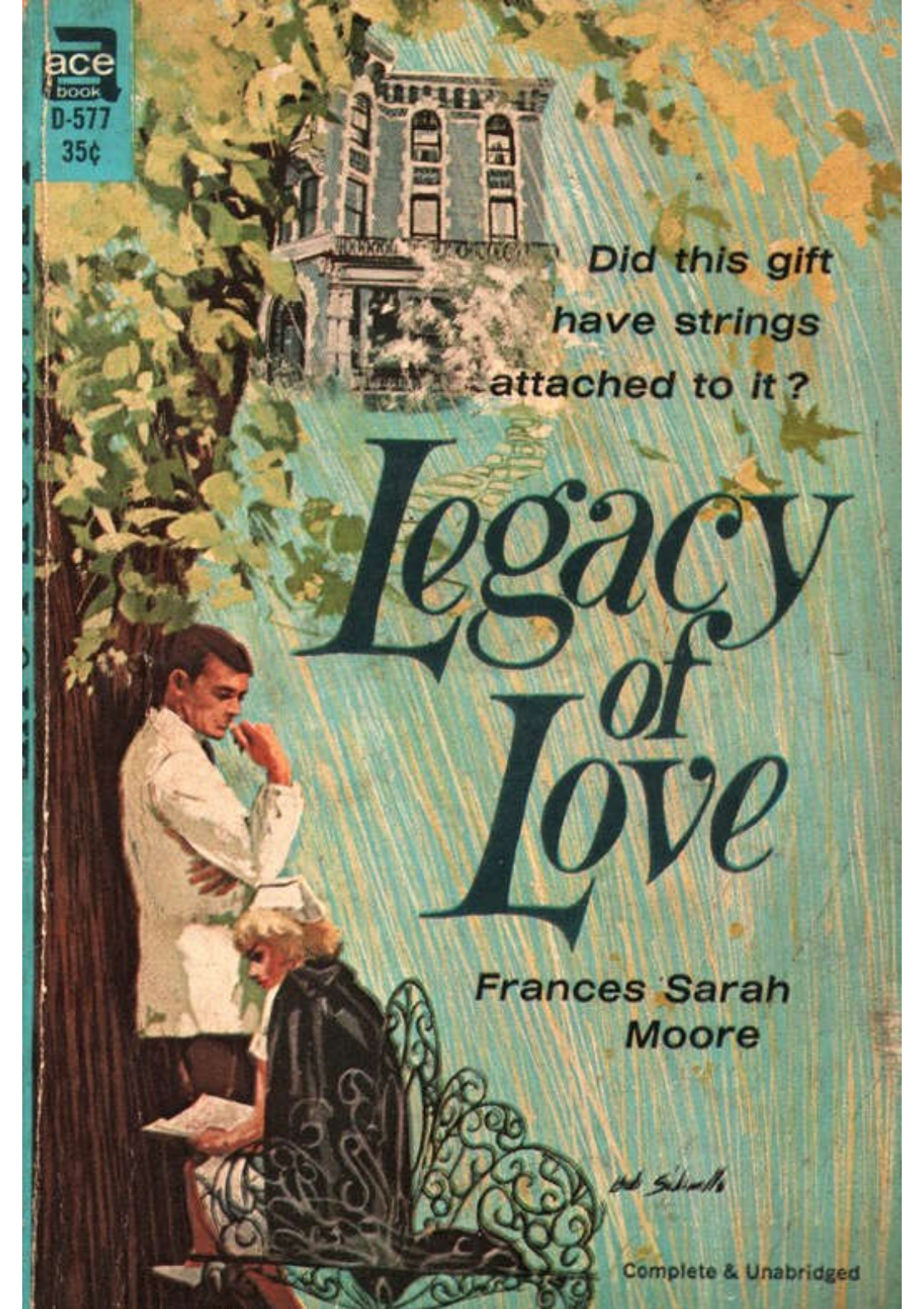


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Legacy of Love

Frances Sarah
Moore

Bob Schmitt

Complete & Unabridged

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LEGACY OF LOVE

Since childhood Margi Leigh had aspired to marry a doctor. As her best chance of achieving this was to become a nurse, Margi did just that. Then Sam Ryall, Senior Houseman at Memorial Hospital, fell in love with Margi—and life seemed to be complete. Or rather it would have been except that the ambitious Sam had no intention of marrying until he had at least one foot on the ladder of success.

When Margi inherited a nice house in a good part of town, the plan to help Sam formed in her mind—but complications pile up in this enjoyable story of a girl's inheritance and how it back-fired.

By the same author

THE RIGHT GIRL

Frances Sarah Moore

LEGACY
OF LOVE

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CHAPTER ONE

There were a dozen questions Margi wanted to ask the man at the wheel beside her, this lawyer with a crewcut and the solid jaw; but he was too busy with his one-a-minute decisions in the heavy city traffic to be more than half aware of her—so Margi sat back and waited.

Presumably in his profession it was commonplace to call strange young women and inform them that they had inherited a house. Margi recalled the telephone message word for word. *You are the beneficiary, Miss Leigh, in the last will and testament of my late client Regina West.* Oh, all in the day's work to Tobias K. Thorpe, Counsellor at Law! He'd been as calm as the deep blue sky when he called at midday, but Margi had sat there for a full minute staring into space, trying to remember who Regina West *was*, for goodness' sake.

There was a catch in it somewhere, Margi was sure. Someone posing as a radio quiz-master had once called her on the telephone and offered her a phoney jackpot; this house she had inherited might be just as phoney, just an idea of Mr. Thorpe's to spice up his musty legal life. He didn't look eccentric, though. He looked like a man of even-keel stability, reliable and sound. But how could you really tell? There must be a catch in this, somewhere. As Pa used to say: "You pay through the nose for everything you get. Nothing's for nothing."

Funny, quoting Pa, who had said so little worth remembering. But Margi was sceptical of godsend, too, and she'd thought: *I'll have to pay, somehow. This stroke of luck will have its price. There'll be some requirement, some obligation in this inheritance from a total stranger.*

And then, still sitting foggily by the telephone, Margi had remembered Miss West. So Regina had been her Christian name. It wasn't surprising that Margi had never noticed it on her chart. A nurse in an overcrowded, understaffed hospital was practically a prodigy if she could remember all the surnames. You saw faces on pillows and bodies in beds. You saw pain and terror and fear and worry, and you saw gallantry like Miss West's. The doomed, like Miss West, with her unquenchable sense of fun.

What do you suppose she'd asked for, near the end? A permanent wave! "I wouldn't let my dustman see me looking like this," she'd told Margi, "and

I certainly owe it to my Maker to look my best when I face Him.” Pickles she had asked for, too. And some Gilbert and Sullivan recordings. Not hymns, as some asked for to keep on the good side of the Lord. No; *The Mikado* and *Pirates of Penzance*, for Miss West. So Margi had borrowed the recordings from the library; she had taken Miss West a jar of her landlady’s garlic-flavoured pickles, and in her off-duty hours she had picked up a home kit from the chemist and given Miss West a permanent wave.

“I’m no hairdresser; I’m new at this,” she’d told the old lady. “You’ll have to read me the directions as we go along.”

Surprisingly, the wave had turned out fine, if a bit kinky at the ends. Margi had said, “After it’s had time to grow out, we’ll cut the frizz off.” That had been a terrible slip, because they both knew time was running out for Miss West. In atonement, Margi added, “Some evening when you haven’t any other visitors I’ll come in and play the recordings for you.” And even as she said it, she thought angrily: *What’s got into me? Cutting into my free time for an old lady who doesn’t mean three cents to me!*

Miss West’s friends came mostly in the afternoons, so Margi spent quite a few evenings with her, and during their bedside talks they came to know each other very well. To save Miss West’s strength, Margi did most of the talking. And almost without knowing it, she told the old lady things she had never told anyone else; about herself, her life. About Marmora Street.

“Did you hate it all so much?” Miss West asked her once.

“No, I didn’t really hate it,” Margi said truthfully. “I just didn’t want to get bogged down there for ever.” Like Ma, she almost said. But a true picture of Ma was too uncharitable.

The floor nurses gossiped in corridors. “Margi Leigh,” they said, “under that shell, under all that zip and energy, *soft!*” Luckily Margi didn’t hear them. Nothing would have made her angrier than to be called soft.

Then, one night when Margi went into the fifth-floor room, someone else was in Miss West’s bed. . . .

And now, as Miss West’s beneficiary, Margi was on her way to see her inheritance. She sat beside Mr. Thorpe, pencil-stiff with curiosity, wondering about the house that Miss West had left her. Some broken-down old dump? Some awful old white elephant? Not that anything had stamped Miss West with poverty, exactly, but people didn’t leave worth-while legacies to strangers, to just anybody. Margi could find no meaning in it, no purpose or justification.

Traffic thinned in the suburbs. On the highway Mr. Thorpe held the speedometer at a conservative fifty-five, and relaxed. “The house is about ten miles beyond the city limits,” he said.

“Have you seen it?”

“Not yet.”

He wasn’t the least bit curious or excited, but he was finally ready to talk, and Margi’s questions began popping. “Look, are you sure you have the right beneficiary, Mr. Thorpe? I mean”—she finished lamely—“are you sure that I’m the right Margi Leigh?”

As if there could be two of them involved in this! Mr. Thorpe’s answer was a mild reproof. “Of course I’m sure. The will is very clear and simple, and everything has been thoroughly checked. Miss West left you everything she possessed, her house and her car.”

“Her car!” Margi flopped back. “I—I didn’t know she had a car.”

He smiled around at her, a benign, fatherly smile. “You seem bowled over by all this.”

“I certainly am,” Margi admitted. “You would be, too, if someone you’d only known about six weeks . . . I was her nurse while she was in the hospital.”

“That so? She must have been a very grateful patient.”

“I’ve had grateful patients before, but none of them ever remembered me in their wills!”

“You’re no relative, then?”

“I was her nurse, that’s all.”

“I wonder why she left you everything, then?”

He certainly picked up her short-pulse thought waves and bounced them right back at her! “You tell *me*,” Margi said dryly.

But Mr. Thorpe hadn’t any answers for Margi. Twice in his life, he said—accelerating to pass a six-wheeler truck—twice in his life he had seen Miss West; once, to receive instructions about the drawing up of the will, then to get her signature before witnesses. It was clear to Margi that she’d have to get the history of Miss West’s life from someone else.

A gravel road intersected the highway. Mr. Thorpe slowed, turned right at a service garage called Joe’s. Margi looked at the lawyer inquiringly.

“Where—?” But she left the word hanging in a strange, flat, terrifying silence. Was the house off the highway, then? Margi was suddenly too frightened to ask. She remembered Ma tediously harping on the risks of getting into cars with strange men, and all the terrible things in the newspapers. She felt sick. She’d walked into a booby trap. That benign smile two miles back hadn’t been fatherly at all. That brief-case in the back seat held a loaded gun . . .

But a criminal wouldn’t have come right into her boarding-house living-room and met Holly Shore, her landlady, would he? Margi slid her shoe back on and decided not to thump Mr. Thorpe over the head with it.

“The house is about a mile from Joe’s Place,” Mr. Thorpe was saying. “I telephoned ahead, so they’re expecting us.”

They? “A—a reception committee?” She tried to say it jokingly.

“The spinsters. They lived with Miss West. Didn’t she tell you about the three elderly spinsters who lived with her?”

“No,” Margi said faintly. “No, she didn’t.”

What next?

“I don’t know what sort of financial arrangement they had with Miss West,” said Mr. Thorpe. “However, now that the house belongs to you, you can make any changes you feel like making. It’s up to you, entirely.”

“Oh, of course,” Margi agreed. She giggled. “For a minute I thought I might have inherited three old maids!”

I am dreaming all this, she thought. I’ll wake up soon and I’ll be rinsing out nylons and listening to my long-playing records. Just another normal Saturday afternoon.

“Ah, here we are,” said Mr. Thorpe.

Margi lost her breath and recovered it in a gasp. Tall wrought-iron gates hung on square cobblestone pillars; wild grapevines overran the low stone wall. Majestic elms cast ladder-like streakings of shade on the circular drive, and the lawn was so smooth it might have been painted on by Grandma Moses. And the house . . .

“Well, well!” said Mr. Thorpe, the breath knocked out of him, too. “All the dignity of the Georgian houses built over a century ago. Good architecture and good materials age well.”

Margi knew nothing about architecture, good or bad. But gazing at the big four-square house, its faded-rose brick walls, its open windows, she felt a sense of calm and quiet, a lyrical quality of beauty.

“Well, congratulations, Miss Leigh!” said Mr. Thorpe. “You’ve come into a sizeable inheritance. If you should decide to sell”—he stroked his jaw appraisingly—“twenty-five thousand, I’d say, give or take a little.”

Margi gasped.

He meant it!

“Myself,” said the lawyer wishfully, “I’d live in it. A place like this lasts out all the current whims and fads. I wish I could get my wife out of our ranch-style horror. No, houses today aren’t built to last. Thirty-five, forty years—then they’re traded in like cars.”

Twenty-five thousand dollars.

I’ll be rich, Margi thought. *Anything I want I can buy!*

But all she wanted was Sam. The man she loved. The man who was planning to marry for money. Dr. Samuel Ryall, an embryo doctor with a spectacular career in mind and his own charted way to the top. The fast way up, the easy way round. *I love you, Margi, but I can’t afford to marry you . . .* He had dropped her, the way he’d drop a scalpel for a clamp, a clamp for a needle-holder; the way he’d drop a used swab.

It should have made him despicable in Margi’s eyes, but it didn’t—because Margi was an opportunist, too, and she knew it. *I’m going to marry a doctor*, she’d said, and before she met Sam she had meant *any* doctor, just the way Sam meant a wealthy girl, any wealthy girl . . .

That was the crowning irony, not being able to deliver him a curtain lecture on ethics. It was a huge joke, really. She ought to have a good laugh about it. If Sam knew, he would laugh, too, but Margi certainly wasn’t going to give him an alibi for his conscience by telling him that they were two of a kind!

But now he needn’t ride roughshod over their love. Now everything would be fine for both of them. She could stake Sam to office space and medical equipment when he was through with being a houseman, and there’d be enough money to tide him over the three or four years until he was established in his own practice.

Just for the fun of seeing Mr. Thorpe’s jaw drop, Margi almost said to him, “I’m going to sell the house. I’ll sell it as fast as I can—and buy the

man I love!” But he’d think she was crazy. Besides, it was none of his business.

Mechanically, Margi went through the motions of getting out of the car and walking up to the front door, but in reality she wasn’t there at all. Within herself she was years away, a quarter of a continent away, living the time before she had come to Randome City’s Memorial Hospital as a student nurse. She was back on Marmora Street, reliving the life that had been traced out for her in full before she was born. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

All large cities have a Marmora Street. Jangling cars and gaudy theatres with torn posters. Seventy-five cent hotels and dingy restaurants. Greasy smells and crumbling tenements, and all the bits and pieces of broken human dreams that would never be picked up and put together again.

