how easy it is to wake her up? If she's sleeping soundly, maybe we oughtn't to bother."

"That sounds sensible," he agreed. "I'll get the things together meanwhile, just in case."

Gladys crossed the darkened threshold into Ginny's room and groped for the chain to the soft night light.

A gentle glow diffused the room, just as a cheerful high voice announced that Ginny was, after all, wide awake.

"Hello, Mommy. Did you come to tuck me in again?"

"No, baby. Doc—Mr. Carney just came home, and he wanted

to say hello to you, so I came to see if you were asleep yet." Ginny puzzled over

that. "Why?" she demanded finally. "Why *what?"*

"Why does Mr. Carney want to say hello when I'm s'posed to be *asleep?"* The young voice was prim and virtuous.

"Well, he " She's not afraid of needles. Did she see the doc-tor take the blood from Barbie? Gladys wondered. "He wants to play a kind of game with you." She saw her daughter's startled disbelief and realized her own nervousness wasn't helping matters any. "He wants to take a kind of test."

"When I'm s'posed to be *asleep?"* Ginny asked again incredu-lously. Virtue was rapidly turning to suspicion.

"Well, it's kind of important. And he didn't get home before."

Ginny sat bolt upright, hugging faithful Pallo tight against her cheek. "I don't want to. I want to go to sleep." Oh dear! Now what?

"I'm sleepy. Turn my light out." The child suited the histrionics to the words and lay down again, burrowing under her blanket. What in the world . . . ?

"Mom!" A door banged loudly, downstairs. Barbara's voice was breathless and excited. "Mother! Mom, c'mere!"

"I'll be right back, baby." She dropped a kiss on the tiny patch of Ginny's forehead that still showed above the covers. The patch promptly disappeared, and something emerged from under the covers about turning the light out, but Gladys didn't stop to listen.

"The truck's outside, Mom," Barbie greeted her on the stairs. The front door was wide open. "They wouldn't listen to me, but I told them I'd get my mother."

"All right, I'll talk to them."

"I'll go take care of Ginny."

"You better leave her alone. She's all upset." *I hope Gar doesn't get down there before I get back. I hope* . . . There was no use thinking about it. "You stay here," she called again, to Barbie, and went out the door.

The big squadman stood at the porch steps, his visor down, his foot rocking impatiently on the flagstone. It was as close as he could come to impatient tapping in the heavy shoes. At the back entrance to the truck another man looked out curiously, visor open for a clearer view. Gladys didn't recognize him at a distance.

"Come in," she told the squadman impatiently. "Isn't the doctor with you?" She had to stop to catch her breath. Her voice wasn't working right again.

"Sorry, ma'am, I can't come in. We're on patrol."

"Oh!" She was startled. Standing above him on the porch, she hadn't been able to see his face, shielded as it was by the raised visor. But his voice was that of a total stranger. "I thought you were "

"If you want your regular squadman, he'll be around later on," he said. "They're changing off the regular schedule, so I can't say just when—but you watch out for him; he'll be here."

"Wait a minute. Please wait!" He was going away. He didn't understand.

"Lady, I can't wait. I've got a job to do."

"But my daughter—please! Listen to me!"

He didn't stop, but he started and half turned back. It was all the time she needed. "I can't wait for the regular squadman," she told him quickly. "I have to get a

message to the doctor right away. We sent somebody out to find the truck, to get the doctor, but that was five o'clock and she's not back yet. All I want to do is let the doctor know."

At last he was showing some interest. Gladys stopped to catch her breath and he filled in the pause with a swift question of his own. "Still out? What's her name?" She told him Veda's name and, on demand, produced a brief description. "If we pick her up now, we'll know who she is," he explained, tucking away the notebook in which he had scribbled the information.

"But I need *a doctor!"* Gladys protested. "That's what I stopped you for."

"Who's the doctor on duty here?"

"Dr. Spinelli, Peter Spinelli. He's an intern at the new Veterans' Hospital. The squadman is Jim T "

"Hey, Spinelli's the kid on duty this evening at headquarters, ain't he?" That was from the man in the back of the truck. For the first time Gladys realized how loud she must have been talking.

"Yeah, I think so. I'll leave a call for him when I check in."

"Please let him know as soon as you can," she pleaded, knowing it was useless. The man just didn't care. "It's my little girl," she explained again. "Her hair

"I'll tell him, but your kid ain't the only sick one, you know." He had lost all interest.

There had to be some way. "Do you know Jim Turner?" she asked, trying to keep him there until she could find something that would work. Unexpectedly Turner's name had an immediate effect.

"You a friend of his?" the man asked.

"Well . . . yes."

He caught her hesitation. "He's your squadman, uh? Not a per-sonal friend?"

"No, that is, yes." She forced confidence into her voice. "He's the squadman here, but he's an old friend too. He said if anything went wrong to be sure and let him know right away. If you

"Well, look, Miss—Mrs.—I mean, I'm only trying to do my duty. I'm not supposed to handle anything but violations on curfew patrol, but I said I'd get the doctor for you, didn't I? Look." He fished out the notebook again. "Maybe you better give me more details. What's the kid's name? Age? He'll know who she is, won't he?" He wrote rapidly. "I'll leave a call for the doctor, like I said, but he's on duty right now, I know. Can't say when he'll get here. Mr. Turner could probably get him quicker for you. Tell you what, suppose I call Mr. Turner for you, how's that?"

"That's not Yes, of course, that's a good idea." It dawned on her just in time that the man was trying to keep her from calling Turner. It didn't make sense. If she had a phone working she wouldn't have had to stop him in the first place. But she kept her-self from asking questions or saying anything more that might modify his incomprehensible change of attitude.

She watched him fill in the house number in his little book and turn back to his truck.

Why should Jim Turner's name have such a startling effect? It certainly wasn't a matter of personal liking. The man's attitude had been one of respect or . . .

The full significance of the patrolman's change of mind finally struck her. He'd

been afraid. Was it possible that Turner was actu-ally as important in the new scheme of things as he would have her believe?

She wished there had been some way to keep the patrolman from calling Turner.

She almost wished she had never mentioned Turner's name. But if it meant getting the doctor sooner . . .

"What did he say? Didn't they have a doctor? Are they going to get Pete—Dr. Spinelli?" Barbara flew down the stairs toward her.

"What? Oh." She pulled her thoughts away from the mysteryof Jim Turner's name. "He's going to call the doctor and Mr. Turner both. They're just the curfew patrol truck. They don't have a doctor with them, but they said Dr. Spinelli's on duty at head-quarters, and they'll call him."

"Well, what do they have to call Mr. Turner for?"

"I don't know." *I wish I did.* She started up the stairs. "Mom."

"What? Oh, is the water ready yet, Barbie?"

"I was just coming down to start some more. He's got some on the hot plate upstairs for sterilizing things. I thought I'd make some tea or coffee or something, and Doc didn't eat anything yet, so I figured I'd heat up the stew. There's still some left."

"That's fine." She's really such a good girl. Gladys reached out and squeezed her daughter's arm with sudden tenderness. It was terrible to be so young and not able to do anything, when the world turned upside down like this. "I . . ." There just weren't any *right* words. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Barbie," she finished lamely.

"Mom, listen."

Gladys stopped, her foot already on the first step. Barbara hadn't moved toward the kitchen at all.

"Listen, Mom, don't go up."

"What do you mean, don't go up? For heaven's sake, why not? After all, Gritty hardly even knows him and—of course I'm going up." Impatiently she shook off the girl's hand.

"Well, listen, Mom. It's just well, you know how Ginny's al-ways better at the doctor's if you don't go into the room with her. Little kids just are that way. You told me that yourself, and I know it's true. Anyhow, you're all—well, you're all nervous and every-thing. Don't get mad at me again, Mother, please. Only I think it's better if you don't, honest."

Gladys could only stare at the girl, amazed.

"Besides, she isn't upset, and anyhow, he's in there with her already, and—please don't be mad at me, Mom—but I was sitting with her awhile, before Doc Levy came down, while he was getting

his stuff together, so I asked her about—you know—if she was—sick."

Gladys took her foot off the stairs and followed her daughter through the living room.

"What—what did she say?" That was silly; she knew the answer. "*When* was it?"

"Well, that's what I don't understand. She says it was Tuesday, when you were sleeping. It must have been when she was taking her nap—come to think of it, she didn't feel so good at lunch-time—but that's practically impossible because Pete said

it's always within a few hours after exposure. It was about eight hours for me and they said that seemed like a long time. Tuesday afternoon would make it a whole day, or even the morning would be an awful long time."

"Are you sure she didn't go outside Tuesday morning?"

"I was with her myself practically every minute," Barbie insisted, "and anyhow, the door was locked up on top. She can't open that. *I know* she wasn't out."

"Well, she must have been. I don't know how, but she must have been."

"Well, there's another thing too. Listen, Mom, Doc says some-times it's much quicker with little kids, and if her hair is coming out so soon, in just a couple of days, that would mean she would have had to be sick just about right away. So maybe—maybe it's something else. Maybe she hasn't really got it."

Gladys looked away from the pleading eyes and shook her head. "No." There was no way out of it. `"She's got it. I knew you didn't, and I know she does." She could feel the matted strands of hair again, as if she still held them in her hand. She wiped the damp palm against her apron.

"I promised," Barbie said suddenly. "I promised not to tell." She turned and pushed through the dining -room door, letting it slam behind her. Gladys started after her and stopped. Leave her alone, leave her alone. She has to be alone.

She started again for Ginny's room. Out of old habit she stoppedat the bottom step to listen. There wasn't a sound from upstairs, no voices, no footsteps. He must have the door closed. Except for the ceaseless, senseless chatter of the radio, the whole house was silent, deadly silent. What is he doing up there? Gladys went back into the living room, made herself sit down, forced herself to stay there, to sit and wait.

TWENTY-FIVE

Gaily carved in the kitchen, oak-framed black on the dining-room wall, tiny gilded stripes in the watch on her wrist, with unremitting patience the hands completed and renewed their circles. And still they didn't come. No sign, no word, from Veda, from Turner, from the doctor.

Alone in her room again, Ginny cried a little bit in sleepy pro-test, then fell asleep in the middle of a sob.

Downstairs Gladys heard the news without surprise when Garson Levy explained that the blood count made it certain Ginny was sick, and almost as certain what the nature of her illness was. The white-blood-cell count was drastically low, and checked too well with the symptoms they already knew. Gladys tightened her grip on the arms of Jon's big chair and thanked him quietly.

"Of course, I'm not sure. I can't be sure. Another count . . ."

"Yes, of course." Gladys cut him off. She was sure; she didn't need another count.

When is the doctor coming?

Levy went back upstairs, to dismantle his makeshift laboratory and put his things back in the attic hideaway. Barbara went quietly out to the kitchen to get the warmed-up supper she had fixed for him. Gladys sat alone, studying the unchanging pace of the little gold hands on her wrist.