Margi grew up on Jasonville's Marmora Street. The neighbourhood children were always getting into free-for-alls, and being passive and peaceable didn't save you from flying rocks and mud balls. You either had to duck fast for cover, or else you picked up your own ammunition and dived headlong in. Running for cover was unthinkable for Margi. She painted a target on an old corrugated-iron garage wall at the back of the yard and practised with a tennis ball until she had a champion's aim.

But holding her own in the rivalry of toughness wasn't enough for Margi. There were things she wanted, things she needed—and she was going to get them. She began thinking ahead, organizing her resources, charting her future.

If it was unreasonable to expect life to proceed exactly according to her own plan, then Margi was unreasonable. Certainly her mother thought so. Mrs. Leigh's forty-five years on Marmora Street was a submission to environment and events as unavoidable; she believed that day-to-day living followed a set pattern as unalterable as the path of the moon, and anyone who tried to take Destiny by the two horns was asking for trouble.

Fatalism had been Mr. Leigh's creed, too, but he died when Margi was seven, so she was spared the rampaging tide of his scepticism when she announced her decision to run her own life. Her father's profanity had never frightened her; she merely supposed, naïvely, that all adult males talked like Pa. Then, at school, she found out that the men teachers never used Pa's words, even to break up playground fights. This kindergarten discovery was Margi's first inkling of a world other than her own neighbourhood, of values beyond her own.

As soon as the law allowed, Marmora Street girls left school to get married or go to work. Margi made up her mind to graduate from high school. She did, in the top ten of her class, Next, a job as a waitress in the restaurant where her mother worked, to earn her tuition in a hospital-

conducted school of nursing where there was no charge for her room, food, laundry, uniforms, and books. Her willpower to save money was a source of wonder to Ma, tinged perhaps with envy, but to Margi it was a cinch. On pay-day she merely shut her eyes and ears and nose until she was safely past the record shops and cinemas and soda fountains; then, with half her salary deposited in her savings account, she had enough left for board money and to buy her mother some little gift.

At first, it had been fun, surprising Ma with inexpensive earrings and bargain-rack blouses, and seeing her face light up; but after a while the gift-giving ritual troubled Margi. To Mrs. Switzer, her life-long next-door neighbour and crony, Ma proudly displayed everything Margi gave her as tokens of a daughter's devotion—and Margi knew it wasn't love at all that prompted the giving. Guilt nudged her, because what she felt for Ma was pity. Pity for all the years Ma had wasted in grumbles and alibis and second-rate films and paper-back novels.

And the junk Ma went for! Give her a good book and she'd use it as a doorstep or prop up a window with it; an ounce of French perfume she'd push away in her purse and forget. Give her a pint of cheap pink cologne, though, and she'd put it on so heavily no one in the block could miss it. Margi would always think of Ma with her brassy hair in curlers, padding about in heelless slippers and trailing cheap perfume that always smelled like raspberry jam.

In time, Mrs. Leigh began to think that Margi might have what it took to make the grade and get off Marmora Street. With growing enthusiasm she over-sentimentalized Margi's choice of a career.

"Just like Florence Nightingale"—she said tearfully, "the night before Margi left to go in training—off to the Dardanelles, fifty years ago!"

Oh, Ma, a hundred years ago, the Crimea! But straightening out Ma's anachronisms was only lost time and effort. Besides, why hurt her feelings?

"You'll find your reward like she did," Ma said piously, "being useful to others."

If Margi had wanted a lofty motive for choosing nursing as a career, there it was—tested and approved and time-saving as a cake mix. Only it wasn't honest. Margi felt no spiritual excitement about nursing, no absolute belief in it. She said, "I'm no Angel of Mercy, Ma." And then, flatly, "I'm going to marry a doctor."

There. Having said it aloud at last, she felt an explosive sense of relief. Yet in some obscure way it shamed her, as if by planning everything so carefully and keeping her head she had somehow lost her integrity.

You could have heard Ma's laughter clear across the street. Mrs. Leigh had seen Margi turn dreams into reality, but this time she was surely sailing too close to the wind. Her little Margi a doctor's wife, taking part in hospital drives and civic affairs, running a big house and directing servants and entertaining her husband's colleagues?

"You," she laughed, "always kidding!"

Being laughed at always made Margi angry and unsure of herself. "You're wrong, Ma." She was white-faced. "I'm serious."

There was an air about her that Mrs. Leigh had come to connect with the harbouring of inner thoughts. A supercharged look.

"Well, why not?" she temporized. Maybe all marriages weren't made in heaven; it might be who you met, and when. "You be a good girl, now," she warned. Not that she had ever had to worry about Margi that way, listening in on her phone calls, and spying on her the way some mothers did. "And don't be disappointed," Mrs. Leigh added, "if things don't turn out just exactly the way you want them to, Margi. The best-laid plans get snowed under more often than not."

"Oh, Ma, I'm not going to wait for things to happen!" It would have been too cruel to say: Like you, all your life waiting and hoping for everything to be better. "I'll *make* things happen the way I want!"

The very thought of giving Destiny a shove turned Mrs. Leigh pale. "Now, you be careful."

"I'm doing what I have to do," Margi said pleadingly. "You do understand that, don't you? You know I have to get away from here?"

"Honey, you can't marry a doctor without meeting one first, and your only chance here on Marmora Street is to break a leg or rupture your appendix! Besides, there's only Dr. Jenkins, and he's married."

If it sounded tough and hard, why blame Ma? After all, it was only Margi's own carefully thought-out theory put into words.

There was no time in the busy two years of training to consolidate her long-term plan, but it was there, waiting, through all the new experiences

and challenges; it was at the back of Margi's mind through classroom discussions and while she was mastering the complicated hospital equipment, through encounters with birth and death and pain and miraculous recovery. She never really forgot it, even while she was unconsciously changing and responding to her new environment.

But to Mrs. Leigh, who in due time attended Margi's graduation ceremonies—big and busty in shiny satin, with her hair dyed to a new brass—there was nothing different about Margi at all.

“You haven't changed a bit, Margi!” She sounded as if she'd expected a Red Cross brand on Margi's forehead. “You met that doctor of yours yet?”

Margi laughed. “I've been pretty busy, Ma.”

Mrs. Leigh was disappointed. During the visitors' tour of the hospital, she had seen young men in starched and rumpled ducks in every corridor and ward, and more dangling masks and stethoscopes than ever before in her life. Surely Margi could have found her doctor by now?

Then Margi met Sam. Dr. Sam Ryall, senior houseman at Memorial Hospital; twenty-seven years old, a graduate of Ralston University's Medical School, late of the U.S. Army. On duty at Memorial one hundred and twenty hours a week, more or less. The hospital gave Sam his room, laundry, meal-money, alternate Saturday nights and Sundays off, and a salary of twenty-five dollars a month. It would be a long time before Sam was self-supporting, longer before he could support a wife, and Margi knew it—but for once her heart was too fast for her head. She fell in love with Sam.

Margi knew what the first five years of marriage to Sam would be. She'd go on working while he tried for a foothold as a G.P. and became known. Until Sam was established he could give her no financial security. But it didn't matter. She loved Sam, and he loved her . . . or so she thought. So she missed all his carefully dropped clues about head-starts and short-cuts, until the final blunt truth: *I'm sorry Margi. I can't afford to marry you.*

He was sorry! Sam was going to marry for money, and all he could say was, “I'm sorry!” Margi tried to hate him. But she couldn't. Maybe Sam's background had conditioned his approach to life, too. . . .

So this was Margi Leigh, who had always measured every moment and counted every step; this was Margi, who said on the day of her inheritance: “I'll be rich! I can buy Sam!”

The lift stopped at The Floor. Sam Ryall stepped out and automatically looked up and down the corridor for a girl with shining fair hair, freckles on her tilted nose, and a light, quick way of walking. Then he remembered; this was Margi's day off. He also remembered something else—that with Margi out of his life she was now taboo in his thoughts. So this was how post-operative patients felt, waiting for the incision to heal and the surgical scissors to snip the stitches, and the doctor to pluck out the bits of black silk . . .

He plunged into the afternoon's work. Charts and temperatures. Dressings. Patients from the convalescent room to be soothed back to reality from the world of anæsthesia. Chest X-rays, cardiographs, sedatives, medications. Rounds at three-thirty with the junior. Down to the X-ray room. Back up to The Floor. Dinner at six. Tonight he needn't eat and run, as usual, but it wouldn't seem like a Saturday night off without Margi . . .

In the doctors' basement cafeteria, he sat down with Monk Avery. "Whew," he sighed. "Thank the Lord for every other Saturday night."

"I'm off, too," Monk said. He was thin and dark, and his well-bred look always made Sam feel craggy and homespun. "What's on your agenda?"

The one luxury within Sam's budget. "Sleep."

"You look all in, pal," Monk observed. "Rough day?"

Rough *deal*, did he mean, in oblique reference to Margi? Double meanings were right on the surface these days. Sam was on guard, edgy. If only one nurse was in Margi's confidence, knew why she had been jilted, then the whole staff knew it by now, top floor to basement. No grapevine is more efficient than a hospital's. Well, let the tongues wag. Monk Avery wouldn't know what it was all about, anyway. With the financial kick-off he'd get from his aircraft tycoon father, Monk wouldn't know the first thing about scrabbling for short-cuts.

In self-defence, Sam could say, "Now, look. I've got my own career to look out for and a kid brother to put through law school." That obligation Monk would consider Sam's father's. Why not? There were no job-bound fathers in Monk's crowd; job-bound in a small-town office, with no prospects, never getting anywhere. Arthur Ryall, solid citizen. An insurance policy specifically for his two sons' education gone into a major operation and years of costly medical treatment for Sam's mother.

"You're halfway through Medicine, your G.I. money will see you through," Arthur Ryall had written Sam, overseas. "And when your brother

Tom's turn comes, I know you'll see him through, Sam."

Naturally. What else were families for if not to stand together? Well, Tom's turn was in the offing. Next year he would graduate from high school with his heart set on a pre-law course that would lead to a degree as an attorney. Tom's scholarship would help; the rest was up to Sam.

Try putting all that across to Monk Avery, with wealth the norm of his background!

It was also impossible to convey it to Margi.

"Housemen do get married," she had begged, pride forgotten. "Their wives work."

To help establish a man in his career, yes; but to carry his kid brother, too? How much could you ask of a girl?

Besides, Margi had her own responsibilities. Her mother's heart attack six months ago, for instance. The heart has a miraculous power to repair itself. But suppose Margi's mother was one of the ten or twenty per cent. who never got back to a normal routine after thrombosis? That did it, for Sam. A possibly invalid mother-in-law on his hands, along with everything else . . . No, it wouldn't do.

Sam tackled his food. On the radio, a raucous-voiced crooner was singing "Hi luh-huh-huh-huv-you-hu," in a series of shunts. The steak was tough again. Sam scowled.

"You need a change of pace," Monk prescribed, unasked. "Come along with me tonight, why don't you? To Ryrie's."

Sam hadn't met Monk's fiancée, but he knew that Ryrie James was socially prominent, a born-with-the-moon-in-her-lap girl. Her father owned a gold mine in Canada. All Monk's crowd owned something spectacular; oil companies, lumberyards, skyscrapers. The difference in the pattern of their life and Sam's was immense.

"The usual gang," Monk was saying. "How about it?"

It was so astonishingly what he wanted, social access to Monk's crowd, that Sam feared his motives must be showing. He felt hot in the face and cold in the feet. "It sounds like fun," he said, half afraid of the opening door.

Monk clapped him on the back. "Fine. See you about nine? I've some book-work before I knock off." Monk was going after a diploma in internal

Medicine; three years in hospital training, two in practice, then as tough an examination as any in the world.

Incredible that Monk should pick tonight! Two weeks ago he'd have been tied up with Margi . . . It's too easy, Sam thought, with a queer sense of anticipation and shame.

Three hours later, he walked beside Monk up front steps of Provincial grandeur. The grandeur was sustained in a vast hall with icy candelabra and Oriental rugs. A white-coated Negro boy took their hats. "They're in the library, Dr. Avery."

It smelled of money. Yet, paradoxically, it had the same pipe-and-slippers cosiness of his own family's living-room back in Nilestown. Bigger, of course. A huge room of books, soft couches, and deep chairs, flowers in silver bowls. Ryrie James broke away from a group around the record player and ran to Monk. "Darling!" She pressed her kiss deep on his lips, unaware of Sam until she broke away, flushed and bright-eyed.

Monk made the introductions, and Ryrie linked her arm friendly through Sam's and led him over to the others. Sam had no illusions about the brand of snobbery in this tight-knit set. They'd run a newcomer through a battery of acceptability tests. But Monk was his sponsor, so Sam was in. Too easy, he thought again, later on, with a drink in his hand and a girl on the couch beside him.

She had a flower face and dense thick hair that was exactly right for her long bob. Her name was Shenna Vaughn. She curled into her corner and smiled at Sam. "I've seen you around, Doctor." He blinked. "At the hospital." Her smile gave him no clue. "I'm a physiotherapist," Shenna said.

Sam didn't know much about pearls and Paris originals, but he'd bet Shenna's were real, and every stitch of her simple little dress hand-sewn; the sort of things a girl couldn't possibly afford on a hospital salary—so her job was a rich girl's hobby.

Shenna was saying, "I had a serious injury when I was a child. Years of expert therapy restored my health. So you see, my career was spelled out for me."

Not just a hobby, then. And this was a thoroughly likeable girl, with her straightforward smile and warm grey eyes. Sam almost forgot why he was here.

"So many sick people need just a spark of hope to start them on the way to recovery," she said. "The long, slow way, too often."

Sam flinched at that “long, slow way.” A sly poke at the ulterior motives of Dr. Sam Ryall?

“Is something wrong?” Shenna asked. “You look belligerent.”

He laughed hollowly. Belligerent! He was all wound up, a fine specimen of guilt-anxiety symptoms. *Keep a cool head, Sam. Big things are afoot!*

Someone loaded the radiogram and he danced with Shenna until a wholesome wolf named Philip intercepted them and Shenna laughingly danced away with him. Another girl sat down on the couch beside Sam. Carol, her name was, with her hair scraped back like a washerwoman’s and emerald earrings fit for a duchess. Next there was a girl called Susan, and a cuddly brunette named Lou Ann. And through it all Sam listened to the smoothly ticking strategy inside him: *Almost any wealthy girl will do.*

It was midnight. Where was Margi tonight? Out with someone new? That marriage-minded anaesthetist? Margi deserved someone really fine, someone who could give her everything she wanted. Not that she ever asked for much, from Sam Ryall, anyway. A Saturday-night baseball game, or a neighbourhood film—Dutch, mostly. Or television in her landlady’s living-room. The Shores were nice people. They had liked him, Sam could tell. They treated Margi as if she were their own daughter, and they had obviously thought that marriage between him and Margi was a certainty . . .

“What are you brooding about, Sammy?”

He switched his thoughts to Lou Ann. Her father owned the Wolesley Jockey Club and a million dollar stable of thoroughbreds. And it would drive Sam crazy to live with being called Sammy. He smiled wryly. “I just scratched an entry,” he said.

“Oh, are you a horseman, too?”

“A girl, honey. Not a horse, a girl,” Sam said gently. And lucky for you, maybe, he thought. I’ll pick up a fast fortune through someone else, not you, Lou Ann, honey.

The party showed signs of breaking up. Monk strolled over. “Why not stay with me tonight, Sam? Ten minutes from here. No need to drive all that way back across town.”

Instinct made Sam jump at the chance; it also made him cautious. The possibilities in a closer friendship with Monk Avery were endless, but things might be moving too fast . . . Monk took his arm. “All right, thanks,” Sam said.

The wolf was walking Shenna to the door. She looked over her shoulder at Sam. “We’ll see you again, won’t we?”

He met her eyes. “I hope so.” Astonishingly, he meant it. It had nothing whatever to do with being practical about his future. What was it, Shenna’s beauty, or some other quality he felt in her? Everything about her—her voice, movements, thoughts—were moneyed. Of course. He’d looked for and found just that. Nothing more.

Later, Sam climbed into Monk’s tailored silk pyjamas, slid between monogrammed sheets, and thought wryly, Get ready for a jet ride, Sam. You’re moving.

Much later he woke from a sound sleep, as suddenly as if his bedside telephone had rung. He stared a moment into the darkness, remembering and then he spoke a name aloud, an upward querying inflection, with some appraisal in it, some pleasure, some shame, a philosophical shrug: *Shenna Vaughn?*

CHAPTER THREE

Holly Shore drew the bay-window curtain back and watched the steady stream of traffic from the wrestling match at Rinkler Stadium. It was like the five o'clock traffic jam. You could smell exhaust fumes seeping in through the brick walls and around the window and door casings. And the din! Did drivers expect to change the light from red to green by punching their horns?

This used to be such a quiet residential street, but not any more. Now it was a major north-south traffic artery, with permanent elimination of curb parking. It had a decayed look; no dignity left, no style. Even the wide green boulevards were gone, thanks to the city's traffic and transit improvement policies, and street widening.

Rooms For Rent signs were in windows, clutters of milk bottles on porches. The fire hazard established a rule of no cooking in rented rooms, but Holly Shore knew very well that her lodgers made tea and hot chocolate on hot plates. She let them get away with it because they were careful, and she hated bickering and petty scenes. Besides, she liked her lodgers. University students, and those nice young nurses who said their food at the hospital was all run through the sterilizer. It was a stale old hospital joke. Holly knew all the stale old hospital jokes from her nurses . . .

“Holly?”

“Yes, Fredric.” She let the curtain drop and brushed her hands lightly, from habit, as if to rub off dust. Not that the curtains were soiled, but everything in these old houses felt gritty to the touch, as if age were grimed in beyond ever being scrubbed or laundered or vacuumed out. Holly didn't mind. She liked old things: old streets, old people, old trees. Especially this old house in which she had been born . . .

“Fredric!” She saw her husband's worry-frown in the 300-watt cone of flashlight. “What is it? What's the matter?”

He looked up from his newspaper, older than Holly, in his early sixties, wearing an Argyle vest that Holly had knitted for him and comfortable Romeo slippers. He put his glasses on the leather-topped coffee table. “It's come up again,” he said. He pressed the paper over to her. “Another editorial.”

“Talk, talk, talk.”

Holly wished she could believe that, but she couldn't. A crisis was brewing, had been for months. No newspaper editorial had to tell her that. The city was undergoing a replanning. There was a massive boom in real estate. Sub-divisions were mushrooming. Civic-efficiency surveys were being made in all departments; blighted areas were being re-developed . . . Oh, well. If the city decided to expropriate and clear the land in this area and erect a flat project on the site, what could Holly do about it? Or Fredric, or anyone?

But she read the article, anyway, absently putting on Fredric's glasses before remembering that hers were out on the refrigerator. “Never mind,” she said, as he jumped up to get them. “The print's big.”

It was ominous, too. But if the homeowners didn't get sold down the river, a lot of them would jump at the chance to move out to one of those new subdivisions with their acres of bungalows and futuristic luxury flats. Not Holly. There'd never be another rooming-house district like this, what with the hospital and university so close and their residences bursting at the seams.

City Council's vote after an all-night session endorsed the proposal of the thirty million dollar redevelopment of the Worley-Duchess-Vine area, and cleared the way for an immediate start on the project . . .

Immediate! “I'd better have my glasses, Fredric.” As if they'd help! Even with corrected vision, you couldn't see through panic.

Once the agreement is signed, the Council will be asked to pass a redevelopment plan by-law, followed by an expropriation by-law. The City Planning Board will be asked to approve issuing of debentures to cover the cost of acquiring and clearing the land. Thomas K. Brighton, a city solicitor, indicated that the question may have to be submitted to the electors in the forthcoming election . . .

“There may be a vote, Fredric.” It was a straw to grasp at.

“That's so.” For her sake, he pretended optimism, the way he pretended to overlook the house's deterioration because she couldn't bear to admit that it was falling apart. He caulked cracks, tuck-pointed the brickwork and masonry, built back the flaking concrete, waterproofed the cellar, and was for ever fixing the roof.

Fredric knew that it wasn't only a house he kept patched up and repaired for Holly; it was a way of life.

“That big old creaking white elephant,” Fredric had protested, when Holly inherited her childhood home and flatly refused to sell it. “You’re surely not thinking of us moving over there and living in it, Holly? We’d be two peas in a pod, rattling around.”

“Not if we fill the second and third floors with lodgers, Fredric.” Young people, who would clatter noisily up and down the stairs, and bang doors, and blare “bop” and blues records on their gramophones. “We’re getting to be two old codgers,” she’d said. In a backwater, old before their time. A houseful of young people would put them back in the swim again.

Of course, it wouldn’t be the same. Nothing would ever be quite the same as it was before that stormy winter night when the bus ran off the highway and crashed into a tree and killed Janey and Louise on their way home from ski-ing in the Laurentians. Louise nineteen, Janey seventeen. Funny, you missed the little everyday things most, after the first grief and shock. The little things, like a lamp that needn’t be left on in the hall to light them home from dates, and no breezy slang to censor or party *décolleté* to cluck over. And the telephone so terribly silent, when it used to run you off your feet . . .

The telephone rang in the stairway alcove.

“I’ll get it,” Fredric said.

An upstairs door flew open. Margi Leigh ran down. “For me?” She leaned over the bannister.

Fredric cradled the mouthpiece on his shoulder, looked up. “Not this time, Margi.”

Margi said disappointedly, “Oh.”

“The newsreel’s just coming on, Margi,” Holly said cajolingly. Television was her decoy. She lured them in shamelessly for the give-aways and prize fights, knowing that afterwards they’d sit around and talk. Sooner or later, they told her everything, asked for comfort and opinions and advice —just like Janey and Louise used to.

“Not tonight, thank you,” Margi said. She started back up, then saw that Fredric was off the telephone. “Do you mind if I use your phone, Holly?”

“Sure, honey.”

But Holly frowned. Four times already Margi had tried to get in touch with Sam. It wasn’t like Margi to swallow her pride like that, even with big news like the inheritance for Sam. Let him go, Holly thought, and good

riddance. Personally, Holly felt that Margi was fortunate finding out Sam's true nature in time. A go-getter, set on a profitable marriage! But try talking sense to Margi. One might as well try to reason with a concrete slab. She wouldn't listen—with her head, anyway.

Years ago it had been that way with Holly. The whole family's will had been set like iron against her marrying Fredric Shore. *He'll be a factory clock-puncher all his life*, they said. *You can do better*. Better? Holly glanced over at Fredric with his pipe and newspaper, and for the life of her she couldn't imagine sharing hearth and home with any other man. Their marriage would never make deathless sonnets, or the headlines; it was just a sweet and devoted and durable man-and-wife team. Better? Not in a million years! But there were times to listen to your heart and times to listen to your head, and after the way Sam had treated Margi, it was high time her head took over.

"There's no answer." Margi cradled the receiver. She said unnecessarily, "He's out somewhere, I guess. If he were asleep, he'd hear the phone. You know doctors. One ring and they jump into their trousers. So he—he must be out."

With Miss Million-Bucks, Holly thought. But Margi was in no mood to let truth have its way. It was more than Holly could stand. "Why don't you wait until you sell the house and *then* tell Sam about it?" she suggested. Holly felt like a dissembler, but she was a firm believer in time as a modifier of snap decisions. A house wasn't something that would sell across the counter like a bottle of bath salts. It might take months for the sale to go through, and by then Margi might have stopped eating out her heart for Sam.

"Why—yes!" Margi's face lit up. "Why, I think that's a terrific idea, Holly!" She could tell Sam she was rich and back it up with documentary evidence. "Can't you just see his face when I show him a cheque for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Holly could see Sam's face, all right. A predictable cinch he'd come running back to marry her on the double. Ha, big-hearted!

But Margi looked stricken, suddenly. "Holly, suppose he marries someone else before I sell the house?"

"Courtship takes time, even in this push-button era," Holly said dryly.

"Yes." Margi was reassured. "Yes, of course." The way the house had impressed Mr. Thorpe, it would probably sell in a week.

It was settled, then. Temporarily, anyway. Holly relaxed. “How about a nice piece of fresh apple pie?” she suggested.

“Oh, could I, Holly, please? I’m starved! With all the excitement, I skipped dinner.”

“No wonder.”

“Imagine, Holly—suddenly owning a house!”

Imagine suddenly *not* owning one. This one. Holly had a bleak mental preview of razed brick walls and bulldozers scraping up debris. Well, no use worrying about something she was powerless to stop. She went out to the kitchen and plugged in the percolator.

It was August. Margi was walking the mile to Joe’s Place to pick up her car, left there for repairs.

Since leaving the hospital a month ago, Margi had been living in her house, Regina House, as it was affectionately called by everyone in the neighbourhood. For various reasons it had seemed best to leave the hospital, where no one knew about her inheritance. She didn’t want to face a barrage of questions, most of which she couldn’t have answered—and wouldn’t have answered, anyway, with the habit of secrecy over her own affairs so inherent. Then, there was Sam. Besides encounters in corridors and wards which were upsetting enough, she was afraid she might blurt out her splendid surprise for him, and telling him about the house before she had the cheque for him would be like proffering a gift in a brown paper sack. Margi wanted it perfect, fancy wrappings, ribbons and all.

Then, too, Margi needed free time for the major project of selling the house. She had telephoned a real-estate agency. A salesman from Haskell and Jones was coming tomorrow. Once the house was in his hands, he would be bringing prospective buyers, and if Margi weren’t there in a supervisory capacity, no telling what her three spinsters might say or do . . .

Her three spinsters! Margi caught herself up short. Mustn’t slip into a proprietary way of thinking like that, as if she were in some way answerable for their behaviour or their welfare.

But what was to become of them? Surely someone ought to be looking ahead, making plans, and *they* certainly weren’t, or Margi saw no signs of it. They were like the weathercasters; the farthest they’d look into the future was thirty days. Miss Sims went on with her baking and cleaning and

gardening, Miss Wilson made her dolls' wardrobes, Miss Mullins kept the mailbox bulging with her contests and bulletins—all as if everything would continue *in statu quo* for ever and ever, amen.

Actually, existing conditions were a bit confusing to Margi. Not to Miss Sims, though. Miss Sims was the spokesman for the trio, and to Miss Sims everything was as simple as one-two-three. The only thing that puzzled Miss Sims was Margi's confusion, after they'd had a long talk.

Regina House, Miss Sims had told her, was not formally an old ladies' home, but to all intents and purposes it was a refuge for the lost and lonely and the misfits; and into this category fitted the Misses Sims, Wilson, and Mullins, aged, collectively, two hundred years.

In a minor, unassuming way, Regina West had been a philanthropist—though all she'd had to benefit mankind was a house, a twenty-year-old car, and a small lifetime income. Plus, according to Miss Sims, a heart as big as the world.

Up to this point in her recital, Margi followed Miss Sims. But when she went on to recount how Regina West had found them one by one and brought them here to live with her, Margi began suspecting that reality was being tinged with some high-flown fantasy. But laughable as was the emerging picture—Miss West on a white horse to the rescue of three captive princesses!—Margi didn't laugh. Miss Sims was too desperately in earnest. So all Margi could do was try to sift fact from fancy.

Miss Hattie Wilson had lived for years with her married brother and his family, evolving through the thankless rôles of baby-sitter and family dressmaker to that of old-maid aunt permanently in charge of miscellaneous small jobs. Believing she was needed, she had stayed on until Regina West, stressing the vast difference between being useful and being put-upon, invited her to live at Regina House.

A whole new life began for Hattie Wilson. Her extraordinary talent for sewing she put to profitable use. She made dolls' wardrobes for speciality shops—shortie pyjamas, jeans, pleated skirts, shorts and bathing suits, smocked silk dresses and snow suits with white bunny fur, varying in price from thirty dollars to thirty-nine cents. By following magazine fashion trends, she kept her dolls' wardrobes up with the times. The climax of her career was an order to outfit a doll for a daughter of European royalty. Now, with confidence in her capabilities and self-respect, she carried her head high at Regina House.

Rebecca Mullins had been sternly ruled by her mother's gentle possessiveness until she had no backbone left. No personality of her own. And, at her mother's death, no practical experience in coping with the workaday world. She was next to be taken under Regina West's wing.

Contesting was Rebecca Mullins' hobby; slogans, last lines for jingles, limericks. All she'd ever got out of it were mimeographed lists of winners that didn't include her name—until she was challenged with the necessity of paying her own way at Regina House.

This point Miss Sims made very clear to Margi: Regina House was not a charitable institution. Everyone participated in the household's running expenses, food, light, taxes, repairs. So Rebecca Mullins acquired contest bulletins, a Rhyming Book, a Winning Entry Dictionary and a Roget's Thesaurus. She set up a filing system and turned her hobby into a trade. Inevitably she lost more contests than she won, but she paid her way, and had the dignity of a brand-new self-reliance. That was what Miss West had cared most about during her lifetime. Miss Sims told Margi; human happiness and human dignity, and the translation of her ideals into tangible everyday realities.

And Miss Sims herself? Before coming to Regina House, had she also been at variance with humanity, out of her element, bereft of dignity?

"Regina West," said Miss Sims with a perfectly straight face, "bailed me out of the poor-house."