Afterward, when the dishes were put away and there was nothing

to do again, they gathered in the living room and tried to talk. But every subject

led, by a devious route of its own, to the one thing Gladys could not, would not, talk about.

Unworried and unhurried, the little hands on the watch, the big ones on the clocks moved steadily past nine and ten and toward eleven. Somewhere in those rounds of time Jim Turner came. They all heard the car in front of the house, and the sound pulled Gladys blindly from her chair, drew her unthinking to the door. It was Barbie who remembered and made her stop and wait, to let Levy get out of sight upstairs before she opened the door.

And then it was only the squadman. The doctor wasn't with him, and he knew nothing about Veda. He had come straight to the house when he got the patrolman's message, and knew only that there was trouble at the Mitchell house.

Gladys listened impatiently to his explanations, and once again she told the story of Ginny's hair. But now it was maddening when he tried to reassure her, when he urged her to wait for the blood count before she worried too much, when he stood there *talking* instead of doing something, and she couldn't tell him a blood count had already been made.

And when she told him about Veda his only answer was a knowing shrug. "She couldn't get very far. The boys have probably picked her up already. I'll let you know if she turns up at head-quarters, but I don't think they'll let her go again. Don't make much difference. I'll get the doctor for you, and I already told you she'd probably be pulled in before evacuation anyhow."

The door closed behind him, and there was another chilling thought to add to the sum of fear in the household. She asked Dr. Levy, but he could not, or would not, add anything to what Gladys knew about the Security Office. She felt as he talked that there was much he was not saying, and that none of it was good, but she did not press him. She knew already that if anything in his own experi-ence would help, however unpleasant it might be, he would tell. If he was holding back, it was because he saw no useful purpose in adding to her fears.

When the desultory conversation died out entirely Barbie sug-gestO cards. But Gladys couldn't keep her mind on three-handed bridge, and she broke away to find a corner where she could bend unseeing over a magazine and not have to talk. She was grateful when the others went off upstairs and left her to nurse her worries alone. Barbara explained that they'd be within earshot, but far enough so she could open the door without waiting, and she nod-ded in reply, never raising her eyes from the blurred page on her lap.

Once in a while she looked at *her* watch, but time went on for-ever, and the hands barely moved. She knew it was after midnight, though, when a car pulled up again in front of the house.

"Oh, thank God, thank God you're here!" Gladys was almost as relieved at the sight of Veda's familiar face as she was at the doctor. "You're all right?" she asked Veda. "What happened to you? We were so worried." Without waiting for an answer she turned to Spinelli. "She's upstairs, Doctor, do you want to see her right away? They told you, didn't they—about Ginny?"

He nodded. "I'll go right up. As soon as I can get this thing off." He was fumbling with the heavy helmet of his suit.

"Can I help?" Barbie came down the stairs, across the hall, and reached up shyly

but efficiently to unfasten the metal closing that held the helmet to the suit.

"Thank you." He let her take the heavy headpiece. "Is she sleep-ing?" he asked Gladys.

"She was Iast time I looked. I don't understand it; she seems so healthy."

He nodded. "That can happen. Just a minute, will you? Barbie, will you take care of Veda while we go up? She's had a bad time tonight. She ought to go straight to bed."

"What . . . ?" Startled, Gladys saw Barbara help Veda out of the chair near the door. "What happened? Is it serious?" She saw Veda try to protest and then give in weakly. "What happened to her, Doctor?"

"The Security Office," he said briefly. "I'll tell you about it later.

Or Veda will. It's not serious—she just needs a good rest. You go ahead." He turned to the maid, standing in the doorway, leaning on Barbie's arm. "Get into bed before I put you in myself."

She smiled weakly. "I was jest thinking," she pleaded, "I'd ruther wait till there's some word about Ginny. I couldn't rest good not knowin'." ~

"1'11 come in and tell you," Barbara promised. "Come on, you heard what the doctor said."

Veda shook her head. "I'd a sight ruther lay down in here awhile, if Missus Mitchell don't mind. Then I'd know fer sure." "Of course I don't mind."

"Well, I do." The doctor was firm. "You get her into bed right now, Barbie. And don't take any back talk. I'd have been here an hour ago," he told Gladys when they were gone, "if I'd left her there. Those boys had it all figured out she was a dangerous enemy agent."

He started up the stairs as he talked, taking two steps ato time, so Gladys had to run to keep up and hear what he was saying.

"They picked her up after curfew, without identification, and she kept asking for me. She told them who she was, and when they checked they found out she was supposed to have a clearance to be out at all. Of course they didn't believe a word she said about why she was out, and

They were at Ginny's door. He stopped and lowered his voice to finish the story. "They never thought of finding out who I was. They just took it for granted she was lying. She was getting a pretty rugged third degree—polite American variety—bright lights and lots of questions, for about two hours, till Turner's call came in, and I was paged on the speaker system. When they realized I was right in the building, they called me in to identify her. Then it took me about an hour, after I verified her story, to get them to release her. They just couldn't stand the idea of giving up a suspect."

"Is she—will she be all right?" Gladys asked.

"Sure. They didn't hurt her. I told you it was the polite type. But she's beat. She ought to take it easy tomorrow too."

"I'll see to it," she promised.

"Okay." He grinned at her. "Now I've got that out of my system and said enough to be damn near court-martialed, suppose we take a look at the kid."

Gladys led the way. She switched on the overhead light, and they saw Ginny pried peacefully around her friend Pallo, nuzzling the worn fuzziness of his plush hide.

"Wake up, baby." Gladys nudged the small shoulder and leaned over to drop a

kiss on the flushed cheek. "Wake up. You have to wake up now. You've got some company."

Ginny transferred her embrace from the blue horse and twined her arms sleepily around Gladys' neck to pull herself up. Then she looked over her mother's shoulder and her eyes flew open.

"Hello." She seemed to find it perfectly natural that the doctor should be standing by her bed. "I know who you are," she an-nounced. "You're Pete. You was talking to Babsy. I remember you."

Gladys saw the rare, sweet smile spread across his face, and im-mediately everything seemed easier and less fearsome.

"That's very clever of you," he told Ginny gravely. "This time I came to talk to *you."*

Ginny promptly released her strangle hold on her mother and patted the side of her bed invitingly.

"Sit down," she offered.

"That's a nice horse you've got," he complimented her. "You know your mother thinks you're sick?"

Ginny nodded. "Only I ain't. Amn't," she assured him. "You feel pretty good?" he asked.

"Sure I feel good. What's that for?" She was pointing to the long zipper on the back flap pocket that held his medical equipment. He pulled it open and let her peer in at the jumbled assortment of tubes and jars and implements. "See?" he said. "All the things you need to be a doctor with."

"You gonna stick a needle in me and make me bleed like before?"

"I never did it to you before, though," he said. "Just Barbie. I only do that to big girls and you were too little before."

"I'm big enough now," she assured him. "Because Mr. Car "Ginny's used to needles," Gladys broke in hastily. "She's had all kinds of shots at the doctor's."

The doctor didn't seem to notice anything. "All right," he said. "If you'll get me some alcohol we can start right in and do it just the same way I did for Barbie."

"With the funny thing you squeeze?" Ginny asked. "Like a horn, only no noise?"

"You've got the idea." He turned to Gladys. "If you don't mind . . ."

She did mind. There was no telling what Ginny might say while she was out of the room. But there was nothing else to do. "No, of course not. I'll be right back."

She fairly flew to the bathroom and back, but when she got there Spinelli met her at the door and took the bottle from her hands. "Thank you," he said politely. "This won't take long." Then he stepped back into the room and very firmly shut the door in her face.

Angry and worried both, still she lacked the courage to open the door and go in. He was the doctor. She stood where she was and tried to distinguish words from the murmur of voices that came through the wall, until at last he opened the door to admit her.

"That's a good girl you've got there, Mrs. Mitchell," he said. "She did everything just right." He was holding a thin tube of pinkish liquid corked at either end. It didn't look much like blood to Gladys.

"Look, Mommy." Ginny was wide awake and cheerful. "Look what Dr. Pete gave

me." She waved a wooden tongue depressor gleefully in the air. "Look."

"I see, baby. That's very nice." Gladys walked past the doctor, afraid to look at him. Over her shoulder she asked him, "Can she go back to sleep now?"

"She might as well.""I don't want to go back to sleep. I'm all woke up."

"Well now, it's the middle of the night, Ginny. You have to go back to sleep." Gladys tried to make her lie down, without success. "Don't want to go back to sleep. Want to get up."

"Don't be silly, darling, you can't get up now. I told you it's the middle of the night." She couldn't quite keep an edge of sharpness out of her voice. She *had* to talk to the doctor.

Spinelli left the room while she tried futilely to quiet the child. When he came back Barbie was with him.

"Barbie's going to read to you till you fall asleep, Ginny," he said firmly.

She was perfectly willing to make a good bargain. "Will you read the *whole* mouse book?"

"Every single word of it," Barbara promised.

But when Gladys faced the young doctor out in the hall he was no longer smiling. His face was once again as she had first seen it, long and bony and too sober.

"Who is Mr. Carney, Mrs. Mitchell?" He came straight to the point.

"Mr. Carney?" Gladys was prepared. "Why do you ask?" She turned her back on him and started walking down the hall. "Don't you think we'd be more comfortable in the living room?"

"I don't really care. If you don't mind, Mrs. Mitchell, I'd like to discuss it right now. It's important. Who is Mr. Carney?"

It was silly even to try, because she knew it couldn't work, but she tried to make it sound convincing. "He's a friend of Veda's," she lied. "He's—Ginny is crazy about him. He was over here yes-terday."

"What would make Ginny say he took a blood sample from her?"

"I don't know. I guess he heard some talk about Barbie, so maybe he pretended to give Ginny a blood test. He's always playing make-believe games with her." She looked straight into his eyes and tried to fill her own with innocence. "That's the only thing I can think of that would account for it."

The doctor shook his head. "It's hard to believe your little girl could know as much as she does, unless she's really had a sample taken before," he said stubbornly.

"But, Doctor," Gladys objected, "you must realize I'd tell you if she had. Why should I try to keep it from you?"

"Because you know as well as I do that any man with the knowl-edge and equipment to take a blood count had no business being here. Now who is Mr. Carney? Where is he?"

"I told you," Gladys said slowly. "He's a friend. A friend of Veda's."

"Where is he? I want to see him."

"Well . . . he's not here now. I don't know where he lives."

"Look here, Mrs. Mitchell!" It was hard to believe he could be so angry. He had been so even-tempered all the time. "I'm willing to concede that you must have some good reason for lying to me. It would have to be a pretty dam good reason to weigh

in the balance with your daughter's life. Or perhaps if you understood fully that the previous blood count could make all the difference in the world, you'd change your story."

Ginny's life?