Margi laughed outright. She couldn't help it. Her leg was being pulled—and serve her right for getting roped into a heart-to-heart talk!

So there it was . . . and how to inform the three that a radical change was in the offing posed for Margi a grave problem of tact.

Of course, she could simply pile their possessions on the front lawn and let them carry on from there. But how hard-hearted could you get? On the other hand, her protective instincts might make them an indefinite liability. Darn it all, why did she have to get involved with *people*? Always she had done exactly what was best for her own good, asking no favours, giving none. Why change now? If selling the house brought discomfort and inconvenience to the Misses Sims, Wilson, and Mullins—well, that was just too bad. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

At the service station, Joe walked over with Margi to the Heirloom. There was no other name for it; an old sedan one step ahead of the running-board era. Joe wiped his hands on a bit of rag and explained what had been wrong with the starting motor. It was all Greek to Margi, but she listened politely.

“I took out the unit, see,” Joe said, “and tested it for no-load speed and torque. You can tell what’s wrong, see, by the speed the armature turns when it’s running free. And the torque it develops when the drive pinion’s locked. Your commutator bars were burned. Not too bad, though. I re-soldered the leads and turned the commutators down in a lathe and undercut the mica. She’ll start okay now. Hop in and try.”

Margi hopped in. Joe was right. She started now okay, though she sounded as if she’d rather not. Margi smiled at Joe. “Thanks.”

“Funny,” he said, “someone else behind the wheel of Miss West’s old buggy.”

Margi turned off the motor and looked at Joe. “You knew her, then?”

“Miss West? Who didn’t, around here?” He surveyed Margi interestedly. “You a relative?”

“No. I nursed her at the hospital.”

“That so? I wondered—you inheriting her house and all.”

Theorizing about that would provide the neighbourhood with fuel for gossip for months. It kept Margi awake at night, too. Why, out of all the world, had Miss West picked *her*? She wondered whether she could rule out eccentricity . . . “Would you say,” Margi asked Joe carefully, “that she was a —a well-balanced person?”

“Miss West? Yes siree! No wobble or runout in *her* wheels.” He hiked up his jeans. “Now, I’d say about Miss West that she’d come to terms with life and made a good bargain.” Quote, Margi thought. The minister, maybe, or some local philosopher. “Her and this jalopy were steady customers of mine, Miss Leigh.” Joe tipped his cap. “As I hope you’ll be.”

“I shan’t be around, Joe. I’m going to sell the house.”

“Yeah?”

Margi sensed more than interest in his voice. Surprise, was it? Reproof? Oh, ridiculous! It was no business of Joe’s if she burned the house down. What she’d heard in his voice was something she was half afraid of, more than half listening for . . . She started the motor again. “I’d better have some petrol, please.”

She paid Joe and drove off down the gravel road. Behind the wheel she was still jittery. She had passed the driving-school tests with flying colours, but being on her own was different from having an instructor beside her. She had felt exactly the same way when she left the hospital—suddenly alone, no longer a working member on a team of doctors and nurses and technicians.

A tan-and-rust saloon was parked before the house. The real-estate agent, a day ahead of time? Margi hurried in, brushing off a friendly nip at her ankles from Miss Sims’ Boston bull, Dome.

The three were in the living-room serving Miss Sims’ speciality, black-as-anthracite coffee, to a young man with putty-coloured hair and a plaid sports jacket. Dismay jolted Margi. What if he had told the spinsters his business here, before she’d had a chance to cushion the blow?

“Ah, Margi, there you are!” Miss Sims’ voice, hearty and happy. If she had just been informed that the roof was to be sold over her head, she was bearing up remarkably well—or treating it as a wild rumour. “Margi, this is Mr. Colladine. Burt, Miss Margi Leigh.”

Burt. So he was on a first-name basis already. The hail-fellow-well-met type. Just the one to babble his business here. Margi didn’t want the spinsters to get it callously, from a stranger. Several times she’d tried to tell them herself that the house was to be sold, but—well, she hadn’t told them, yet. Maybe this Burt Colladine hadn’t either. Margi regarded him coldly. “May I speak to you alone, Mr. Colladine?”

He looked surprised. “Certainly.”

“In the library, please.”

With the door closed behind them, she faced him anxiously. “I hope you haven’t told them?”

“Told them what?”

“Who you are. Why you are here. Oh, it’s my fault. I should have told them myself, but I kept putting it off. It’s difficult— —”

"I haven't the faintest notion what you're talking about!"

"Did you tell them that I'm going to sell the house?"

He looked at her as though she had blown a square bubble. "*Sell it!*"

"I told Mr. Haskell on the telephone— —" She broke off suspiciously. "You're from Haskell and Jones Real Estate, aren't you?"

His hazel eyes glinted with devilry. "Wrong. Guess again."

She took a step back. "But I thought— —"

"I'm Simsy's nephew."

"Oh."

"So you are going to sell the house," he said accusingly. "Who to? Just anyone?"

Margi's chin went up. "Unless you have any objections, Mr. Colladine."

He ignored the rebuff. "Tell me, do you honestly believe Regina West left her house to you just so you could turn it over to a real-estate agency?"

Margi frowned. Was he only curious, or had she finally found someone who could answer her questions? "Tell me about Miss West," she ordered. "You knew her, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"Why did she make me her beneficiary? She had a sister." That she knew from Miss Sims: a sister in Ohio, Elizabeth West. "And friends." By the dozen. They called on the telephone, strangers to Margi, but friendly, willing to be neighbourly if she would let them. "And you, Mr. Colladine. Maybe it would have made as much sense, or more, if she had left *you* her house instead of me."

"Don't I just wish she had! I'd have sold it quick as a shot and bought myself an aeroplane. I'm a geologist," he said. "On field trips I use a company plane. But what a wonderful busman's holiday I could have for myself with my own plane!"

"There, you see?" Margi gave him a triumphant look. "You'd have done exactly what I'm going to do—sell it, and buy something I want."

"But she didn't leave it to me," he reminded her.

"What am I supposed to do, then? Live in this house for ever, like a cabbage, with those three old— —"

“Hey, don’t go into a side skid! I only meant this: Miss West never intended her house to serve some strictly selfish aspiration.”

“Why didn’t her will have a codicil, then?”

“No need for qualifying or modifying terms—if she left her house to the right person.”

Margi had to laugh. “Me?” Because of a jar of pickles, a frizzy permanent wave, and those chummy bedside chats to a musical background of *The Mikado*?

But Burt Colladine didn’t laugh. “What are you going to do about Simsy and the others? They’re settled in here pretty snugly. You can’t just kick them out.”

But no one was going to talk Margi into an altruistic sleigh ride. Her mind was made up. She was going to get rid of this house, no matter what it meant to the three women, what plans they made or did not make, what equilibrium was upset. “I don’t owe them anything,” she said defensively. “If she cared about their welfare, why didn’t she leave *them* the house? Answer me that!”

He shook his head at her and stood up. “Find yourself another oracle, Margi.”

“You haven’t answered my question, any of my questions!”

“You’ll find the answers. Now, I’m going back to my bull session with Simsy. We talk shop, Simsy and I. Did you know she used to be a prospector?”

“Miss *Sims*?”

“Hoisted a pack with the best men in the Canadian northland,” Burt said. “The old days, before the geologists took over with their note-books and college degrees. Simsy hasn’t much faith in me and the paper boys. She claims you can’t do mining out of books. Says if it weren’t for the old prospectors like her, some of the biggest Canadian mines would still be moose pasture. She’s right, too. I’m surprised she hasn’t told you all about the good old days.”

Puzzle pieces began sliding in place in Margi’s mind. The coffee-pot always on the kitchen stove: Margi could picture Miss Sims brewing the strong black stuff in a smoke-blackened tin over a bush fire. The way she slapped her hips absently, as if she missed a pair of pants’ pockets. Her dog,

Dome—named after a gold mine! Dome slept every night on the foot of Miss Sims' bed—a habit from camping out, to keep her feet warm?

Burt was saying, “She moved from one province to another, following reports of new gold discoveries. That was before uranium. It was all gold, then. Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario. Once she acquired some promising base-metal property—but along came the crash of twenty-nine, and all her claims reverted to the crown. But she kept on staking out ground, prospecting, waiting for a boom. And what happened? Just when Simsy came on something good, Hitler knocked the bottom out of the mining business, and Simsy was broke. She never recovered from that. Before she turned up here at Regina House, we didn't know where she was for months. She was too proud to ask for help.”

Regina West bailed me out of the poor-house. And I laughed, Margi thought with a twinge of remorse.

Burt opened the library door. “If you change your mind about selling the house— —”

“I'll send up a flare!”

He looked at her. “Maybe that will should have had a codicil, after all,” he said. He was smiling, but only with the bottom half of his face.

That smile stayed with Margi as she helped Miss Sims with a flea treatment for Dome, sewed snap fasteners on a doll's ski pants for Miss Wilson, and chopped cabbage for the dinner's salad. It stayed with her off and on through a restless night. But in the morning the real-estate agent arrived; Mr. Pringle, right on time from Haskell and Jones, brisk and businesslike. No Dutch-uncle talk from Mr. Pringle. All he cared about was a sale, a quick sale and his commission. Margi forgot Burt Colladine, and his smile.

CHAPTER FIVE

“August,” said Miss Sims from her Cape Cod chair in a patch of elm tree shade, “is the only month in the whole year when you can relax and enjoy the garden. May is the month for planting and transplanting; June’s for spraying and July for weeding, or is it *vice versa*? September is often too wet and chilly to sit outside, and in October you dig holes for the bulbs and cut down the perennials and rake the leaves. But in August you can sit back and enjoy everything.”

Margi was on her knees on the lawn. She had on a sleeveless blouse and rolled-up dungarees. Her face was hot, her hands grubby. She was industriously yanking out dandelions. “Oh yeah?” she grinned.

Miss Sims grinned back. “You are thoroughly enjoying yourself, and you know it. Though it beats me why you feel compelled to work like a beaver over a few dandelions in the lawn!”

“A few!” Margi rocked back indignantly on her heels and put her fists on her hips. “I wish I had a dollar for every dandelion in this lawn!”

“Don’t be so mercenary,” chided Miss Sims mildly.

“There aren’t any weeds in the front lawn,” Margi said accusingly, remembering its perfection and her first day’s impression that it had been painted on. “I don’t see why you had to let them get so far ahead of you out here.”

“Regina always looked after the front lawn,” said Miss Sims. “Regina was a real crank about weeds. Even when the mosquitoes were bad, she’d be out there with her butcher’s knife and bushel basket and box of salt.”

“Salt?”

“To kill the roots,” explained Miss Sims. “Nevertheless, Regina depended on my crop of dandelions when she was ready to make her dandelion wine, so I always had an alibi for being lazy! Regina used to make wonderful dandelion wine, just like champagne it was, everybody said. Have you ever tasted champagne?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Neither have I, but that’s what everybody said, just like champagne, Regina’s dandelion wine.”

Miss Sims’ voice droned on and on, somnolent and soothing as the bees. Margi thought, “She’s right. I’m really enjoying this!” The sun was warm on her shoulders and the air heavy with the scent of roses and phlox and mint. Working in the soil, even if only to pull weeds, was enormously satisfying. It would be nice to work one’s way through the changeless seasonal patterns of a garden; to watch the tulips come up from autumn-planted bulbs, and the perennials push through again, and annuals grow from seeds.

When Sam and I are married, we’ll have a garden, and I’ll get seed catalogues, and folders and pamphlets from manufacturers so I’ll know how to grow things properly.

“Why don’t you sit down and rest?” said Miss Sims. “The way you’re going at those dandelions anyone’d think you had something on your conscience that had to be worked off.”

“I don’t have a conscience,” said Margi.

“Why, that’s blasphemy!” Miss Sims was visibly shocked. “Everyone has a moral sense within. What else determines whether one’s conduct is right or wrong?”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell what is right and what wrong,” Margi said, remembering Burt Colladine’s smile.

“Mercy, yes,” agreed Miss Sims amiably. “Oh, do sit down, Margi! I feel guilty, watching you work so hard! Besides, I want to watch the birds in the bird-bath, and they won’t come, with you hopping like a grasshopper all over the lawn!”

“They won’t come with no water in the bath, either!”

“Oh, isn’t there, dear? I must have forgotten to fill it this morning.”

“I’ll fill it.”

Margi stood up, stretched the stiffness out of her cramped muscles, uncoiled the hose from its hook on the garage wall and filled the bird-bath which was set in a clump of myrtle under a lilac bush. Then, replacing the hose, she sat down beside Miss Sims; she folded her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. “I suppose you know an awful lot about birds, Miss Sims?”

“Birds are like people, different personalities,” said Miss Sims. “I’ve sat out here by the hour watching them in that bath, and they all go at it differently. The cat-birds, now, they never miss a day. And they always come punctually at four o’clock.”

“Like the English,” said Margi, “for tea.”

“You’re making fun of me,” protested Miss Sims, hurt.

“No.” Margi leaned back and closed her eyes. “Tell me all about the cat-birds, Miss Sims.”

“They plunge right in, head first,” said Miss Sims. “They love to bathe. But the robins—my, I never saw birds so reluctant to get themselves wet all over as the robins.”

“Why bother, then, if they hate it so?” said Margi lazily.

“Some instinct for cleanliness prescribes it, I suppose. But they don’t enjoy it, not the robins. They’ll spend five minutes making up their minds to get in. They hop around the bath’s rim; they test the water’s temperature with their beaks, first, then with their tails, and finally, when they can’t put it off any longer, they ease themselves in sideways with an aggrieved and martyrish look.”

Margi laughed. “I guess there are robin-type bathers on any resort beach!”

“You’ve seen them yourself, haven’t you?”

“I’ve never been to a resort beach,” said Margi flatly.

“Really? I thought, at some time or another in their lives, everyone had.”

“No,” said Margi. There was no need to tell Miss Sims how Marmora Street children spent their summers; in hot back yards with no grass or flowers or shade trees, at the local cinema if they had the price of admission, at amusement haunts or in street games. No need to outline her background for Miss Sims, whom it didn’t concern at all. “Go on about the birds, Miss Sims.”

“Well, the starlings.” She was easily diverted. “They’re the belligerent ones. They come lumbering up and frighten all the other birds off. They’re clumsy. The starlings splash water all over the place, and won’t let any other birds near the water while they’re monopolizing the bath.”

“The starling type,” nodded Margi, “have their own private beaches and No Trespassing signs.”

“Exactly. Now, the sparrows are different again. You don’t see much of the sparrows all summer, until September, when they come in flocks to eat up the weed seeds in the lawns and flower beds. But when the sparrows do come there’s a gay old time at the bird-bath, believe me! They’re the communal bathers—the more the merrier. They’ll crowd around the bath’s rim a dozen at a time and push each other in. The sparrows make a game of it . . . Margi? Are you asleep, Margi?”