Ginny, lying in the room behind the closed door, listening to a story and dying as she listened. Dying, dying, dying every minute.

She thought of Garson Levy, coming through the night to warn her about Barbara's danger, fighting off invaders in the darkened kitchen, repairing the terrifying gas leak, boarding up the win-dows, fixing a toy for Ginny, bringing courage and hope back into the house.

"I don't want to turn anybody in to the Security Office, Mrs. Mitchell. After the way I blew my top before, I should think you'd realize that. All I want is to find out the results of that last blood count. Anyhow"—he smiled a little grimly—"you've got nothing to worry about. Any friend of Mr. Turner's is a friend of the Security Office. I don't care who your mystery man is or what he's done; I just want to avoid any further wait in diagnosing Ginny's case."

Any further wait . . . They had waited to hear about Barbie,She had waited for the doctor to come. She knew the poisonous fear of waiting. She knew it too well.

She couldn't wait any more; she could do anything but wait. She looked up. The good-natured young man wasn't smiling; his face was set and determined. He saw surrender in her eyes and pounced on it.

"If you won't tell me, the only thing I can do is take her in to the hospital right away. I'll just have to assume it's as bad as it looks."

There was no way out.

"I . . ." Forgive me, please forgive me. She breathed a silent prayer, whether to God or Garson Levy, she didn't know. "I . . ." It was harder to do because she knew he would forgive her—Doc Levy would. She wet her dry lips.

"It's all right, Gladys." The door to the attic stairs stood open, and the teacher took a step forward to join them. She hadn't heard it open; how long had he been there? "You're Dr. Spinelli?" He turned to the younger man courteously and extended his hand. "Mrs. Mitchell and her daughter have both told me a great deal about you. I'm sorry I had no chance to speak to you before, but there were circumstances . . ." As if there were nothing to explain, as if it were the most common, everyday sort of meeting. "I'm Albert Carney. You want to see the results on the little girl's blood count, don't you?"

TWENTY-SIX

"Oh, there you are."

Gladys scrambled to her feet as the doctor pushed through the swinging door.

"How is—can you tell—I mean, do you know anything yet?" "Not really. I just came down to ask you " His eyes took in

the bubbling pot on the hot plate. "Oh—I see you knew what we'd need."

"What?" She followed his glance, and understood. "No," she admitted. "I should have, I guess, but I was just boiling it to keep. Really," she added, `"just to have something to do. Are you going to make the blood count right here?"

"It seems like the best thing—certainly a lot quicker than taking it back to the lab. Levy's got everything I need. He's setting it up in the bathroom now. I was going to

help, but that water's almost ready; I might as well wait here for it."

"What did you say?"

"When?"

"Just now—about Mr. Cam "

"Oh, that." Amused, he leaned against the kitchen cabinet, where he could watch the water, and told her, "I knew him as soon as I got a good look at him. Well, what's so surprising about that?" he demanded. "After all, I was a high school senior, and a science major in Year One of the atom bomb. And I was a college fresh-man the year Gar Levy was making big noises in the papers with his Survival Kit. I heard him talk several times, and I gave money to his committees. I even managed to get introduced to him at a dinner once. He didn't remember me, of course, but I'd know him anywhere."

The water was boiling. He felt the pot handle gingerly, and Gladys handed him two pot holders, one for each side.

"I could hardly forget him," Spinelli added, "seeing that the money I gave and the petitions I signed were largely responsible for making me a doctor. I had planned on biochemistry," he explained, "in connection with radiation therapy. Unfortunately the work you can do in that field is negligible unless you can pass a loyalty check. I got turned down for an atomic scholarship because of my—ah-unfavorable associations, Gar Levy among others."

He lifted the pot, tested the weight of the scalding water, and began walking carefully toward the door. "At any rate you don't **have** to worry about my turning him in, believe me. Thanks."

Gladys was holding the swinging door open for him to go through with the steaming pot. She moved ahead to open the other door, into the living room. He paused a minute before he went through and showered her with the warmth of his singular smile. "And thanks again," he said. "Not for the doors. It—means a lot to me, knowing that somebody took him in. He's important."

He went through the door and on to the stairs. Gladys almost followed him, and then remembered that she hadn't turned the hot plate off.

Back in the kitchen she decided to put another pot on, instead of turning the stove off. She found a jar that would hold the boiled water, in case the doctor didn't need it, and left the problem of sealing the jar, which had no top, to the inventiveness of her im-*portant* guest. Barbara's teacher . . . Tom's teacher . . . Doctor . . . Doc . . . Gar Levy. .. .

She left the water heating up and went up to look in at Ginny. But as she passed the bathroom the young doctor called to her through the half-open door.

"Mrs. Mitchell?"

"Yes?" She peered in and saw a strange-looking machine plugged i.n to the outlet Jon had installed for his electric razor. The sink was full of little tubes and rubber pieces and needles and glass slides. Spinelli had his sleeve rolled up and was busy sticking one of the little needled tubes into his own arm.

"He wants to check the accuracy of the counter," Levy ex-plained, answering the question in her eyes. "Take his own count first, and check it against what it should be. These things are deli-cate and they can get out of adjustment pretty easily—and I had no way of checking it."

The doctor's hand relaxed on the little rubber bulb, and he pulled the needle neatly from his arm, swabbed the puncture, and corked the tube, almost with one gesture.

"I just wanted to suggest"—he turned to Gladys—"maybe it would be just as well if Ginny didn't go to sleep right away. I won't know till I finish this, but it might be best to take her to the hospital

tonight. Look, don't—well, it's silly to say, don't get upset. But if Levy's count is right, then the quicker we do something, the better off she'll be."

"Yes . . . yes, of course." She ought to do something. She shouldn't just stand there. She watched him doing swift, competent things with tubes and liquids and slides, but she didn't really see anything. "Yes, I was just going in there anyhow."

The hospital?

He used a walkie-talkie on a squad truck to call headquarters when he was done.

Wisely, Gladys allowed Barbara to dress the child. She herself was strung to a high pitch of nervousness that would have infected Ginny immediately. It gave her a chance, too, for a few minutes alone with the young doctor.

"Do you want to come along?" he asked. "It won't be very pleas-ant for you, but maybe you'd rather?"

All she could do was nod. There was something she wanted to ask, but she had to wait for her voice to come back.

"How bad is it, Doctor?" Why did they always make you ask? Why couldn't they just tell you? "How did it happen?"

"I don't know. How it happened, that is. When we get her to the hospital the diagnosis might give us a clue. There are all kinds of radiation disease, Mrs. Mitchell, and they've got instruments there that will show just what she's got. Then we can guess how she got it."

"But how bad is it? You're in such a hurry to get her there . . ."

"Well, it's hard to answer that. The disease has obviously taken a rapid course. . . . But that can happen with children. In an adult the hair falling out so soon might indicate something serious. In a child—there's no telling. I'd really rather not say anything until we see what the testing machines say. How bad it is depends partly on the type of radiation too. I don't want to give you any false hopes, Mrs. Mitchell, but the fact that she's feeling all right is en-couraging. The white-cell count I got must be pretty recent."

Gladys waited for him to go on and then closed her mouth onanother question. He'd tell her when he had something to tell. There was no reason to torment him with futile questions.

"Thanks." It sounded bitter. She summoned up a ghost of a smile to show she didn't mean it. "I guess I better wash my face if I'm going. Will she—need anything along with her? Clothes or a tooth-brush or anything?"

"No." He was thoughtful. "Well, maybe you better take along a pair of pajamas, just in case, but I don't think we'll be there more than an hour or two."

"You mean . . . ?" She couldn't believe it. "You mean we don't have to *leave* her there? You mean she's coming *home?"*

"Oh, **I'm** sorry! I thought—didn't Levy tell you? About the hospital?"

"Oh, I never even asked him. I forgot all about it. I was so worried about Ginny."

"I haven't been at the hospital since it happened, myself," he told her. "But if things

are anywhere near as bad in the children's section as he says they are in the rest of the place, I think she'll be better off here at home. We can draw supplies from the pharmacy there and bring them back to the house for treatments."

"Then she can stay with me? I can take care of her myself?" Now she could think about Doc Levy. "Is that why he came back? I never even asked him," she repeated. "What's he going to do? Did he get a—treatment, or anything?"

"He got a diagnosis. He couldn't be treated without waiting till it was too late to come back today, and he didn't want to stay there. He says his case isn't too serious—a medium dose of gamma, so he's probably just as well off here. I'm going to bring back some stuff for him, too, if I can."

"What's gamma? What does that mean?"

"Oh. Well, as far as treatment is concerned, it means what he needs is rest, and if he could get some blood, that would help too, but Oh, hello," he broke off. "Ginny's all ready. You better get started, Mrs. Mitchell, if you want to wash up."

Barbie was bringing Ginny, dressed in her best, down the stairs, and Gladys passed them on the run, going up.

"Don't we look pretty?" She saw that Barbie was dressed too. Levy was in the bathroom, clearing away equipment.

"Oh, Gar . . ." She paused on the flight to her room. "I—Dr. Spinelli was just telling me about you, about this afternoon. I never even asked you before. I just couldn't think about anything but Ginny, and

"Of course not." He dismissed the subject. "You want to get in here? Are they waiting for you?"

"I'll go change my dress while you finish. The car's not here yet." She had to hurry. "I seem to owe you a whole new set of thanks, Gar. I don't think I've even realized, half the time, how much you were doing. You just keep . . . stepping in, when we need you. But

"Has it occurred to you that you very likely saved my life when you took me in here?"

"I? That's nonsense! What I wanted to say was, Dr. Spinelli says he's going to try and bring back some stuff for you. I don't know just what it is, but he also said what you need most is rest. All this time you've been doing everything for us, and I just wanted you to know that it won't be that way any more. If there's anything any of us can do—"

"You may get your chance, but I'm not that sick yet." It was the first time she had seen him really embarrassed. "Now go ahead and get dressed. I'll be out of here in a minute."

But when she got downstairs there was a new problem to face. Barbara had made up her mind she was going along. For just a moment Gladys hesitated. Then she remembered the mysterious "conditions" Spinelli had referred to. "*It won't be pleasant.*" And things had been too bad there for Levy to stay.

"No," she said firmly, and the battle was joined. That was how Ginny heard the word "hospital" and found out where she was going.

"I don't want to go to the hospital."

"But, baby, you're not going to stay."

"I don't want to go to the hospital. I won't go to the hospital."

She sat down on the floor, spread her hands flat on the rug as if she could cling to the hairs of the nap, and repeated her de-fiance.

"Darling," Gladys explained patiently, "we're going to take a ride there with the doctor and come right back. We're not

But Ginny had found a single sentence that perfectly expressed her feelings, and stuck to it. She stopped repeating it only to try the effects of an occasional sob. They tried ignoring her, and for a while it seemed as if it was going to work. Ginny was tired, after all, and within a few minutes she had almost fallen asleep, had actually dozed off, only to come awake, screaming and kicking, when Gladys tried to pick her up. The noise brought Veda out of her room, bundled in a bathrobe, pale and frightened.