Margi yawned and opened her eyes. “I’m awake.”

“Then look out front. That truck is turning in our gate, isn’t it?”

Margi pushed herself up on her elbows. From where they sat they could see the wrought-iron gate and the delivery truck that had turned in and was circling the driveway. Margi said, “I’m not expecting anything to be delivered today, are you?”

“It’s probably one of Miss Mullins’ contest prizes,” said Miss Sims calmly.

“Something big enough to be delivered in a truck?”

“Oh, some of the things she wins are quite large. A few months ago she won enough plywood to build a recreation room, and before that she won a factory-built preconstructed garage.”

Margi looked astonished. “What does she do with things like that?”

“She sells them. One a month. Regina used to load everything in the car and peddle them around the neighbourhood.”

“Peddle them?”

Miss Sims nodded. “Miss Mullins isn’t a very clever saleswoman. She’s far too shy and retiring. But there was hardly anything Regina couldn’t sell for her, and at a good price, too! . . . Maybe we’d better go around to the front and see what she’s won this time. I haven’t heard her mention anything . . . Why, yes.” Miss Sims gave a brisk nod, remembering. “She did say something about another television set.”

“Another?” Margi said faintly.

“She’s already won two. The first one we kept. The second Regina sold to Joe, at the service station. Oh, dear, I do hope there’s someone in the neighbourhood in the market for a television set. I’ve seen so many aerials lately, it seems just about everybody has TV, now.”

The driver and his helper were unloading it. "Just set it inside the front door," Miss Mullins was saying from the front steps.

"Oh, we'll carry it right in for you," the driver said obligingly. "Put it right where you want it, ma'am."

"Thank you, but we shan't be keeping it," Miss Mullins said serenely.

Margi was in sympathy with the driver's puzzled look. "No?" he said.

"We already have a television set," said Miss Mullins. "This one we will sell." She looked at him brightly. "I dare say you wouldn't care to buy it, Mr.—er—?"

"Joslin." Puzzlement still creased his forehead. "Thanks, ma'am, but I've already got one. One too many, if you ask me. My wife used to make Irish stew for my dinner at night, and steak-and-kidney pie; now all I get is something out of a can, with her watching them soap operas all afternoon . . . This okay right here, ma'am?"

"That's just fine, and thank you very much, Mr. Joslin."

The truck drove off in a flurry of gravel.

"Well," said Miss Mullins. "No use uncrating it, I suppose."

"Who'll buy it without seeing it first?" objected Miss Sims reasonably. "No one's going to buy a pig in a poke."

"We should have asked Mr. Joslin to uncrate it for us," Miss Mullins said doubtfully.

"Oh, I'll do it," said Miss Sims.

"Do be careful," warned Miss Mullins. "Don't break the picture tube."

"Did I break the other two picture tubes?" retorted Miss Sims with dignity, as she went to the cellar for tools.

"Well," said Miss Mullins, after the unpacking, "it's real nice, isn't it? That maple wood, and the fine big screen. I wonder how we're going to get it out of here, now we've got it in?"

"We could hardly leave it outside all night," said Miss Wilson. "The weather forecast is for rain."

"Why not let the person who buys it just pick it up in his car?" suggested Margi.

“Dear, we can’t sit and wait for someone to come to us and offer to buy it,” Miss Mullins said, as if surely that must be quite clear to anyone of reasonable intelligence. “Regina used to say that my prizes always sold much faster by taking them around to the different houses so that people could just step out to the car and see them. It has something to do with the psychology of salesmanship, I believe,” she finished vaguely.

“That’s just fine,” said Margi. “But how are you going to get *this* into the car?”

“Oh, we’ll manage. There’s a small trailer that hooks on to the back of the car. Regina often used it. We’ll manage.”

Margi shook her head at them. She had never known anyone with as many answers to everything as these three had!

An hour later, with the tarpaulin-covered television set safely loaded on the Heirloom’s trailer, Margi sat with the three spinsters in the living-room drinking Miss Sims’ overpoweringly black coffee. From a previously compiled list of names, the three were discussing the pros and cons of this one and that one as possible customers for a television set, and one by one, by the process of names scratched off by elimination, only three were left. Johnson, Golland, Granger. Apart from her understanding that the three families lived in the neighbourhood, the names meant nothing to Margi.

“Margi will drive the car,” announced Miss Sims. “Now, which of us will go with her to do the job of selling?”

No one said a word.

Margi saw their glances converge hopefully on her.

“I think Margi is the one to do it,” decided Miss Sims. “And it will be a fine way for her to get acquainted with some of her new neighbours.”

“Yes, dear, it will,” agreed Miss Wilson.

“Then that’s settled,” said Miss Sims. “More coffee, anyone?”

I’ve been shanghaied, thought Margi. But the whole episode was so outrageously high-handed that she burst out laughing. “All right, I’ll sell your television set for you,” she said to Miss Mullins. “How did you win it, anyway?”

“By saying in twenty-five words what I liked most about Golloway’s Seventy-fifth Anniversary Sale,” said Miss Mullins proudly.

CHAPTER SIX

The first of the three on Margi's list, the following day, was the widow Johnson. She came to the door, moon-faced and pleasant. She was wearing an apron, and on her head she had a brown paper bag. Margi stared. "Oh, this!" With complete unselfconsciousness Mrs. Johnson removed the brown paper bag and smiled at Margi. "I've been spring-cleaning the attic, and this protects my hair from dust and cobwebs. Do come in. I didn't catch your name? If you're selling something, maybe you'd better tell me right off what it is. No use wasting my time and yours on something I don't want or can't afford."

"As a matter of fact, I *am* selling something, Mrs. Johnson. I'm Margi Leigh—"

"Why, you're the girl Regina left her house to!"

"Yes, I—"

"Well, now, isn't it nice of you to come calling on me? Come in and sit down." She scooped a tabby cat off the divan in the living-room, sat down, and patted the rep cushion beside her for Margi. "Someone told me—Joe's wife, at the service station, you know?—that you were Regina's nurse at the hospital."

"Yes, I was. I—"

"You must be the one who took her those Gilbert and Sullivan recordings?"

"Yes, I—"

"Now that was very kind and thoughtful of you, I must say. Though I never did hold much with Regina's taste in music. I like a waltz, a real nice waltz. Relaxing, you know? I'm a great one for Strauss. I used to play *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, and some of the others—before my fingers got knotted up like this with arthritis. My husband—my late husband, that is—used to say it set his toes tapping just to hear me play Strauss on the piano. All our family was musical. My sister played the violin and my mother the mandolin and my brother the guitar. Do you play a musical instrument, Miss Leigh?"

“Well, no, I— —”

“A pity, a great pity. In my generation we all had music lessons, talent or no talent. Many’s the hour I’ve sat and practised my scales to the metronome, and thought what a tyrant my mother was for keeping me at it! Later, though, I was grateful she’d been so strict with me. I used to play the church organ. Before the country churches had electric organs, that was, and we had to pump wind into ’em with our feet. It certainly kept an organist very busy, I can tell you! I’ve often thought I’d never have caught my husband—my late husband, that is—if he hadn’t been so fond of music. Soloist in the church choir, he was. Tenor, a fine strong voice. Nowadays, though, children don’t learn to play musical instruments, do they? They’ve all got TV.”

“That’s why I came to see you this morning,” Margi cut in quickly. “I wondered if you might be interested in buying a television set, Mrs. Johnson? Miss Mullins— —”

“Ha, another of her contest prizes, I’ll wager!” Mrs. Johnson laughed and threw up her hands. “Looks like you’ve stepped right into Regina’s shoes, all right. Regina was for ever selling off something Miss Mullins won in a contest. This is the second television set she’s won, I think.”

“The third,” said Margi.

“Bless me, you don’t say. She’s got real talent along that line, hasn’t she? Or maybe you’d call it luck. *I* never won anything in all my life, unless you’d count the book of Tennyson’s poems in a oratorical contest at high school. A debate, it was. The four members of the winning team each got a leather-bound volume of Tennyson’s poems.”

Undoubtedly the opposing four never had a chance to open their mouths! Margi thought amusedly.

“So you are selling Miss Mullins’ television set,” said Mrs. Johnson. “Well, now, I reckon you’ve picked the wrong house for a sale, this time. I don’t go in much for the new gadgets. Each one is just one more thing to go wrong and have to have fixed. My daughter, now—my married daughter, that is—lives in Detroit. Have you ever lived in Detroit? No?”

“No, I— —”

“Well, she’s got just about every new-fangled gadget that’s ever been invented, and then some. And she’s everlastingly got some repair man in, fixing up this or that that’s gone wrong and won’t work. She’s got one of them air conditioners built into the wall, controls humidity as well as

temperature, you know? Even provides heat for chilly autumn days before the central heat is turned on. And you know what? I was visiting her in Detroit last July—you remember the heat-wave we had? And there was that air conditioner, out of order and pouring more heat into a house that was already ninety-five on the thermometer! They had to tear out three walls to find out what was wrong.”

Margi smiled. “Well, now — —”

“My daughter has one of them home fire-alarm systems, too. Fire detectors in every room, including the attic and the basement, to immediately detect a fire and start a bell ringing. There’s even a light-control panel to show where the fire is. And you know what? In the middle of the night, a month ago while I was there visiting, lights lit up and bells started ringing all over the house—and no fire! Just something wrong with the circuit. My, what a time we had locating a man to come in the middle of the night to fix the circuit!”

“I can imagine,” Margi murmured.

“No, I don’t hold with the new-fangled gadgets. If I ever have a fire, heaven forbid, my nose’ll smell smoke soon enough and tell me where it is. Now, you take them automatic washer-dryer combinations. Come Monday washday, there’s always something goes wrong, and where are you? Back to the old washboard! As for TV, from what I’ve seen and heard, just when you’re all settled down to listen to some programme you particularly want, there’s trouble in transmission, or nothing but snow on the screen, or the power goes off! No, if I want music. I’ve got my piano. I can still play a bit, even with this arthritis. And if I want to see a good picture, I’ll go to the cinema.”

Margi finally escaped.

The next name on her list was Mrs. Golland. Turn right on the first street after you leave Mrs. Johnson’s, Miss Sims had directed. Margi turned right. The Gollands’ was the third farm, an old stone house that looked as if it had grown into the soil, deep-rooted and solid. A box hedge was clipped to a T-square edge, the evergreens shaped and trimmed, the window curtains starched and frilled. Margi knocked on the back door.

Mrs. Golland was small, wiry, grey-haired, with an embroidered apron over a print house dress. Margi said, “Good morning. I’m Margi Leigh — —”

“Oh, from Regina House! Come in, if you don’t mind sitting in the kitchen until my biscuits are done. They’re just about ready to come out of

the oven, and we'll have some hot with honey and a pot of tea. My, you're a lot younger than I thought you'd be! You were Regina's nurse while she was ill, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was."

"Regina was real fond of you, she told me."

"I was fond of her, too." That surprised Margi. It was true, but even to herself she hadn't admitted it, until now. "Mrs. Golland, I— — Would you be interested in buying a television set? I have one to sell for Miss Mullins."

"Goodness, wouldn't you think some of those contests she tries would pay off in cash instead of merchandise?"

"Well," Margi smiled, "it would be a lot less trouble for Miss Mullins if they did!"

Mrs. Golland went to the window and drew back the curtain. "You see that garage out there? That's one of Miss Mullins' prizes. She won it a week after a tornado cut through the yard and lifted our garage right off its foundations as if it was cardboard. Freakish things, tornadoes, aren't they? Didn't touch anything else but the garage, and no one ever saw it again. I will say Miss Mullins' prefabricated garage came in real handy—but you've come to the wrong place to try to sell a television. Our children bought us one just last week. An anniversary gift, fiftieth wedding anniversary. My son is coming next week to fix up an aerial for us."

"Oh," said Margi. She rose. Two down, one to go. She hoped a disappointment wasn't in the offing for Miss Mullins.

"You're not going until you've had some biscuits and tea," said Mrs. Golland firmly. She opened the oven door. "There, done beautifully. I couldn't have timed them better if I'd known ahead of time that you were coming! Now, I'll just set the pan there on the table and make us some tea."

The kitchen was like a box of sunlight. The floors shone with wax. Copper pans gleamed in a tidy row behind the electric range. Margi thought of the kitchen back on Marmora Street, with its worn linoleum that never would take a shine even with wax; its back-yard view of tenement tops and factory chimneys, its dilapidated old furniture.

Maybe it was because her kitchen was so defeating, so utterly depressing, that Ma spent as little time in it as possible. Margi couldn't remember her ever baking up a batch of biscuits like these. Any visitors Ma had were served something from the corner bakery . . . Margi thought, *This*

is the sort of kitchen Sam and I will have, shining and inviting and homey. I'll learn to cook, too!

She left Mrs. Golland's with some biscuits wrapped in waxed paper and a jar of honey for the three spinsters. The Grangers' farm was two miles farther along the road. It was a white frame house fretworked with fragile shadows from three silver birches. The red barn had a silver roof. Chickens and geese drowsed in the sun inside a fenced enclosure. Margi watched them for a moment, thinking, It must be wonderful to grow up in a place like this! But there was a silence over everything, and even before she knocked on the door, Margi felt instinctively that no one was at home. She waited, knocked again, and finally went back to the Heirloom.

The sun was high overhead, now. A noon hush lay over the countryside. Margi drove carefully over the rough gravel road, mindful of the fragile parts of the television set. The tarpaulin would protect it from dust, anyway. The spinsters would be disappointed at seeing her return with it, but with their India rubber resiliency they'd bounce right back to cheerfulness and optimism. Such hopeful, trusting souls! Margi didn't know whether to laugh at them or feel sorry for them. Certainly, in all her realistic life, Margi had never encountered anyone like them.

She crossed a road and turned east back to Regina House. A hundred yards back from the road, at the corner, was a small house hardly larger than a cabin. It was half-buried in underbrush, weeds, and a tangle of golden glow and sunflowers. There was no television aerial, and on a spur-of-the-moment impulse Margi turned in at the weed-grown driveway. The house was not on the spinsters' list, but it might be worth a try.

The shiny, cream-coloured convertible parked in the back-yard surprised her; a low-slung, very expensive model completely at variance with the shabby-happy little house. Someone was picking out notes on a piano as she walked towards the open door.

"Hello?" she called, knocking. "Anybody home?"

"Of course somebody's home," answered an irate masculine voice. "Who do you think is playing this piano—gremlins?"

Margi grinned. "That certainly was a silly question."

"Well, come in, now you're here. Come in, and tell me how you tracked me down. The only person in the world who knows where I am is my agent, and he wouldn't tell you if you twisted his arm off."

Margi walked into a large room furnished with a piano, a divan, a coffee table, two chairs, and nothing more. The bad-tempered young man was tall, loose-limbed, and badly in need of a haircut. He was wearing moccasins, slacks, a T-shirt. “Well?” He glared at Margi.