She tried her hand, too, but her "No nonsense!" attitude had no more effect on Ginny than Gladys' explanations or Barbie's prom-ises. Eventually, under the doctor's stern injunctions, she went back to bed, leaving Ginny still in possession of the floor.

"Not gonna go. Not gonna go."

In the ensuing hour the little girl was alternately coaxed, threat-ened, ignored, patted, pacified, and pulled at. But when the car came she still clearly had no intention of going anywhere.

Spinelli solved the problem then by simply wading in and picking her up, bodily. With his heavy suit on, he could afford to ignore nails, teeth, and shoes. He dumped her unceremoniously in the car, and Gladys followed meekly. Barbie had lost all interest in arguing. She watched them go and made no effort to push her plea again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Nightmare rode with them through the empty streets in the speeding car. Every familiar pattern of the suburban night was gone. There were no late cars coming back from town, no

lonely men out walking in the night, no hastily dressed women pulling on the leashes of their dogs.

Throughout the five-mile drive ,there was nothing to stop the car, hardly anything to slow it down. The headlights pushed a golden fan ahead, to underscore the darkness all around, picking out blind street lamps and dead traffic lights in their glare. The only signs of life they passed were squad cars and trucks parked here and there on neighborhood patrols. And when they hit the highway, even the trucks were gone.

The noise of the motor made a roaring world of its own inside the car, and the only other sound in the night was the steady wailing of the terrified child.

It was a nightmare from which they woke only to face the white-lighted horror of the hospital. And this horror was not a dream; this was such reality as Gladys had never known before. The sight, the sound, and above all, the smell, of pain and fear, not hidden discreetly behind closed doors, not closed away in back of neatly folded screens, not quieted by starched, white, rubber-soled nurses, not, in any way, the civilized sadness of a hospital.

This was pain on parade, fear on exhibition. All doors stood open, so tired nurses and doctors could hoard what energy they had. Basins and bedpans stood by the beds; no one had time to fetch and carry. Inside each room the floor was crowded

with cots, begged, borrowed, improvised from stretchers and wooden blocks. And in the heart of the building, away from the traffic of the out-side doors, mattresses lined the floor along the corridor walls. They passed a wagon piled high with dirty dishes outside a ward; a little farther on, an attendant in rumpled khaki coveralls was serving tea to corridor patients. Each one in turn held up a cup or glass, or a small basin, to be filled from a soup ladle out of the bucket she wheeled along.

A young man with a bandage on his head got up and walked along beside her, picking up the cups of those too weak to sit. After a little way the attendant spoke to him, shaking her head, and he went back to lie down on his mattress. There was a small crimsonspot on his bandage. A middle-aged woman with one arm in a sling took his place. She wore a torn sweater over the cotton oper-ating gown the hospital had given her. The flapping of the gown on her legs annoyed her, and she draped it to one side with her good arm, then looped the long end over her sling to keep it out of the way.

They reached the children's section by walking through endless corridors and climbing interminable stairs. The elevators were not running, whether for lack of power or personnel, they did not know.

Here bigger rooms and smaller beds made overcrowding less of a problem. The rooms were lined with rows of cots which Gladys recognized as standard nursery school equipment. Different-colored canvas and different types of legs marked their varied origins. She pointed out to Ginny the familiar square green legs and the yellow canvas of the cots at Burl's, but the little girl wouldn't look.

Again Gladys tried to explain to her that she would not have to stay. Ginny only shook her head wisely, refusing to be fooled. She had long ago stopped crying, but ever since they entered the harshly lit white corridors she had been using her own legs and her mother's eyes to walk with. Her two hands clung fiercely to Gladys' skirt, and her head was turned in toward its folds. She would look up only when they were ascending the stairs, where the lights were dimmer, and there were no frightenin; rows of cots and mattresses.

Now, when her mother's interest in the cots informed her they had reached the children's section, she still refused to show any interest in her surroundings. But when the doctor, looking down at the disheveled curls, remarked kindly, "We're almost there—just around the corner," she responded immediately.

With a howl of protest she flung herself away from Gladys and ran back to the head of the stairs. Too tired and confused to attempt an escape by descent, she seized the doorknob and clung with all her might.

"I won't go!" she shrieked, and the noise echoed down the corridor. "I won't! I won't go!"

"Ginny!" Gladys swept down the corridor after the child. "Ginny, you ab-so-lute-ly-have-to-keep-quiet! There are children sleeping —sick children. Now you behave yourself. If you don't want to get well, *they do. Now* stop it, once and for all!"

To her complete surprise, the shrieking stopped. Gladys seized the opportunity. "Get your hands off that knob," she commanded, "and walk down this corridor like a lady. I'm sick and tired of your nonsense."

Meekly the child did as she was told. And belatedly Gladys un-derstood. Every

effort they had made, in the house and on the way, had been with the consciousness of Ginny's trouble in their minds. Now for the first time she had gotten angry enough to forget to be sorry for the little girl—and Ginny had promptly stopped being sorry for herself.

They went around the bend in the corridor, down to a little room labeled "Dispensary."

"If you wait right here"—Spinelli pointed to a bench—"I'll be right out." He knocked on the door and entered without waiting for a reply. Gladys and Ginny sat down on the bench in silence and stayed that way. Determinedly Gladys controlled an impulse to pet the little girl, to apologize to her. Her hand kept trying to move that way, and she kept pulling it back. But the effort was worth while. After minutes of utter silence a little voice whispered, "Mommy?"

"Yes?" She tried to make it sound still annoyed.

"Mommy, will I really not have to stay? Can *I really* go home again?"

"Of course you can, Ginny. I told you so over and over again."

"Mommy." The little voice was honeyed with an appeal Gladys recognized only too well. Ginny had learned the art of successful apology early, but Gladys never had been able to resist the sweet contriteness of the tone. She looked down and allowed herself a very small smile.

"What?"

"Mommy, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was bad."

"All right, baby." She squeezed the small hand that wriggledinto hers. "Now forget it and behave yourself." The poor tyke. *She's too little. It isn't fair!*

Promptly Ginny dropped her head in her mother's lap, and the tears began to flow afresh, more quietly this time, but no less fluently.

"Ginny, I said *stop it!"*

"Will you come in now?" A nurse, this one in crumpled white, opened the dispensary door.

Gladys stood up and prayed that Ginny would follow without more emotion. When she looked she found the cheeks still wet, but the eyes were dry and, miraculously, alert.

"What's that?"

"That's a very smart machine," the nurse told her. "It knows all about everybody who sits in that chair, and we're going to sit you in that chair, and then we'll know all about you without asking you anything at all."

Gladys braced herself for the resistance and watched her daugh-ter walk over, examine the chair, and announce happily, "You don't have to sit me in it. I can sit in it myself." She scrambled up promptly, and the nurse moved to a switch on the wall and threw a lever. Nothing happened but a gentle humming. Then lights began to flash on the machine. The nurse watched closely, at the same time guiding a piece of tape through a gadget near her side, with one hand, and with the other moving a small lever. Curiously Gladys followed the connections to the lever with her eye and finally located a small glass-tipped tube on the big machine that kept moving in response to the nurse's motions.

Abruptly the nurse switched it off, pulled out the tape, and studied it briefly.

"Pete."

Dr. Spinelli came through a door in the side wall, and the small incident shook Gladys more than anything else. You read about floods and earthquakes and emergencies. You heard of overcrowded hospitals, saw newsreels of corridors like the one outside, but one of the unchangeable things in life, somehow, was that a nurse never,

never called a doctor by anything but his title in front of a patient. It was such a little thing, but it told so much more than the soiled uniform, the linenless mattresses, the dirty dishes, or the tired lines on the nurse's face. Gladys remembered the woman's unhurried patience, explaining the machine to Ginny, and marveled at it.

"I think the photoindicator would be a good idea." She showed the doctor the tape, and he examined the little punches on it care-fully. "Oh, you haven't used these much, have you? There's a chart someplace." She found it under a pile of discarded tape, a heavy cardboard intricately diagrammed; she fitted the tape across it pre-cisely and handed it back to him. This time he looked it over swiftly and nodded.

"Looks that way. Come on, Ginny, we're going to take some pictures of you." He picked up his helmet and the nurse helped him fasten it back onto his suit.

Docilely the child jumped down from the chair, cast one dubious glance at Gladys, and took a step forward.

"Like at the dentist?" She didn't like the idea of the helmet. "Same general idea, only more so." He had the visor working now.

She decided in favor of it, and followed him through another door in the opposite wall. Gladys started to get up, but the nurse motioned her back.

"Sorry," she said briefly, "you can't go in there."

"But why? What are they going to do?"

"Just another test." She explained no more.

Gladys went back to her seat. *She didn't have to say it that way!* She watched angrily while the nurse looked around, decided there was nothing that had to be done immediately, and sat down. Scien-tifically and deliberately the woman relaxed in the straight white chair, shifting her position to rest each weary muscle separately, and closing her eyes for a brief, blessed moment of escape from the white light overhead. Gladys' protest died unspoken. *"Pete,"* she remembered, and marveled again at the sustained cheerfulnesswith which the nurse had treated Ginny. She had to let go some-time.

"I *am* sorry."

She hadn't meant to say it out loud. The nurse's eyes opened to regard her with embarrassing surprise. Then the eyes softened and warmed, and she saw that the woman understood what had impelled the remark. They smiled at each other, and Gladys had an impulse to thank her for being so nice to Ginny, but she left it unsaid. It wasn't necessary.

The girl closed her eyes again, and Gladys sat there, studying her. *"Pete,"* she thought again, and tried to imagine the nurse, fresh and untired, dressed up, out on a date with the strange young man who was so sober and so unexpectedly warm. She smiled inside now, thinking how Barbie's new-found love would have flared into jealousy.

The door opened, and Ginny came out, chattering and blinking at the strong light.

Gladys caught a glimpse of a screen and a bulky machine in a darkened room, and then the door was closed again.

"If you'll wait just a few minutes," Spinelli told Gladys, "I'll collect the stuff we need." The nurse came to help him with the helmet, but he shook his head.

"Never mind, Jan." He was scribbling something on a pad of paper. "I won't be here much longer." He tore off the page he'd written on. "Could you do me a favor? Put this through to Supply for me?"

She took the sheet, glanced at it, and looked up, puzzled.

"I wouldn't ask you," he apologized, "but I've got to talk to old man Kallen before I go, and I have to get out fast." He looked significantly at Ginny, and Gladys began herding the child toward the door.

"That's okay. But all this . . ." Gladys had the door almost closed; the nurse must have thought she couldn't hear. "What are you putting over, Pete? I don't get it."

"Tell you later, kid. It's important, that's all." Gladys was too curious to feel guilty about eavesdropping. "They *need* this stuff."

The nurse wasn't convinced. "What the hell do you think I want it for?" There was silence for a second, a kind of whispering silence, and then Spincl;i's voice again. "For God's sake, keep it under your hat. That's what I have to see the old man about. Now be a good girl and see how fast you can make them move down there."

"Right." All the tiredness had gone out of her voice. Gladys heard footsteps and moved unhurriedly away from the door toward the bench, once more aware of what Ginny was telling her.

"Mommy, he said they were my *bones,* but they didn't look like bones. It was all dark, and shadows . . ."

Gladys tried to keep her mind on Ginny's prattle, but she kept thinking about the conversation she had overheard. What was it all about? What was wrong with the supplies he wanted? Why did he have to talk to "the old man"? Who was that?

Peter Spinelli was so young, so terribly young, to carry the re-sponsibility that had been suddenly thrust upon him. For just a moment Gladys felt panic, wondering if he knew what he was doing, whether Ginny was safe in his care.

But what can I do? What else can I possibly do? If she only knew more about it . . . You could tell when a doctor was no good if your child had measles or pimples or a rash. You knew something about those things. But how could you tell now? What was he planning anyhow?

"Lady, do ya know where the toilet is? I gotta go to the toilet, an' I .can't find it."

The little boy's voice reached her first. When she saw him she was s'm eked into silence. She could only shake her head, to show she didn't know. Ginny was equally silent—until the child stretched his hand out from under the rolled-up sleeve of the man's shirt he was wearing.

"Pretty," he said. "So pretty," and reached for the furry muff that dangled from Ginny's coat sleeve.

"Mommy!" It was a whisper, and it was a scream. "Don't let him touch me. Don't, don't! Mommy!"

Bandages covered the boy's arm, but on the active hands theycouldn't stay in place. Blood and pus ran from a visible open sore; inside, his sleeve the bandage was stained with the accumulation from others unseen. His hair wasn't shaved off, she

realized then. There just wasn't any. And there was something wrong with his face, something that made him look as much younger than his four years as the bald pate made him look older. She placed it at last. No eyebrows. None at all.

Ginny was drawing in close to her, shrinking away from the child's touch.

"Are you her mama?" He ignored Ginny. "She's a baby. She acts like a baby. You seen my mama any place?"

"I am not a baby. You're dirty. Go away."

"Shush, Ginny. Would you like me to find the nurse for you?" she appealed to the little boy.

"No, I want my mama. Do you know where the toilet is? I gotta go real bad."

"You wait a minute," she told him. "I'll get the nurse." "I don't want any old nurse. I want

"Don't go away. Mommy, don't *go away!"*

"I " She didn't want to leave Ginny alone with the little boy, not with that open sore, not with . . .

She sat down again. The door opened, and the doctor came out. "Hey! What're you doing out of bed?" He surveyed the child. "Which room are you in? Where's your bed?"

But the little boy was no longer there. He paused just long enough to take in the bulky suit the doctor wore and skittered away down the corridor for dear life.

Around the corner he stopped and peered back, showing only enough of himself to be able to see.

"Can't catch me," he shouted defiantly. "Bogeyman can't catch me!" Then he was off again.

When they went down the stairs the nurse was following the youngster's path of flight down the hall. Ginny was sobbing un-controllably, and they made no effort to stop her. They had to wait again, down in the main hall, while Spinelli collected an armload of

apparatus, the things he had asked the nurse to order for him. Then they were outside, and the empty dark that had **been so frightening** before was a blessed relief.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The door flew open while they were still coining up the walk in front of the house, and a breathless Barbic ran out to meet them. As soon as they were inside, with the door shut behind them, Gar Levy appeared on the stairs and came down to join them.

"How'd it go?"

"About what we thought," Spinelli told him briefly. "I got every-thing we needed."

So that was it, Gladys thought. Something for him.

"You find the trouble?" Levy asked.

"Um-hmh." He nodded, and didn't explain. Mystery upon mys-tery. Why did they have to talk in code? Maybe when Ginny wasn't there . . .

She hung up coats in the hall closet and turned to find the doctor stripping out of his big suit again, with Barbie's help.

"Can I sit on your lap?" Ginny approached the older man. "That's what I've got one for," he admitted. "How did you like your trip?"

She shook her head vigorously, made what she fancied to be a horrible face, and confessed, "They took pictures. It was dark. He said it was a picture of my bones. But it was all dark. It didn't look like bones." She snuggled into the warmth of his lap, and he looked up at Spinelli questioningly. The doctor answered with a nod, and Levy pursed his lips.

1 wish I knew what was going on!

"It was nice riding in the car." Ginny sat up now. "It went fast--wheeee—all the way home."

"You must be all tired out."

"N9pe." She snuggled down again with a sigh of contentment. "Your lap is almost as nice as my daddy's. Do you know my daddy? Where is he?"

"Doctor," Gladys asked hastily, "should she go to bed now, or . . . what?"

"Not just yet," he said thoughtfully. "I think we better take agglutinization samples first," he told Levy, "and we can arrange everything else while they wait." The older man nodded agreement. "For transfusions," Spinelli explained to Gladys, "to test blood types."

Transfusions!

"Is there anything I should do?"

"I don't think so. We'll need boiling water of course."

"What for?" Ginny had been following the conversation as well as she could. Now she was suspicious.

"To wash things in," Gar told her. "You wouldn't want to take any medicine from a dirty spoon, would you?"

"I don't want to take any medicine."

She's so tired, Gladys thought. This was going to be a struggle. But the teacher was laughing, as if the child had said something outrageously funny, and Ginny, finally convinced, joined him. The subject of medicine was, temporarily at least, disposed of.

"I'll start the water," Barbie offered. "Would you like me to make some coffee, too, Mother?"

"Why, yes, I guess we could use it." Gladys quelled her own restlessness and let the girl go out alone. Barbie wanted to be efficient and helpful while the doctor was around to sec it. There would be plenty for her to do later, Gladys realized.

Barbara was back to keep Ginny entertained, too, while the men set up their bathroom laboratory again. Surprisingly quickly the young doctor was coming around with alcohol, cotton, and hypo-dermic needle, collecting neat little samples of blood from each of them. Barbie proudly announced that it wasn't necessary to take hers, because she knew her type, but Spinelli explained that that wouldn't help if they didn't know Ginny's.

"I'm AB," she told him gratuitously.

"Oh." He finished swabbing her arm but didn't stick the needle in. "Are you sure?"

"That's what the school doctor said when they tested us there." "Well . . ." He hesitated. "We might as well take a sample any

way. In case you made a—Ginny's might be the same anyhow." "What's wrong with AB?" She offered her arm. "Why wouldn't

you take– "

"AB's pretty rare," he explained, "and it means you can't give blood to anybody except another **AB. Do** you know what your husband's type is, Mrs. Mitchell? If he was in the last war it must have been on his dog tag."

"B," she answered automatically, without having to think about it. She remembered the dog tag, she could see it around his neck. She hadn't thought about Jon for a long time. How long? Never mind how long. This was no time to start. She could see the metal chain, with the flat coin at the end, swinging forward when he leaned over the sink in the flat near the camp . . . *Stop it!*

The doctor started upstairs with his collection of tubes. **"Oh,** Mrs. Mitchell, I think you could get Ginny undressed now. Levy's fixing up some stuff for her. It ought to be ready any minute."

"What is it, Mommy? What's gonna be ready? What is it?"

"Just some things to keep you from getting sick. Let's go up and get into your pajamas, so you'll be all ready to go to bed after-wards."

"I'm not sick," Ginny insisted. "Not sleepy either." But she came along docilely. She was unnaturally quiet while Gladys took her clothes off, then, with her pajama half on, she suddenly twisted around to face her mother.

"Mommy?"

The child was terrified again.

"What is it, baby?"

"Is it—is the medicine—to keep me from being sick like that boy? So I won't get like him?"

She was glad enough to escape when Spinelli remembered theyhad no blood sample from Veda, and asked Gladys to wake her. She turned Ginny and Ginny's difficult questions over to Barbara and went downstairs to knock on the door of the little room.

Veda wouldn't wake up, and she finally had to try the door. Surprisingly it was unlocked. But where tapping had failed to waken her, the lightest footstep brought her bolt upright imme-diately.

"What is it, Missus Mitchell? Is Ginny bad?" She was reaching for the robe on the chair beside her when Gladys turned on the light, trying to wrap it around herself under the blanket.

"Ginny's all right, and you lie down," Gladys told her promptly. "Go on, now. The doctor said you weren't to get up." She stopped talking and refused to say any more until the woman put the robo away and lay back under the covers again. "Dr. Spinelli wants to take a sample of your blood," she explained. "He's taking them from all of us, to find out who can give transfusions to Ginny. But he said you're not to get out of bed. He's

"Transfusions?" Veda stared at her in horror. "Ginny didn't look near that sick. She take a turn for the worse?" She was reach-ing for the robe.

"Put that back and lie down. She's no worse than she was. That's just what they do for this kind of sickness. Please, Veda, the doctor specially said you shouldn't get up. You've got to take care of your-self. I can't have *you* sick too."

That did it. Veda lay back again, frowning. "But how's he goin' to take that sample? You jest now said he had to have some of my blood."

"Yes, I did." Gladys tried to sound firm. "But he's coming right down here as soon as I tell him you're ready, and you don't have to budge out of bed."

"No'm. I'd ruther get up."

"Well, he ought to know what he's doing. He says you should stay in bed. Now for heaven's sake, Veda, don't be foolish. All you have to do is stick an arm out. I'm going to get him, and I want to find you right where you are when I get back." She turned and left

before there could be any argument, but when she got back with the doctor she found Veda had struggled into the robe while she was gone. True enough, she was in bed, but sitting up, and bundled up to her ears. Gladys refrained from comment and wisely did not try to leave the room till the doctor was done. Then she let him go out first and did not close the door till she had given Veda a last warning about staying put.

"We don't need you for anything now, but we probably will tomorrow," she pointed out. "You go back to sleep. I can always come and get you if anything happens."

In the living room she found the doctor waiting for her. There was time now to ask some of the questions she'd been saving up.

"You see, we can't really treat the disease at all," he told her. "There's no way to deactivate an ionized cell. But if we treat the symptoms, just help the body through the worst of it, the damaged cells are eventually replaced, and the patient is all right again. There are several different drugs that are useful. I'm leaving some dramamine in case she gets nauseous again, and Gar has some other stuff."

He rattled off a series of things, most of which, she gathered, affected the blood in some way, and none of which were familiar, except one called toluidine. "That was on the information sheet, wasn't it?" she asked.

"That's right. Gar has all the stuff, and I've given him complete instructions. If I had more time I'd rather show you everything myself, but Gar's familiar with the techniques, and I think it's better to space the treatments—give each drug a little while to work before we shoot her full of a new one. She should get regular doses, and he has it all written down. You don't have to worry about that part of it at all right now."