“I am Margi Leigh,” she said. “I didn’t track you down. I don’t even know your name.”

He looked fiercely at her, then gradually his scowl smoothed itself out. “I’m sorry. I mistook you for one of the bright and beautiful young females who are for ever hounding me— —”

“Hounding you? Why?”

“No matter.” He laughed. “I’m Charles Gregor.”

Everyone knew who Charles Gregor was, though this shack far from New York was the last place Margi would have thought of meeting the composer of the songs for three top musicals. He said, “Young unknown actresses think I can help them get on the stage. I can’t, you know. All I do is write music.”

“Well, I’m not an actress and I don’t want to go on the stage,” Margi said crisply.

“Oh, a local girl?”

“Only temporarily. At the moment. I’m selling a television set.”

“Really?”

“It’s outside, on my car’s trailer.”

“I don’t want a television set, thank you. I came here to get away from television, among other distractions. I’m halfway through the music for a new show, and it’s turning out to be rough going. This shack of mine, ‘far from the madding crowd’, is the only place I’ve found where I can have peace and privacy while I work.”

“I see,” said Margi, in the same crisp tone. “And I can take a hint. I’m sorry I interrupted you. Goodbye, Mr. Gregor.”

He laughed. “Oh, sit down and talk to me. I can take five minutes off. I’m stuck on this thing, anyway. Cigarette?”

She accepted one from the pack he offered. “I suppose song writing can be terribly frustrating, sometimes.”

“It’s always frustrating, until you get the idea. The right idea. The new, original, right idea. Miss Leigh, people don’t just rattle off rhymes and tunes like that—” He snapped his fingers. “My current problem is to write a song for a girl who is heartbroken over a lost love. It calls for rivers of tears, if you want to be downright corny. It just happens that I’m fed up with rivers of tears. Tin Pan Alley is awash in a flood of tears these days, have you noticed? You either cry, cry, cry—or you don’t have a top hit. I’ve reached the saturation point. I’m pretty darned sure the only legitimate place for tears is when you’re peeling onions!”

He pointed an accusing finger at her. “Tell me something. If you lost the man you loved, would you sit down and cry about it? I’ll bet you wouldn’t. It’s too downright mid-Victorian. You’d go right out and get yourself another man.”

Margi said slowly, “I’d rather die than cry.”

“You see? That’s what I mean!” He stopped dead and stared at her. “Why, that’s *it*,” he said softly, unbelievably. Excitement trembled in his voice. “That’s *it*. That’s the idea I’ve been beating my brains out for. And you walk in here out of nowhere and give it to me! *I’d rather die than cry*. That’s my title, honey. You’ve given me my song. You’ve given me my title on a lovely silver platter.”

“I have?”

“You certainly have, bless you! Now, get out of here. I’ve got to get it down on paper. Go home. Go sell your television set . . . Say, how much do you want for that television set?”

Margi mentioned the price agreed upon by the spinsters.

“I’ll buy it,” said Charles Gregor. “I’ll give it to my young nephew for a birthday present. You gave me a song, so to square things I’ll buy your television set. Fair enough?”

“But you haven’t even seen it!”

“Does it work?”

“It should. It’s brand new.”

“It’s not stolen property, is it?”

“Do I look like a thief?”

He grinned. “As a matter of fact, you look remarkably honest. I’ll take your word that the set works, and that it is not stolen property.” He fished a

cheque-book out of his jacket pocket on a chair back. "Shall I make this out to you?"

"No, to—to Miss Rebecca Mullins."

He wrote quickly, handed the cheque to her. "There."

"But how are you going to carry the set in? It took four of us to load it on the trailer."

"Look, you just unhook the trailer and leave it here. I'll get a man to help me unload it. You can pick your trailer up tomorrow, can't you? Or I'll bring it back to you. Where do you live?"

Margi told him. "Three miles north, one east. You can't possibly miss Regina House. It has a big wrought-iron gate. No, on second thoughts, I'll call in tomorrow and pick the trailer up myself."

"Don't trust me, eh?"

Margi said wickedly, "As a matter of fact, you look remarkably honest!" She grinned. "It's just that when you get into that song I'm afraid you'll forget me and my trailer."

But he did not forget. After dinner that evening, Margi saw the cream-coloured convertible pull up in front of the house with the trailer in tow. She went out to him. "Well, thank you, Mr. Gregor!" she called.

"Look at that sunset, will you!" He stood, his feet spread wide apart, his hands lifted in an embracing gesture. "I know people who spend hours in art galleries looking at some artist's expression of his distorted outlook on life—and here's real art, a thing of beauty and incomparable joy, right from your own front doorstep!" He looked at Margi. "People are funny, aren't they?"

"Now, there is a real pleasant young man," said Miss Sims, after Charles Gregor's departure. "I wonder"—she cocked her head to one side consideringly—"I wonder if he has any more nephews with birthdays?"

"Oh, not another television set!" groaned Margi, with a jolt of dismay.

"No, a cocker spaniel puppy," Miss Sims said with a philosophical shrug. "Mullins' prize for naming a new dog food. Well, I suppose we'll have to make out another list. With my dog, Dome, we certainly don't need another. Let's see, now, who do we know who might be interested in buying a pedigree cocker spaniel pup?"

Margi didn't ask who would be relegated to the rôle of salesman. She already knew! This whole thing was going too far, getting entirely out of hand. The spinsters were subtly fitting her into their lives, into their pattern of behaviour, into the community—as if they had already settled it among themselves that she had come to Regina House for no other reason than to take Miss West's place permanently! It was unfair of them to assume that she had no life of her own to live, away from Regina House . . . Yet though she steeled herself against the spinsters and their gentle claims upon her, Margi felt amazingly light-hearted. It had been quite a day, all in all, and she couldn't be anything but happy at not having had to disappoint the spinsters by towing their television set back, unsold.

A few days later Margi came on Miss Mullins backing guiltily out of an upstairs clothes cupboard.

“Oh, it's you!” Miss Mullins was obviously relieved as she recognized Margi. “I was afraid it might be Miss Sims.”

“Afraid?”

“It would never do to have her find out where I've hidden her Christmas present,” said Miss Mullins in a conspiratorial voice.

“But Christmas is four months off!”

“Oh, we start gathering our gifts early in the season. We make most of them, you see, and it takes time. Haven't you noticed that Miss Wilson has taken to sewing late in her room at night, so we won't see what she's working on?”

Remembering a pencil of light several nights in a row under Miss Wilson's door, Margi nodded.

“And Miss Sims is up to something in her garage workshop,” Miss Mullins said. “Last year she took up pottery, and everybody got vases from her for Christmas. This year, I think it's fretwork.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I just tuck away one of my contest prizes, now and then. I've just hidden a power lawn mower in this cupboard. I won it for the last line of a jingle. I had quite a time getting it in and hidden away without Miss Sims seeing it, believe me! My secret is safe with you, isn't it, Margi?”

“Safe as a church.” Long before Christmas, she would be gone from here; the house would be sold and she would be on her way, far from the spinsters and their problems, their eccentricities, their secrets. She thought bleakly, It won’t be much of a Christmas for the spinsters this year, if they no longer have a roof over their heads. *Where will they go?* But let somebody else worry about that. It was no concern of Margi’s, no responsibility of hers—was it?

The time to have told Miss Wilson that the house was to be sold, that she wouldn’t be here for Christmas, was when Miss Wilson asked her if she would mind having a dress pattern pinned on her for size. “I’m making a dress for my niece,” Miss Wilson explained. “She is exactly your size.”

Amused by the flimsy subterfuge, Margi allowed herself to be pinned into the paper pattern. Obviously, this was to be Margi’s Christmas present. A surprise. Touched, and feeling oddly guilty, Margi played Miss Wilson’s little game through with her. It would be thoroughly heartless to say flatly, “I’ll only be here a little while longer; you’re wasting your time on a gift for me.”

Day by day, it grew more difficult to tell them that the house was to be sold; day by day, Margi put it off, dreading the inevitable moment when she would have to be blunt and cruel and tell them the truth.

Or did they guess the truth? Were they, as carefully and deliberately as Margi herself, evading the issue? Burying their heads in sand?

“I’ve bought advance tickets for the autumn fair tomorrow at Everly,” Miss Sims announced at breakfast one morning. “There is to be a lucky number draw on a dream house. Only advance ticket holders are eligible for the prize.”

“What on earth would we do with a house if we won it?” asked Miss Wilson.

There was a sudden silence. A too-long, significant silence. Then Miss Sims said brightly, “Oh, there’ll be time enough to worry about that if and when the time comes. Is there plenty of petrol in the car, Margi?”

“I filled the tank yesterday.”

“Good. It’s only a two-hour drive. If we start right after breakfast, we can get there before noon, and have the whole afternoon to look around and enjoy ourselves.”

“We?” Margi said faintly.

Miss Sims' eyes widened innocently. "Why, yes. I took it for granted you'd want to go with us, Margi. Of course, if you'd rather not, we can get a ride with the Grangers, I'm sure. They have a station wagon; plenty of room for the three of us."

"I'll drive you," said Margi fiercely, slapping marmalade on her toast.

"That's lovely of you, dear," said Miss Sims. "Have you ever been to a country fair?"

"No, I haven't."

"You'll enjoy it, I'm sure."

"I'm sure I shall," Margi said grimly.

They ignored her tone.

"Autumn fairs," said Miss Mullins mildly, "are a dying institution, I'm afraid. The small country fairs, that is. A pity, I think, don't you?"

The two spinsters chorused yes, but Margi poured herself another cup of coffee and wished crossly that they would stop dragging her into their activities. Just let her alone; that's all she wanted! Not to get involved. Not to get any more entangled in their lives than she already was. Not to be leaned on, depended, counted upon—as if, by inheriting Miss West's house, she had also inherited her duties and obligations.

Nevertheless, Margi enjoyed her day at the fair. They ate candied apples and hot dogs, drank pop, rode the big wheel, went through the Fun House, saw the flower exhibit, toured the agricultural and manufacturing buildings, filled shopping bags with samples, saw the grandstand performance and finally held their breaths as the winner's ticket on the dream house was drawn to a fanfare of trumpets.

They didn't win the house. In her heart, Margi had known that they wouldn't. A solution to the problem facing the spinsters wasn't going to be as easy as drawing a lucky number from twenty thousand tickets in a drum at a country fair.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As usual, it had been a slow summer in Memorial Hospital's physiotherapy wing. With temperatures in the eighties and nineties, patients were reluctant to endure heat treatments and exercise. But by late September physiotherapy was back on a full-time schedule.

One Saturday morning a woman with a fractured hip was learning to walk again. Two patients were dozing under diathermy and an elderly man, waiting for a free machine, was hopefully informing the receptionist that he'd give ten bucks, yes sir, ten smackeroos for a chaw of t'bacco. In the whirlpool bath a red-haired boy was whistling bird-song imitations, and one elderly lady, a new patient, told Shenna Vaughn that she didn't care one scrap whether or not she ever learned to get about on crutches. What was the use? By the time she was out of the hospital, she would have lost her house in doctor's bills and be out on the street. But this was her first day in physiotherapy. She'd change her mind about getting well. They all did, with hope to make life more bearable . . .

And that's my job, Shenna thought. *To give them hope*. She pushed the wheel-chair out to the lift, rode up with her patient, delivered her to the floor nurse. "I'll see you on Monday," she said with the special tenderness she always felt for these dear old ones.

In the corridor, a doctor fell in step beside her.

"Hello, there," said Sam.

Shenna smiled around at him. "Oh, hello!"

"Busy day?"

She glanced at the big electric clock on the wall. "I'm off in ten minutes." Physiotherapy closed at noon on Saturdays.

"This is my free——" Sam began. But his name came over the loudspeaker. *Dr. Ryall, Dr. Ryall report to surgery*. "There goes my lunch hour!" he said ruefully.

Watching him swing off down the corridor, Shenna thought, *And there goes my date for tonight*.

Or was she mistaken in assuming that he had been on the verge of making a date?

Janet Drew, a floor nurse, rode the lift down with Shenna. Janet had seen the brief encounter. “He’s nice, isn’t he?”

Shenna shrugged off the pulse-feeler.

But Janet rattled on. “Everyone was so relieved when his romance with Margi fizzled out.”

Shenna couldn’t help herself. “Margi?”

“My room-mate through training school,” Janet said. “Margi Leigh. Boy, was she hard! You could cut glass with her tongue. I don’t know what made her that way. She never told us anything about herself—but she was after a doctor, *that* was no secret. ‘Get what you want’ was Margi’s motto. Dr. Ryall didn’t have a chance, poor guy. We could all smell orange blossoms, then—pffft! It was all off. Margi jilted him, of course. If she’d wanted him, she’d never have let him off the hook. I guess she didn’t want a husband in hock for his medical equipment, thought she could do better. Lucky for him! Margi’s not at the hospital now. I don’t know where she is. Nobody seems to know. Do you know her?”

“No, I don’t.” Gossip, Shenna thought, how I hate it. Especially when it involved Sam Ryall . . . Surprisingly, he had not tried to make a date with her, though Monk was in the habit, now, of bringing Sam to Saturday-night parties. Not that Shenna was vain enough to think she had made a spectacular impression—but adequate, surely? Something was there between them; real, worth following through. Something mutual, or felt only by herself?

Was Sam Ryall to be just another of the intelligent, normal, likable men in her life?

Shenna reported off duty at the desk, changed to heather-coloured tweeds in the locker-room, left the hospital. Pigeons strutted in full sunshine; dry maple leaves sifted down. The staff parking lot full of two-tone cars was colourful as a flower bed. Shenna slid under the wheel of her convertible and rolled the top down.

A luxury car. And out of uniform a luxury girl. Wealth was her aura, and motorists in the stream of traffic admired her casual elegance as much as her imported car.

Through-traffic had to skirt the enclosed residential community where Shenna lived. Planned long ago to serve the residents only, the streets wound and twisted and looped back upon themselves. Smooth lawns, formal gardens, terraces.

The Vaughn house had leaded windows, a red shale roof, ivy-covered walls. The entrance hall was cool, marble-floored, a harp-like balustrade, hand-blocked French scenic wallpaper. Shenna shed gloves and jacket and went straight to the kitchen.

“I’m starved, Mrs. Somers!” she greeted the housekeeper, a well-corseted power-house of energy. “Where’s everybody?”

“Your father’s lunching at the club; your mother has a tray on the terrace. I fixed one for you. Want me to carry it out?”

“I will.” Shenna peeked under the linen napkin. “Mmmm, cheese in the celery. Thanks, Mrs. Somers.”

The terrace was beyond french doors. “Hi!” she called to her mother. “Super day, h’m?”

Mrs. Vaughn was on a chaise with her shoes kicked off, a slight sun-tanned woman in slacks. “I adore this time of year.”

Shenna said indulgently, “You adore sub-zero blizzards and heat-waves, too!” *Because she is happy*, Shenna thought. *Happy in her marriage, happy in me, happy in herself*. Unrest stirred vaguely in Shenna. She would not have changed places with anyone in the world, but whatever it was her mother had, Shenna hadn’t found it yet.

Lunch over, Shenna jumped up. “Any calls for me, relay them to Ryrie’s, please? I’m going over to help her choose her wedding-dress design.”

“How that child has jumped from pigtails to a bridal veil!”

“Ryrie’s the same age as I am, Mother.”

“Twenty-one—real ancients!”

Shenna laughed and went in. She showered, changed to plaid slacks and a silk blouse, slung a cashmere cardigan over her shoulders and walked the two blocks to Ryrie James’.

Ryrie was on her back terrace surrounded by fashion drawings. “Help!” she appealed to Shenna. “Shall I drip with lace or be slinky in satin? Or rustle down the aisle in twenty petticoats?”

Shenna cross-legged herself on the grass. “I’d just stab a pin.”

“Don’t be frivolous! This wedding has to be done up in the grand manner for a horde of incoming relatives. To say nothing of portraits for the family album. How do you like this Maggy Rouff?”

“Very elegant.”

“Let’s pray I keep my sun-tan, or I’ll look like a mottled egg.”

“You’ll be beautiful,” Shenna said.

Ryrie smiled bemusedly. “What I wear isn’t really important, Shen. It could be a gunnysack. The thing is to get married to Monk. The faster the better.”

“Ah, luh-huh-huv,” groaned Shenna.

“And just remember I haven’t a monopoly on it!” Ryrie gave Shenna a look from under her lashes. “Do you see anything of Sam Ryall around the hospital?”

“Now *there’s a non sequitur!*”

“Uh-hunh?”

Shenna’s grin faded. “All right, so there’s a spark. I’d better dowse it before it’s a full blaze.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want a rebound romance, Ryrie.”

“Who does?”

“Sam’s just been jilted. A girl at the hospital. A nurse; a go-getter.”

“Wrong version, Shen. Sam dropped *her*.”

“That’s not the way I heard it.”

“I hear things, too.” Ryrie studied a thin silhouette drawing as if she were memorizing its outlines. “Sam hasn’t a dime, you know. When he marries, he— — Oh, let’s not quibble. A wife with money would be a big help.”

“Oh, no! That’s why he—that little nurse— —”

“That’s why.”

This must be true. Ryrie almost never said derogatory things like that. Had it come from Monk? But gossip wasn’t Monk’s line, either . . .

“Don’t look like that, Shen! It’s not as bad as all that.”

It was unrealistic, of course, to put doctors on pedestals, to look on them as a special breed of men with an invulnerable code of rudimentary ethics. It was unrealistic, it was utterly juvenile. But . . .

“Don’t blame Sam,” Ryrie said. “It’s a well discussed and honestly admitted fact that some of the very nicest housemen consider it advisable to fall in love with a wealthy girl. No—listen to me, Shen. I’m not saying it’s admirable. But we might as well face facts. Sam’s going to be a G.P. For quite a few years it will be rough going. For Sam Ryall, the price of high ideals is overwork and unfair competition.”

“Oh, bunk. You don’t believe that any more than I do.” Shenna made a fist in her slacks’ pocket. “Marrying for money is no good. Why try to dress it up in respectability?”

Ryrie said lamely, “I just thought you ought to know about Sam, before — —”

“Before I’m emotionally involved? So if he gets around to kissing me, I’ll see the mercenary glint in his eye? Thanks!”

Shenna could see Sam thoroughly researching Shenna Vaughn in the Sunday papers. Evaluating her emerald necklace in last winter’s Hunt Club Ball picture. The emeralds would set him up in practice, see him through the first rough years, with rainy-day security, too! By now, he’d know the size of the fortune she had inherited in her own name from the Grandfather Vaughn’s estate . . . “I feel sick.”

Ryrie sighed. “Why did I start all this?”

“Yes, why did you?”

“That spark in your eyes, Shen. I saw it when you looked at Sam. I was afraid you’d get hurt.”

“But a moment ago you made excuses for him!”

“All right, so I did. It’s utterly crazy, Shen, but I *like* the man!”

Shenna liked the man, too. She liked him very much. One reason, now, why she felt sick and smeared. To be so wrong in judgment! At work she prided herself on her quick appraisal of character traits; she always knew which patient could be cajoled or bullied or prodded into optimism. But about Sam Ryall she had been wrong.

Ryrie’s brother shouted from the door, “Telephone, Shenna!”

It was Sam. She knew it was Sam. Relay any calls, she'd told her mother, certain that Sam would somehow find a free minute to make that date. She was under no compulsion to talk to him. But she did.

"Tonight, Shenna?" Sam asked. "We could ride the ferry to the island, or walk along the lake-front. By skipping a couple of next week's lunches, I might even manage a film. Take your pick."

Guileless and eager, a disarming smile in his voice. An hour ago it would have fooled her. Now, all she had to say was, "Sorry, I'm busy." Instead, she heard herself saying, "A ferry ride sounds like fun."

"Then it's a date?"

"A date, Sam."

She needn't get hurt. She would go out with him, and thanks to Ryrie's warning, she needn't get hurt.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The furnishings of Margi's bedroom at Regina House were effectively simple; a sleigh bed and a cloth-draped bedside table. On one ivory wall was a painting of an olive-skinned girl in a red and blue dress. It was a print of Van Gogh's *Mousmé*, but Margi didn't know that. The draperies were bright, and underneath the windows were shelves of books. This had been Miss West's room, and Margi tightened her heart against a sense of the elderly woman's presence.

I'll keep this bed, she thought. It was unusual, like something in those impossibly tidy magazine pictures. Sam would adore it. What to do with all the furniture in the house was problematical. It would bulge the walls of a flat. Storage might be the answer, until she and Sam could afford to live in the grand manner. Or maybe an auction sale . . . if she could bring herself to sell off all Miss West's worldly possessions to the highest bidder. It seemed—well, unfeeling. *To Margi Leigh, my nurse, I leave my house and car and all my worldly goods*. It had the marriage-ceremony flavour; durable and solemn. Some obligation seemed involved. The obligation of inheritance, Burt Colladine would say.

She thought of yesterday's offer on the house. Contrary to Mr. Pringle's advice, Margi had turned it down. The sweet-faced old couple had fallen in love with the sweep of lawns and the century-old elms, but their down payment was too small. Five thousand dollars wasn't an impressive enough gift for Sam. The old couple had been visibly disappointed, but someone else would come along to meet her price. Soon, Margi hoped. Before it was too late. Maybe she should call Sam and tell him he could afford to marry her now? No—there would be more drama in a big cheque. Besides, as Holly said, Sam could hardly propose to the first wealthy girl he met. Wealthy girls had eyes in the back of their heads for gold diggers. Sam wouldn't ruin his chances by rushing. No, Margi could wait.

Meanwhile, the spinsters must be told that the house was for sale. Margi had ignored their curiosity about Mr. Pringle's calls, and the old couple yesterday, but she couldn't postpone telling them much longer.

Sunlight was pouring into the room. Margi crossed to the window. The pull of the place was on her again, its calm and quiet. Trees were only half-foliaged, now; there was the smell of leaf-smoke, splashes of sumac beyond

the stone wall. Down on the lawn. Miss Wilson was dressed in her best for church, waiting for the other two. A week ago they had walked the mile to church, and pretended not to mind being dusty-shoed and weary after the walk back.

Margi threw up the window. "Miss Wilson!" she called down. They were too old for that long walk. "I'll drive you to church." Heck, why not?

They were waiting for her in a patch of shade. They came over to the car, three sizes and shapes in stereotyped crêpe dresses and knitted stoles and neat gloves. But what really made them look alike, poured from the same mould, was their facial expression: honest as daylight, and good.

"Oh, you've forgotten your hat," said Miss Mullins. "I'll run in and get it for you, dear."

Margi froze. Oh, *no*. They weren't interpreting her offer to drive them to church as . . . Good grief, they *were*. They thought she was going along to church with them.

Margi could count her church-goings on one hand; weddings and funerals. On Marmora Street, going to church on Sunday was like working on the Fourth of July. Ma always spent the day with the week-end papers, Margi shampooed her hair and manicured her nails and laundered her lingerie. If by accident, Margi tuned in a radio church service she switched to something else in a hurry. The ministers' holier-than-thou voices were put on, she felt, just for Sunday. She could never imagine them talking like that when they said, "Pass the toast," or "Do I have a clean shirt?"

She said flatly, "I haven't a hat."

"But, dear, you can't go to church without a hat." Miss Wilson had an idea. "I have a hat you can wear. The pink with the roses, remember?" She appealed to the two spinsters, who obligingly remembered. "It will look lovely, just lovely on Margi, won't it?"

Two more nods of approval, and off went Miss Wilson, the screen door shushing behind her as she entered the house.

Margi was panicky, backed into a corner. "Now, wait a minute!"

"It's a beautiful hat," said Miss Mullins reassuringly. "Miss Wilson made it herself, but we agreed it wasn't her type, exactly, so she never wore it. No one in church will recognize it, dear."

"I am not going to church with you," said Margi.

“But you said— —”

“I’ll drive you there, and pick you up after. That’s all.” Absolutely all.

But out sailed Miss Wilson, with the hat. Margi had never seen anything like it, except in old photographs of the Edwardian days. A toque affair, top-heavy with roses. And Miss Wilson’s face! All lit up with creative pride. Margi was trapped, and she knew it. She let Miss Wilson settle the hat on her head, but she wouldn’t look at herself in the rear-view mirror. If Sam could see her now! Well, he’d never get the chance to make fun of her, because this was something she’d never tell him about. Never.

The last bell was ringing in St. Andrew’s Church. Margi parked the car in an outbuilding, just a roof supported by wooden pillars, a relic of horse-and-buggy days.

The church was filled. There was an unrobed choir. The organist was playing Bach, though Margi didn’t know what it was, only that it sounded sort of technical and poetic. The spinsters’ pew was right up front. Margi felt like a refugee from a circus with all those bouncing roses. Gloves. She suddenly realized everyone was wearing gloves, like a uniform. She pushed her bare hands into her pockets and sat listening to the music.

Sun streamed in through a stained-glass window over the altar. A strange feeling took possession of Margi, quiet and sweet. She thought, I’d like to be married in a church. It had never occurred to her before. But a church wedding would be nice. Dignified and solemn. You’d get that from-this-day-forward feeling for ever in your bones.

The minister came in through a little door, stepped up on the pulpit platform. The music died away. He rose and said, “Hymn 132.”

His voice was a surprise. It was neither sepulchral nor marrow-bonish. He even sang the hymn with the rest. Margi shared a hymn-book with Miss Sims and just stood there like a totem pole. Everyone seemed to know half the words by heart. Miss Wilson didn’t even have a hymn-book, but she didn’t miss a bar. Well, if you went to church regularly, you couldn’t help knowing all the words in the hymn-book and all the tunes. Margi bet there wasn’t one in this whole congregation who could sing all the lyrics of the top ten hit-parade numbers, the way she could. It was all what you got used to, the way you were brought up.

The minister prayed. He made a few announcements. The choir sang an anthem. The offertory . . . Margi’s face burned as the plate moved towards her. No money with her! But Miss Mullins slipped a coin into her hand. The

minister began his sermon. “My text this morning is found in Second Chronicles, the fourteenth chapter, the second verse: ‘And Asa did what was right and good in the eyes of the Lord.’”

Right and good. Well, people probably got by if they never did anything really bad, Margi thought. If they never violated the principles of morality. Then she stopped listening and was back on Marmora Street, seven years old, the day after Pa’s funeral. “Ma, where *is* Pa?”

“With the angels, God rest his soul,” Ma said.

“Ma, what’s a soul?”

Mrs. Leigh could no more have defined that essential part of a person’s identity, the centre of feelings and ideals and morals, than she could have explained Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. “Questions, questions!” She’d shooed Margi out to play. “Stop pestering me.”

From a brief exposure to Sunday school, Margi knew some of the dramatic highlights of the Bible; she knew about heaven and hell. Somehow she hadn’t been able to fit Pa in either place.

The sermon was over. There was the final hymn, the Doxology, the Benediction, and then the organ music again as the people rose and filed out. The minister was at the door shaking hands with his parishioners. Margi’s sponsors introduced her to everyone, and she shook hands and smiled stiffly.

It was a relief to be out in the Heirloom again.

“Were all those people friends of Miss West?” she asked on the way home.

“Oh, my, yes,” said Miss Mullins. “Just about everyone in the neighbourhood was a friend of Miss West.”

“Good friends?”

After a brief pause, Miss Mullins said gently, “A friend is one devoted to another by affection, regard, or esteem. ‘Good’ is a redundancy, don’t you think?”

All right, Miss molasses-mouth Mullins. When I want one of your Webster’s dictionary definitions I’ll ask for it! Margi bit her lip. “Then why didn’t one of her esteemed devoted friends inherit her house?”

“Choosing one’s beneficiary is a very serious business, I should think,” said Miss Mullins. “You have to be sure no one is slighted. There’s no mischief-maker like jealousy . . . If Miss West had singled out *one* of her

friends, the others might have felt injured. I expect she didn't want any fur to fly after she'd gone."

That was supposed to be a reasonable answer? Well, perhaps it was. As reasonable as any of the answers to all this. Undoubtedly, the spinsters would be just as reasonable about why *they'd* been passed over, too, but Margi couldn't quite bring herself to ask outright.

The tan-and-rust saloon was parked in front of the house. Burt Colladine jumped up off the grass as the Heirloom rattled to a stop.

"You've got some loose spring U-bolts," he said. He helped the spinsters alight and looked at Margi. "Greetings," he said, staring.

Margi snatched off the hat. *If he laughs in front of Miss Wilson, I'll push his face in!* "We have been to church," she said. *Just laugh, I dare you.* But if he was amused, Margi saw no sign of it.

"Shrimp casserole and cold chicken for lunch," said Miss Sims serenely, taking her nephew's arm. "Come on in and help Margi set the table."

The house smelled of furniture polish and floor wax and the oven casserole. Margi put the hat on a hall chair and followed Burt into the dining-room. He was already taking place mats from the sideboard drawer. "Make yourself at home!" she said, goaded by his assumption of familiarity.

"I'm going to miss all this," he said.

"All what?" Free meals, probably.

"The precious family privileges. This is my second home." He looked at her sideways. "You sold the house yet?"

"No."

"Any nibbles?"

"One."

"You turned it down!" he said delightedly.

"Only because the down payment was too small."

"Ah. Not big enough to justify keeping it, as a fisherman would say. Do you like to fish?"

"I've never tried it."

"Too bad. If I ever get that plane, I'll take you to Canada and show you a fisherman's paradise."