"Will—will she be very sick? How long does it take?"

"It's hard to answer either one. They're really the same question. It'll take months before she's completely healed—before her hair grows back and her blood count is entirely normal. But how long it will take her to start recovering, or how sick she'll get . . . it'sdifferent with everybody. So far the disease seems to be taking a rapid course, and she hasn't shown much evidence of being affected by it. But when the blood count drops this way—well, we just don't know."

"You said, till her hair grows back. Is it—that is, will it all come out? Like that little boy, the one in the hospital?" She was being as foolish as Ginny.

"No telling." He smiled slightly. "If that was all we had to worry about . . . As a matter of fact," he went on briskly, "I'm not even trying to do anything about that. I'm worried about her teeth. The hair'll grow back by itself when she gets better. The teeth—I don't know. It doesn't matter about these first ones coming out, but I wish I knew what would happen to the second teeth. Well, a good dentist can worry about

that later on. I don't know anything to do about it right now."

"You mean, that tooth that came out . . . That's part of it too?" She was so proud!

"Oh, didn't you know? I guess that wasn't on the information sheet. It's usually a much later symptom. Anyhow, the thing we have to concentrate on is the blood. That's where the greatest dam-age occurs, especially in the type of disease she's got."

"What type? What's the difference?" There's so much I don't know.

"That's a tough one," he said. "The diagnosis is inhalation of a fission product, with an alpha emitter lodged in the bones. In plain English, that means she breathed in some particles resulting from the explosion of the bomb, and that the particles were deposited inside her body, in her bone marrow. They're still there, and until they burn themselves out there's no way of getting rid of them. What complicates things is that we don't even know what isotope it is. It doesn't behave like anything I know. It might not even be a uranium derivative, although God knows what else . . . Anyhow, we'll be able to find that out later on.

"Meanwhile, at least we know what it's doing. An alpha emitter lodged in the bone destroys the marrow and stops production of

blood cells. Later on we may have to worry about anemia; that's not serious yet, and we might be able to forestall it with liver extract. I'm leaving some of that too. But the white-cell count is dangerously low right now. The first thing for that is transfusion; after that the stuff I'm leaving will help too. I'll give one transfusion before I go, and they should be repeated regularly—say, every ten or twelve hours. You could give her one tomorrow morning, and another before bedtime, and after that it would be regularly twice a day. Got everything clear now?"

"Practically nothing," she admitted, "but I guess Dr. Levy can explain most of it later on, when there's more time."

He had already risen from his chair, impatient to get started.

"Wait a minute," she asked. "There's just one thing I've got to understand now. Do you mean I'm supposed to give her trans-fusions?"

Why should he look so surprised?

"Well, of course," he said, "some of them. Unless your type's not right. That's what I took the samples for. Levy can't give any, of course; he'll have to get some. I almost forgot I wanted to tell you about that too." He stopped edging toward the stairs and rested his weight against the edge of the table. "You and Barbie and Veda ought to take turns—if everybody's blood's all right, that is. You won't have to give much anyhow. I guess I made it sound like a lot when I said twice a day. After this first one it won't be more than about half a pint for Ginny each time. You could give that much yourself each time for a couple of days and not have it bother you. Unless .. ." A new thought struck him. "Unless there was some reason you thought you shouldn't—the time of month, or anything like that?"

"What? Oh no! I didn't mean . . . It wasn't giving the blood I was worried about, it was giving the *transfusion,* you know, *doing* it. Isn't it awfully delicate?"

His smile was warm again. "Don't worry about that. You have to be careful of course," he explained, "but it's not the major opera-tion it used to be in young Dr. Kildare's day. I'll show you how todo it when I give Ginny hers. And I think I'd better give Gar some, too, before I go. Then, for him, the day after tomorrow would

be soon enough for the next. That is, tomorrow, really—Saturday. It's Friday by now, isn't it?"

"I guess so." She hadn't looked at her watch since just before he came, around midnight. Now the hour hand was almost four.

"Look," he said, "Ginny ought to get some sleep. Let's finish up with her first, and fill in anything you want to know afterwards. I think the samples should be ready by now."

But when he had examined the samples he was less cheerful. Levy explained it to Gladys.

"Barbie was right. She is an AB, or it looks that way. And Ginny isn't. Anyhow, whatever the classifications are, we can't use Barbie's blood at all. But I wouldn't worry. You'll be able to give Ginny all she needs if Veda's doesn't turn out right."

"Mine is all right?"

"Yours is fine. There's really nothing to worry about. I was just thinking about Barbie, though. She's going to feel bad about this. She wants to help so much, and she's got this bee in her bonnet about going to the hospital to help out there."

"Has she been bothering you about that too?"

"It wasn't any bother. She has to talk about things. Then Veda's not in such good shape, and you'll need some rest. If Barbie can't give any blood herself, why don't you put her in charge of the sick-room? Let her do the transfusions and take charge of Ginny's shots and general care? I think it might make her feel more a part of things, and take a load off your shoulders at the same time."

"But—she can't manage all that."

"I thought she was doing some kind of child care. She had a baby sitters' club, didn't she? Something like that. She was forever asking about first aid and such in school. That's why she had her blood tested, I believe. She had some notion of being prepared for emer-gencies. Why shouldn't she be able to handle it?"

"Well, naturally she can help. But I don't think she ought to do

anything as complicated as a blood transfusion. She just isn't old enough for that kind of responsibility!"

"I was thinking just the other way round," he urged. "Let her take the responsibility and *I'll* do the helping, if there's anything too difficult for her."

Gladys shook her head doubtfully.

"You ready now, Mrs. Mitchell?" the doctor asked. "We can give her the transfusion and let her go to sleep. Looks like you're elected as donor in chief."

"Think it over." Levy put in a last word.

"All right." She let herself be led away.

The transfusion itself turned out to be simpler than she had imagined possible. The doctor drained blood out of her arm exactly as he had done before for the sample, with the difference that he had her lie down beforehand, and that it flowed into a larger con-tainer, in which a small amount of some fluid had already been . placed. When he had as much as he wanted he changed the needle and rubber tubing on the jar and took the apparatus into Ginny's room.

"Maybe you'd like to hold her on your lap, Mrs. Mitchell?"

Ginny let the doctor take her arm and wipe it off, and watched him suspiciously while he inserted the needle and taped it down. Explaining each step carefully, he

flicked a valve, and the blood began, very slowly, to drain from the upended jar. Ginny squirmed a little and giggled.

"It tickles," she announced when the doctor checked the tape to make sure her squirming had not dislodged it.

Then it was done, and Ginny had only to be tucked into bed, with a scrap of adhesive on her arm, to show where life had flowed in. It seemed a much more serious matter that Pallo had mysteri-ously disappeared. Gladys hunted under the bed and all over the room, but the horse had vanished. Ginny called his name in vain, decided he had run away because she hadn't taken him along to the hospital, and dropped off promptly into a deep normal sleep.

"You mean that's all there is to it?" Gladys demanded when she

was out in the hall again. "I was so worried about giving transfu-sions: It seemed so—technical."

"The only part that's even a little delicate is getting the needle in just right. And on a child that's easy, as long as you have small needles. The veins are so easy to see." The doctor was doing mysterious things again, with a little tube of blood, in the bathroom lab. He put it down and turned to Levy. "Looks like Veda's a type 0, too, so you'll be okay. She ought to be able to spare some by Saturday afternoon, if she takes it easy till then. You don't think she'll have any objections, do you, Mrs. Mitchell? She was very anxious to give some to Ginny, I know, but yours is all right for Ginny, and Veda seems to be the only one who can give anything to Gar—except me, and I don't know when I'll be around."

"No, I'm sure she won't mind." Now it began to penetrate why he had been so upset about the failure of Barbie's sample. He'd been worried about Levy, not Ginny. She was so wrapped up in her own problem, she kept forgetting . . .

"I'm sure she won't," Gladys repeated. "She's—almost as de-voted to him as we are."

"While we're on the subject of admiring me," Gar broke in, "remember what I was talking about before? I was trying to con-vince Gladys," he told Spinelli, "that we should make Barbie nurse in chief. I think she could handle the techniques all right, don't you?"

"That's a good idea." He kept working while he talked, sterilizing the jar he had used for Ginny's transfusion. "She can do it all right," he added easily. "Might get her mind off the hospital, too. This place is rapidly turning into a hospital annex anyway."

He was silent a moment, concentrating on the work in his hands. "You were right about conditions there," he went on to Levy. "But I don't know what else we could have expected, the way they were piling them in there the first few hours."

"Do you really think she can do it, Doctor?" Gladys asked. "She's so young. I'd hate to have anything go wrong."

"She's not that young. She's good with her hands. And she can

certainly manage both patients. She's got this one"—he pointed to Levy—"wrapped around her manicured toenail." The two men smiled at each other, with an understanding that left Gladys out. How could they be so cheerful, at this hour of the morning, with horrors just past still in mind, and the future holding nothing but fear?

"Anyhow, we can find out," the doctor finished. "Let her prac-tice on the boss over here, tonight, and I'll be around to see how she does."

"Anybody want that coffee?" Barbie's voice floated up the stairs.

"Do you need more proof?" The doctor grinned at Gladys. "The girl's not only competent—she's clairvoyant." He put the jar care-fully into the boiling water.

"Not anybody!" he called down. "Everybody!"

pursuit

He was very thirsty. He wasn't hungry any more, and his head had stopped hurting a long time ago, but he was afraid to drink from pools, and afraid to go into a house. He'd had a drink somewhere, but he didn't re-member when. He was very thirsty.

It didn't matter, because he was almost home. He knew he could wait for a drink till he got there. The road he was on looked like home. It was pretty white gravel, and now that the sun was coming up the lawns were green on either side.

He had to find someplace to hide. It was getting too light, and now he'd come this far, he couldn't take chances. He was too tired to dodge, and being so thirsty made him dizzy. He didn't always see people coming soon enough.

He'd have to hide, and he didn't want to. He was so close now, he didn't want to wait another day to get home.

"Halt!"

His eyes searched the road ahead, the trees, the lawns, the houses. He needed someplace to hide, to dodge.

"Halt!"

There was someplace up ahead. He began running.

"Halt or I'll shoot!"

He couldn't stop running. A hot poker went through his shoulder. There was a terrifying loud noise, and he tripped and fell.

He lay still. A man's boot nudged him, but he didn't move. The man walked away and said something to another man. He didn't move for a long time, until he was sure the men were gone. Even then he was afraid to stand up. He crawled forward slowly, not caring about the dampness of the ground or the gravelly stones.

TWENTY-NINE

"What about those—sores?" Gladys asked.

"Well . . ."

In the pause while the doctor considered his answer they all heard distinctly the sound of the shot outside. It was no longer a novelty, nor even uncommon, but Gladys could not get used to it.

"I know they look awful." Peter Spinelli sipped his coffee and tried to ignore the interruption. "Gar is going to be a gruesome sight in another week or so, unless this stuff I'm giving him takes

hold faster than it has any reason to. You were thinking about that kid in thc hospital?"

Gladys nodded. All night her voice had been playing tricks on her; now she only used it when she had to.

"Well, if it's any comfort, Gar's won't look so bad, for the simple reason that they'll be properly cared for. You've treated pus sores before, haven't you? This is just more of them all at once. It's an inevitable result of the drop in the white-cell count. There just isn't any way for the body to fight off minor infections. As far as Ginny's concerned . . . I don't know. We haven't had too much experience with the kind of radiations she got, and if they haven't shown up yet . . . I just don't know."

He fell silent, and they all waited for him to go on.

"I keep saying that, don't 1? `I don't know.' I wish there was some other answer. You just *fix* your mind firmly on the fact that those repulsive red blotches are unimportant secondary symptoms. They only become important if they're not kept clean. In thc hos-pital, without enough nurses, that's a problem—particularly with the youngsters, who don't keep their bandages in place and won't lie still. But here . . . You might have to lance one occasionally. Do you know how to do that?"

Gladys nodded again. "I think so," she added.

"Just like an ordinary boil," he told her. "Aside from that, just keep them clean—by which I mean antisepticaily clean, not just free from dirt. And I think I brought some salve in with the other stuff, but I'm not sure."

"We have some penicillin ointment," Barbie put in, "from when I had acne." Even in the middle of the more important conversa-tions, Gladys was startled at Barbara's casual reference to a for-bidden *topic—and* in front of the attractive young doctor.

"That should be all right if it's still good," he said. "Or anything else you'd use for a pus pimple or a boil."

"You keep talking about boils." Gladys essayed a full sentence. "Do you think Job got irradiated in the whirlwind?"

The gale of laughter that greeted the small joke was out of all

proportion. It must have covered the first knock on the door, be-cause when it died down they heard a steady determined banging from in front.

"Ten past five," Barbie announced. "Who in the world?"

But Gladys knew. "It's Jim Turner," she told them. "He—" It seemed very funny, and she had to control an impulse to giggle before she finished. "He has seats for us on the *priority* train this morning. He's going to be very annoyed that we can't come." She got up.

"I better get up to my castle in the air." Levy rose with her. "You stay here, Mr. Carney," the doctor told him. "Let's see. Can you drive a car?"

"Haven't driven one for years, but I used to."

"All right, you're my driver, if anything comes up. You better go let him in, Mrs. Mitchell." The thumping had started again. "Keep him in front if you can. I'll join you if I can think of anything to say that might help. But frankly, I think you can handle Turner better than I can."

The trip to the front door was like walking in a dream. From time to time she would look around and discover she had traversed five or six feet after all; each time it was a fresh surprise.

The banging stopped while she was making the long passage through the front hall. She didn't quite dare to hope that he had gone away. When she opened the door he had his gloved fist raised to knock again.

"Well now, I'm glad to see *you,"* he boomed. "Couldn't see a light on anywheres

in the front of the house, and I didn't know if your kid was home sleeping or in the hospital or what. You look like they put you through the wringer tonight all right. What happened?"

One thing about Jim Turner, she thought, I don't have to talk. She didn't answer, and he went right on.

"They take her in to the hospital yet?" he asked.

Gladys shook her head.

"Well, I can see just to look at you it wasn't no false alarm.

What did the kid say? I called in to him right after I saw you, around eleven. Told the clerk there to get him a relief and let him come right over here. You better sit down, Gladys. You look beat."

He took her arm and led her to the armchair, almost pushed her down into it.

"Now you take it easy," he said, "an' I'll get everything cleared up. But first you got to tell me what the Doc said. I been looking all over for him, but he never got back to headquarters tonight, so I don't know what happened at all."

"Ginny's sick," she said. "We took her to the hospital and found out what it is." Even that much was an effort.

"Well now, I know she's sick, Gladys, but you said just before she didn't go to the hospital."

"No, I meant they didn't—we brought her back."

"Now that don't make sense. You sure she's sick?"

She was too tired to be indignant. Bit by bit, in half sentences, and mostly in small corrections of his statements, she told him most of the story.

"I wish I knew where the kid got to," he said finally. "I don't know what he wanted to bring her back home for. Now we got to get a truck and take her in again. Maybe I can get a car; that would be quicker. That train goes at six-thirty. There ain't too much time."

"But I can't "

"You can make it," he assured her. "I can get a car here in ten minutes, if I have to, and we can get her all settled at the hospital in plenty of time. You could even go along if you want to, and get back in time. I'll tell the driver to stick with you."

"You don't understand," she said clearly. Now I have to tell him. Spinelli . . . no hospital . . . no train. She listed the things carefully in her mind.

"You're not worrying about your things, are you?" he asked. "If you're not packed up, don't give it another thought. We'll find you everything you need, and with the place boarded up like it is, you don't have to worry about anybody breaking in."

He was trying to anticipate everything. Why, he's being kind, she thought. It wasn't even fair to be so surprised. He'd been kind all along.

"No," she said firmly, out loud. "I'm tired, and I'm not—I guess I haven't been too clear. It's hard to talk," she explained, and added a smile, apologetically. "Just give me a minute and I'll get it straight," she promised.

He waited, and she went over her mental list again.

"Dr. Spinelli's here," she said, "if you want him. He's been with us all night. That's the first thing." She paused to form the next thought into words, and he filled in the silence.

"I kind of thought he'd be here when he wasn't at headquarters, but then I didn't sec a car out front, so I figured he was gone."

"He sent the car away. He said he'd get another one when he was done." She remembered. How is he going to say Gar's his driver? He must have forgotten, too, about the car. Now she *had* to keep Turner out of the kitchen.

"I got a bone or two to pick with that young man," Turner said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. Upstairs, I guess. Wait a minute. Please."

He had already risen. Now he paused. She pointed to his chair, and he sat down again reluctantly.

"Let me finish, please. I have to tell you. I'm not going. I'm going to stay here. I'm going to keep Ginny home and take care of her. She isn't going to the hospital."

"You can't do that," he explained patiently. "You just can't do it, Gladys. How're you gonna take care of a sick kid without gas or electric? What're you going to do for food? How do you even know the water'll keep running?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything, except I won't send her to that hospital!"

"Now, you're getting too excited, Gladys. You got to calm down. I can see how you wouldn't want to send your little girl away from you, but for her own sake, you got to think where she'll be best off. You can't take care of her

"Where she'll be best off?" At last her voice had come back. "I saw that hospital! If you think I'd let a child of mine

"Now, there's no call to yell at me, Gladys. I told you, you got to calm down. I know just as good as you that hospital's crowded, and things ain't all they might be. Maybe if you saw some of the other places you'd realize how good that one is. We had a good outfit in this district. We were all set up, and we kept things run-ning smooth. But you got to understand it won't be that way after tomorrow. The only place around here that we're hanging onto is the hospital. They'll get supplies, and the folks there'll be taken care of."

"I am not going to send my child to that hospital!"

"Gladys, do you think I'd ask you to do anything I wouldn't do myself? I never told you, because I figured you got enough troubles of your own, but I had to send my own wife and baby there, on account of not having anybody to take care of them at home. They didn't even get exposed, but you know Peggy's been laid up a long time. She couldn't take care of herself, and whether I like it or not, she's better off at the hospital. That's true for your kid too."

"You sent Peggy . . . ?" Gladys stared at him incredulously. "That's right. Now you see what I mean."

"Have you *seen* that place?"

"I ain't had the chance to get up there, but I was figuring on going up before I transfer to the camp."

She didn't know what she might have said, or what she could have said, if Spinelli hadn't come in then. For a while she just sat still, not even really listening. The men were arguing about Veda, she realized, and about the hospital.

Then abruptly Turner announced that he had to go. "There's still time for you to make that train, Gladys," he told her, ignoring the doctor. "I can arrange for Ginny to get to the hospital, and you could come down and see her as soon as things get running a little smoother." He wasn't pleading or arguing. He just made the state-ment

and waited for her answer.

Exhausted, she shook her head stubbornly and said nothing.

"You sure now? All right, then, I hope you don't mind me telling you a thing or two before I go. I think you're being a damn fool, if you'll pardon my saying so, to listen to this kid. Neither one of you has any idea what's going on in this country. You hear what it says on the radio, and you think everything's hunky-dory. Well, it ain't. Maybe you don't think much of the way we run that hospital," he told Spinelli, "but wait till we're not here, and see how the doctors do it!

"And if *you* think sending Peggy up there was so had"—he turned back to Gladys—"wait till you get a taste of what it'll be like around here when there's no more controls and no more supplies." He headed briskly for the door. "When you come to your senses," he added, "maybe when you get some sleep"—he softened it a little—"there'll still be patrols around here till Saturday night. Any one of 'em can fix you up with seats on some other train."

He was gone.

The young doctor helped Gladys out of the deep chair. "In my professional opinion," he said gravely, "you need some more coffee."

Gratefully she accepted his arm and went back to the kitchen. She didn't want to talk about Jim Turner. She was glad when he returned to his instructions for Ginny's care, as if there had been no interruption.

"The most important thing is to keep her in bed—aside from the treatments, of course. In a way it would almost be better if she felt worse. Her body needs all the rest it can get. If you have to hold her down by main force, you do it. With three able-bodied adults in the house, that shouldn't be too hard."

"Four," Levy corrected with a meaningful look at Barbie.

"Three," the doctor repeated grimly. "It would be better for *you* if you felt worse too." He turned to Barbara thoughtfully. "A lot of this is going to be up to you," he told her. "Suppose for a start you sec to it that the patients stay in bed—I mean both of them.

Do you think you can keep your kid sister under your thumb, and the boss here too?"

"I'll try," she promised happily..

He studied her eager face and reached a decision. "Your mother is worn out," he added. "And Veda—well, I'll come back to that. But all in all, it kind of leaves you holding the bag for the next day or two. I'd like to show you how to give transfusions. Then you could take care of the most delicate jobs, until your mother and Veda are ready to help."

"I'm all right," Gladys started to protest, but her voice had stopped working right again, and she had to laugh herself at the feeble sound of the statement.

"Do you really think I can do it?" Barbara was starry-eyed.

"I know you can. It only depends on whether *you* believe it."

"I . . ." She hesitated. "I wouldn't want to take a chance on doing anything wrong."

`"You won't have a chance," he assured her. "You can give one to Gar tonight, under my eagle eye. If it goes all right, and I don't see why not, he'll watch you do Ginny's tomorrow. If you feel shaky about it he can do it himself. But he ought to

stay put as much as possible, not even exert himself that much. How about it? You want to try bleeding me now?"

"Come on." Levy pushed his chair back and got up, without giving the girl any time for doubts. "I need my pint of blood."

They were milling around, getting ready to go, but there was something else Gladys wanted to ask about.

"Wait a minute," she pleaded. They were quieter, waiting, and it was easier to get everything clear in her mind. I am so tired. . . . "I was wondering, about what Jim Turner said," she told the doctor. "How *are* we going to manage? We've got food for a week, so we don't have to worry about that right away." She forced her-self to keep talking coherently. "But he said the electricity and the water—what can we do without water?"

"I think that was mostly bluff," Spinelli said slowly. "They can't stop the water. It would be silly to bother, for one thing, and they'llhave to keep it running for the hospital. The electricity might go, though. I don't know . . ."

"i could probably do something about that," Levy said. "We might have to use candles for light, but I have plenty of batteries in the lab at school, that would run any electric equipment you want to use. Or I could rig up something."

Mr. Fix-it! She smiled.

"You," the doctor said again, "will stay in bed and do nothing. My God, man, what do you think you're made of? Impregnated lead? You can tell somebody else where the stuff is, how to get it, and what to do with it. Doctor's orders," he added brusquely. "Is there anything else on your mind?" he asked Gladys.

"Veda," she said. "What about Veda?"

"Oh yes . . . Look." He turned to the others. "You two go upstairs and get things started, will you? I want to talk to Mrs. Mitchell a minute anyhow. As far as Veda's concerned," he went on, "I told you she needs to take it easy a day or two, but there's no special care required. There is one thing that worries me, though. I have a hunch the Security officers are going to be here looking for her, either this morning or tomorrow when Turner gets back. He's—a little annoyed at the way I walked out with her. It wouldn't hurt to keep her out of sight until they move their office to tue camp. Maybe Gar could share his hide-out with her whenever company comes. If you tell them she just walked out on you and disappeared they'll be very ready to believe it, you know."

She tried to smile. Her face was stiff and didn't want to bend.

"What I wanted to tell you," he went on, and she realized the others were gone, "was about Barbie. I hope you don't think I took too much on myself. It just seemed like the best thing to do." He took her arm and began propelling her through the door, toward the living room. She didn't have the energy to question him or to resist.

"After all," he was saying, "I'm supposed to be the doctor here. You know, a couple of days ago, I wouldn't have had the nerve to take over like that. The very idea of telling Gar Levy what to do!"

They were in the living room, and he steered her to the couch. "But these last few days—well, I'm not the only one. Barbie's been growing up too. You have to realize that. Wasn't there a quilt around here?" he broke off, looking for it.

"I'm not trying to make you go to bed," he explained, wrapping it around her legs,

"because I know it wouldn't do any good. But if you don't get some rest you'll be on the sick list too."

Under his warmth she relaxed. What *was* it about that smile?

"Doctor," she asked dreamily, "why are you doing all this? You don't have to take so much trouble. There are other people . . . so many people . . ." She thought of the hospital, and a shudder ran through her.

"Why? I don't know." He smiled at the recurrent phrase, but he wasn't joking now. She tried to concentrate on what he said, because it mattered.

"Partly because you took Gar Levy in. Maybe mostly because of that. You don't know what that means to me. I've been going around with Turner from house to house, going back to head-quarters, calming hysterics, taking urine samples, making blood tests, giving first aid—and all the time knowing it's come at last—the whole bloody mess is really here, and we've all just been sitting oa our backsides all this time, letting it come. All of us except people like Turner, that is. *They* were ready—all set to pick up their big sticks and wave them around playing soldier."

He broke off sharply. "I shouldn't be talking this way," he said. "You're tired, and I've got work to do. Gar Levy is a special person to me, that's all. But even if it weren't for him I'd want to help you. That first evening, when we came in here—honestly, I can't remem-ber anything you did or said that should have made any difference."

He half smiled. "That was four days ago. I'm not the same person now. I can't remember what happericd. I do know that I'd had a bellyful of Turner by that time. He went out for a while, looking for someone they spotted in the trees, and all the time he was out I was listening for a shot—like the shot tonight. I know I blew my top, and gave you a lecture for no good reason, andyou didn't get angry. I think I blew off because you didn't under-stand something I said, and I don't know why I should have expected you to. It was something . . . but it all happened too long ago. I don't know now what it was."

I know, she thought, I know what it was. But it would take too many words to explain.

". . . playing soldier," she repeated, and hoped he would under-stand. "It wasn't funny," she remembered out loud. She wanted to make it clear to him that they had shared the same distaste, that she had been thinking the same thing.

"Mrs. Mitchell," he said suddenly, "this is a silly thing to ask now, but—would you mind telling me how old you are?" "Thirty-seven." She looked at him quizzically.

He nodded, thoughtful again. "I'm just about halfway, you see —between you and Barbie," he said, as if it explained something. "You go to sleep now, if you can." He was brisk and medical again. "I'll wake you up before I go if there's anything at all to tell you." He took the stairs three steps at a time.

THIRTY

She must have dozed off right away, because she remembered he was still in sight going up, and when she looked again he was standing at the foot of the stairs. He had his suit on, and Barbie was holding out his helmet. He seemed to be putting Ginny's blue horse in his pocket. She saw him close the zipper, and Barbie handed

him the helmet. They were talking all the time; at least they were moving their mouths, but she couldn't hear any-thing.

She came all the way awake, trying to decide when she had stopped dreaming. That was silly about the blue horse. . . . They were talking in low voices so as not to wake her.

"Yoh did fine, Barbara," he said. "I know you won't believe it, but I couldn't have done any better."

She turned her face up eagerly to his smile. "Do you really think so? It'll be all right with Ginny too?"

"That's easier," he assured her. "Just be careful about sterilizing —ask Levy if you forget anything—and that's all there is to it."

"Will you—do you know when you'll be back?" She seemed to be standing on tiptoe, her whole body poised toward him, tense and completely worshipful.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes on her face. "I couldn't say. God knows what's going on back there. But I'll get back here, one way or another, before you people have to get out. I don't know just what I can do about it, but there are a lot of people who'd be willing to help Gar. Maybe they'll have some ideas."

Barbara nodded, looking up to him, waiting.

"He's pretty sick, Barbie—sicker than he says. Take good care of him."

Again she nodded, and silence hung between them. He fumbled with his helmet. "I have to go now. But I'll get back."

She didn't move.

"Pete," she said, and then with a rush, "oh, Pete, I'm so young!"

His free hand cupped her chin and raised her face closer to his. Then, with the fierce swiftness of self-conscious youth, he bent his head and pressed his lips against hers.

She didn't touch him. Her hands stayed at her sides, but her mouth clung to him until he wrenched away.

"Cut it out! Oh, God, cut it out!" He didn't say it to her or to anybody. He said it to the world. Gladys knew that; she hoped Barbara knew it too.

Something went *burp* on the radio no one had remembered to turn off. Gladys managed a convincing start. Barbie covered the minute by running into the room to adjust the volume. The doctor had his helmet to keep him busy.

"Five thirty-seven A.M., Friday, May seventh," a hoarse voice intoned. "That is the historic moment. We have just received theofficial news from General Headquarters. The war is over! The enemy conceded at 5:37 A.M., Eastern Standard Time, just five minutes ago. Ladies and gentlemen, the national anthem!"

Gladys could hardly hear the scratchy record because Barbie was laughing so hard. She sat in the big armchair, helpless with laughter, until it was done. Spinelli went out in the middle, closing the door very quietly behind him.

When she was spent with laughter Barbara went over to tern the radio off. Then they heard the announcer's voice again.

"An important notice: all evacuation orders for suburban areas are temporarily suspended. There will be no evacuation trains leav-ing for suburban residents until further notice. The war is over, ladies and gentlemen. At five thirty-sev " Barbie's hand closed

on the switch.

"Hurray for the red, white, and blue!" she said. "Red for courage and white for purity and blue for Pallo."

Pallo? Then it wasn't a dream.

"What about Pallo?" Gladys sat up and shoved the blanket away.

"What about Pallo? You know perfectly " Hysteria drained slowly out of her face. "Didn't anyone tell you?" she asked. "Doc found it with his little Geiger counter. Patio's a Trojan horse, atomic style. He's hot—a one-man radioactive rodeo." A travesty of a smile crossed her face. "Ginny should have known better." The smile twisted. "She left him out in the *rain!"*

Gladys stood up uncertainly, rubbing her arm where it was stiff from sleeping on it.

"Pallo?" She tried the sound of the word, but that hadn't changed. "It was Pallo." She left it out in the rain . . . she brought it home and went to bed with it. . . .

There was a clear picture in her mind—the worn blue horse and the pink and white girl safe on the pillow together, night after night. *Isn't anything safe? Not the rain or the house? Not even a little blue horse?*

"But the war's *over,"* she said out loud.

Would anything ever be safe again?

Heavy, pounding footsteps on the porch, heavy, pounding hand **on** the door. She crossed the room and pulled back the bolt, numb to all further shock.

Peter Spinelli pushed past her fo the living-room sofa, carefully deposited the limp form he carried over his shoulder.

Gladys took one curious step forward.

"Keep away," Spinelli warned. "I think he's out of decontam. Barbie, go up and get Doe's Geiger." He closed his visor and turned back to the unconscious man, feeling through his heavy gloves for broken bones, aligning the flaccid limbs in more normal positions.

When Barbie came back with the counter he opened his visor to speak briefly again. "Better get some water boiling. He's been shot, I think."

Barbara ran off again, and Gladys watched from across the room while the doctor set up the small machine and angled it every way from the man's body.

"Okay," he said at last. "He's not hot anyway. Poor beggar looks like he's come a long way, though." He took off his gloves and helmet, set to work ripping off the bloodstained shirt. He studied the shoulder wound and grunted, "They just grazed him."

He began pulling things out of his pocket,. instruments familiar and unfamiliar to Gladys. Briefly he vanished into the kitchen, to wash his hands and give Barbie the things that needed sterilizing.

Gladys stayed behind, staring with painful fascination at the man on the couch. Step by slow step she went closer, till she could see clearly. She found herself curiously unsurprised. Just once she rested her hand softly on the man's head and felt him stir in re-sponse. Then she heard the doctor returning, and retreated to where she would be out of the way.

She waited patiently while he finished his examination. He turned to her at last, relief clearly written on his face.

"I think he'll he all right. I'll clean out that wound as soon as Barbara brings the things, and I don't think there's anything else very serious. They just left him lying there," the young man said sourly. "Shot at him and drove off. They " He stopped andlooked questioningly at Gladys. "He'll need care. He's in bad shape; but he can pull through with care. Of course he might turn out to be another radiation case. The Geiger wouldn't show that. If he is, I'm afraid there's no hope . . ."

He's not. She knew that much at least.

"We'll take care of him," she told the doctor. *Shock and minor injuries,* the radio said. "We'll take very good care of him." Then she explained.

"It's Jon, you know. He came home."