“Gee, thanks!” she said sweetly.

She counted out the silver, sterling, thin and lustrous with age and loving care. *This I'll keep for Sam and me.*

“Louis XVth,” said Burt. “The dickens to clean, all those curves.”

Wild horses couldn't have dragged a confession from Margi that she hadn't known the name of the pattern. Marriage with Sam would require knowledge of so many things that people like he and Burt Colladine grew up knowing! This table, for instance; it looked like just any old round table; but it was probably a period piece . . . Well, there were books. Culture came kit-packaged nowadays. She could learn. Meanwhile, she could only trust her own taste. The bold pattern of the hooked rugs suddenly appealed to her. *I'll keep those*, she decided defiantly.

Lunch over, Burt said, “Margi and I will wash up.”

If he'd suggested a channel swim, Margi couldn't have been more surprised. On Marmora Street, the kitchen was woman's domain.

Through the window above the sink, they could see the serene sweep of fields, the clumps of evergreens, the white farmhouses and red barns. “Let's go for a walk,” Burt suggested. “Get your hat.”

Here it came, his laughter. Margi glared at him. “You know very well that's not my hat!”

He grinned. “Yep. I happened to be here for the sewing-on of the roses. How come you were wearing it? Lose a bet, or something?”

“Just don't talk about it,” Margi said coldly.

The sun was warm, the sky blue. Cardinals flashed red through thin foliage. “Ever hear them whistle?” Burt asked. Margi shook her head. Before coming to Regina House, she'd never seen a cardinal. “In August they lose their voices,” Burt said. “Wait till nesting time. They're better than an alarm clock.”

Nesting time was May. “I won't be here.”

An old pine-stump fence was hung with bittersweet. They climbed over and scrambled down a pebbly incline. Margi had to empty her shoes. Burt steadied her. Their faces were close. He really had an elegant nose, Margi thought, straight and snooty. Hard, clean, square face-lines. Laughter

crinkles around his eyes. Was he making fun of her? She shook off his hand. “Let’s go.”

They pushed through a windbreak of cobwebby cedars, and there was a creek. “It’s a torrent in April,” he said. He looked down at the pencil of water waiting for the freeze-up. “But you won’t be here, will you?”

They flung themselves down on the bank. “Don’t talk,” Margi said. “Just listen.”

He laughed. “To what?”

To all the crazy new sounds! Cricket-scrapes and bird-chirps and water-tinkles. Then, after a while, Burt’s voice chiming in, a lazy drone, going on about himself as if Margi had asked for his biography.

He was twenty-nine, a farmer’s son—and he quickly dispelled Margi’s illusions of the slouchy, straw-in-the-mouth, cartoonist’s type farmer. His father’s farm had power equipment, automatic heating, air conditioning, television, a deep-freeze, two bathrooms. Farmers, he said, were the most important people in the world. “Where do you suppose we get the food that keeps us alive?”

“Why did you ever leave such a dreamy place?”

He grinned. “I got a bad case of exploration and adventure from Simsy. The tales she brought us from the north! The gold to be dug out of the soil! The great and near-great in Canadian mining—Sandy McIntyre, Thayer Lindsley, Sir Harry Oakes. She made Davy Crockett and Dan’l Boone sound like pipsqueaks! Kidding aside, though, mine’s a vital job, Margi. Our national economy is rooted in mineral production—ever think of that? How many planes would fly or cars run without oil? What electric generating station could operate without copper? No uranium, and our national defence would be crippled. It’s a big field, a ceaseless challenge. I want to be in the picture—helping create new wealth, new industries, new jobs.”

He’d had a stint with the Air Force, college on his return from overseas. Now he was with James Enterprises. “A big outfit. Anthony James owns a fifty-million-dollar gold mine in Quebec.”

“So he hires you to look for *more* gold!”

He grinned at her. “Now it’s your turn. Tell me about Margi Leigh.”

But no one was getting the history of Margi’s life. Even Sam didn’t know it. One resolve grimly made when she entered training school was never to clutter up the future with the past. Not that it was shameful, but it

might be a social liability, detrimental to Sam's career. What if Sam's wife were passed up by committees and clubs because of her background? "I am a registered nurse," she told Burt.

"Where do your folks live?"

"Jasonville." That was safe enough. She needn't mention Marmora Street. "Pa's dead." She must learn not to say Pa and Ma. People like Burt Colladine and Sam said Mother and Dad.

Burt's eyes were on her brightly, expectantly. "Give!"

"That's all."

"You are the darnedest! I don't know why I bother with you." But he bent and kissed her lightly.

Margi hadn't known any companionable kisses. Other kinds she'd fought off, but "I like you!" was new. She had an unbelievable sense of warmth. Burt *liked* her. Usually people didn't. Not that she was exactly a pariah, but no one had ever singled her out as a friend. Nevertheless, Miss West must have liked her. Otherwise, why . . . And there she was. Back to that again. Always back to that.

Burt was looking at her, his cheeks sucked in like a harmonica player's. "Have you told them the house is for sale?"

Margi gripped her knees hard. "Yes."

Two days ago. She had been helping Miss Sims hang out the laundry, sheets white as the detergent ads., and she had thought about Ma for ever grumbling about her soot-speckled wash. "Boy, wouldn't Ma like to hang out her clothes in clean air like this!" she'd said.

And Miss Sims had said quite simply, "Why don't you ask your mother here?"

"For a visit? Well, maybe."

"To live. Why not? Plenty of room."

Then Margi had told her. "I'm going to sell the house."

Miss Sims just smiled and went on pegging up sheets, shock-absorbent as foam rubber.

"How did they take it?" Burt asked.

"Oh, fine." They seemed not to understand what it was all about. They reminded Margi of the silly sparrows she used to feed all winter. Long after

the snow was gone and the robins back, the sparrows went on sitting wing-to-wing on the clothes-line, stubbornly waiting—as if they expected the winter handout to last all summer. “They took it just fine,” she said dully to Burt.

That pleased him. “Under all those petticoats and strings of beads, they’re pretty rugged, I guess.”

Rugged! Darn it all, as far as being amenable to reason was concerned they were rocks. “They ought to be making plans,” she said angrily. “People have to know where they are going, and how to get there.”

“Like you?”

Well, why not? How could you accomplish anything if you didn’t think sensibly and make your decisions? “If you’re as strong as your decisions, you can’t help but win. You just have to be sure of the outcome before you start and not let anything get in the way.”

“Except your conscience,” Burt said.

“What has conscience got to do with it?” Margi made a pillow of her hands, dropped back and closed her eyes. “Two decisions I made when I was a kid. To be a nurse and marry a doctor.”

“Co-relative?”

She nodded.

“Mission half-accomplished,” he said lazily. “Why a doctor?”

It began when she was seven, with Pa’s stroke. Margi had gone for Dr. Jenkins, and he’d been out on a call and Mrs. Jenkins had asked her in to wait. It was a terribly hot day. Mrs. Jenkins had taken her into the living-room for a cool drink, and Margi had sat there sipping sweet-sour lemonade and memorizing the room—the books, the fresh flowers in a vase, the tidiness, the indefinable atmosphere of dignity and self-respect and friendliness. Everything she suddenly knew she wanted desperately, had never had, must have. She was seven. She thought being a doctor’s wife had given Mrs. Jenkins all this. So Margi would marry a doctor, and it would follow as the night the day that she would have all this, too, for herself. The dream changed slightly in form, with time; it was altered, varied, modified. But Margi never swerved from that day’s decision . . . She looked at Burt Colladine. “Doctors,” she said, not telling him a thing, “are so romantic.”

Burt laughed outright. “And have you found him, this visionary M.D.?”

If he hadn't laughed at her and angered her, she would never have divulged it, but out it came in a hot rush. "Yes, I have! And as soon as I sell the house and have the money, we'll be married."

There was a horrible red-faced hush as it sank in. Margi wished she could push a button and go into reverse. But now she had to go on, if only to prove to Burt Colladine that Sam wasn't a heel to marry for money. But the more she said, the worse it sounded. Her throat thickened queerly and clogged, "but you had to stand your ground for something you believed in, didn't you?"

Burt Colladine was looking at her strangely, as if he'd cut into a potato and found a dark-brown hollow inside; as if he'd like to turn up his coat collar and start walking somewhere else as fast as he could. Well, let him. This walk in the fields was his idea in the first place, and not a very good idea at that, as it was turning out.

"Do you know what I think?" he said deliberately. "I think you deserve him, whatever his name is. And he you. I think you deserve each other."

Insults suffered in a good cause were bearable, almost . . .

Burt rose. "Air's cooling off. Sun's going down. We'd better get back."

They walked to the house in silence. Margi thought, Well, we certainly got off to a very bad start! But what difference did it make? One afternoon by a dried-up stream wasn't supposed to set anything permanent in motion . . . was it?

CHAPTER NINE

It was a grey October day, with a cold, wild sky. A city wind ran with murderous frenzy through curbside litter and outdoor news-stands. The Heirloom, long past her heyday of a fast getaway on green lights, jerked along in the stream of cross-city traffic. If Margi's savings hadn't been running so perilously low, she'd have taken a taxi. She hoped the house would sell soon. It must.

Specifically, Margi had driven in to town to deliver a carton of dolls' wardrobes to the speciality shop for Miss Wilson. *My good deed for the day*, she thought dryly. But the altruistic motive was only half honest. Actually, after a week without a word from Mr. Pringle or a single prospective buyer for the house, she'd begun to get jittery.

Was she, heaven forbid, saddled with Regina House for ever? Had her refusal of that old couple's offer been too hasty and positive? Was she asking too much? But that lawyer, that Mr. Thorpe, had made his quick appraisal, and Mr. Pringle hadn't quivered a muscle at her price. *He* certainly ought to know property values.

Well, she'd talk it over with Holly Shore. Ask Holly's advice. Never having asked anyone for comfort or reassurance didn't necessarily mean it was shameful, did it?

Her old boarding-house street was noisier than usual. Much noisier. And then, up ahead, Margi saw the bulldozers and cranes and working crews. What in the world was going on here? Two whole blocks demolished! Margi parked at the curb and got out. Holly's house was half gone . . . walls two bricks thick, huge timber beams, and on the ground roof-sheeting an inch thick and tongue-and-grooved a foot wide. Shingles everywhere. There was something vaguely obscene in the exposure of interior walls and plumbing . . . Margi turned away and stopped a workman.

"What's all this about?" she shouted. But he couldn't hear above the racket. Where was Holly? Margi couldn't phone Fredric Shore because she didn't know at what factory he worked. But Holly's ex-boarders would surely know where she was. Janet Drew would know . . .

Margi headed for the hospital. It was noon by her wrist-watch. If Janet were on day duty, she would be signing off for lunch. Margi caught her from

a chemist call box. She cut off Janet's stutter of surprise. "Meet me in the Coffee Shop for lunch? I'll be there in ten minutes. Okay?"

Memories swarmed as Margi walked through the hospital's main entrance, past the girl on telephone duty at the front desk, into the Coffee Shop's midday clatter. Nursing was only a means to an end, she reminded herself fiercely. If any of the so-called rewards had rubbed off on her—joy in service and team-work, tolerance of personalities—it was strictly coincidental. The sudden indescribable pain inside her was a hunger-pang, *not* nostalgia.

"Margi Leigh!" Janet Drew crackled with starch and curiosity on a stool at the counter. "We all thought you'd taken off for outer space!" All agog, Janet. But it wasn't Margi's welfare she was concerned with. A gossip scoop was all Janet was after. *I nearly dropped dead*, she'd say. *Yes, Margi Leigh, of all people. Guess where she's been?* "Where have you been?" asked Janet.

"I've been over to Lansing Street," Margi countered. "It's nothing but a shambles."

"City expropriation, big deal . . . Now, Margi, you've just got to tell me
— —"

"Do you know where Holly is?"

Janet gave her an address. "Thanks," said Margi.

"Is that all you came for"? So flat a *dénouement*! Janet decided to stir up something. "Do you know who's taken your place with Dr. Ryall?" Spitefulness didn't mar her voice at all.

Margi waited for the smoke to clear. Then: "No, who?"

"Shenna Vaughn."

"Shenna— —?"

"Vaughn, honey, of the Country-Club set. Glitters with emeralds by night, and by day works in our physiotherapy wing. Really works, I mean. Certificate and all. Brother, with her money *I* wouldn't be pushing wheel-chairs and massaging muscles! Beautiful, too." A quick glance at Margi. Taking it calmly, the stone-face. Lately, Janet had had her doubts about who had thrown over whom in the shattered Leigh-Ryall romance. But if Margi was the jilted one, as half the rumours had it, then by needling her, Janet could get even for all Margi's tough, tight-mouthedness through training school. "He's crazy about her, they say. Not that you care, Margi, any more."

“Of course not!” It just scared her stiff, that was all. Oh, someone must buy the house soon.

This she said anxiously to Holly Shore, whom she found in a three-room flat with only two features in its favour as far as Holly was concerned: it was temporary, and it was close to Amalgamated Electric, where Fredric worked.

“Now, cool down,” she soothed Margi. “He hasn’t married her yet, has he?”

“She’s rich. Her name is Shenna Vaughn. She even *sounds* rich. And she is beautiful. Holly, what am I going to do?”

“First, you’re going to tell me what’s been happening to you. Not a word from you since you left! I’ve been worried.”

“I’m sorry, Holly.” She hadn’t thought of Holly worrying about her, of anybody worrying about her. “I’ve been all right. Just busy.” Filing stacks of fashion folios so that Miss Wilson could keep her dolls abreast of style trends; disposing of Miss Mullins’ consolation-prize loot—electric shavers, car accessories, encyclopædias—for cash; putting Miss Sims’ perennial border to bed for the winter. Busy! In comparison, ward duty was a breeze. “Holly,” she said desperately, “who is ever going to buy a house full of old women?”

“Goodness, are they still there?”

“For ever, it looks like.”

“Well, they’re not your problem—unless you’re personally concerned what becomes of them?”

“I’m not,” Margi said grimly.

Holly looked sympathetic, but not with Margi. “They’re old. Rooted, you might say.”

“Their roots go down as far as China!” Right smack down through the cellar of Regina House.

Holly laughed. “You’ll work out something.”

Margi brushed off that pinprick of a worry. “Holly, do you think I ought to tell Sam about the house, before it’s too late?” If it wasn’t already.

“No, I don’t.” Time was still Holly’s ally. “If this Vaughn girl is as rich as you say she is, Sam isn’t the first to try to marry her for her money. Sam’s no fool. He’ll go slow and careful. Besides, she might turn him down.”

“She won’t. I know she won’t.”

“Honey, are you sure you still want Sam?”

“*Ho-llly!*”

Common sense was of no avail against that tone; all Holly could do was hope for the best, and pray.

“I’d better go,” Margi said. “The Heirloom can’t cope with rush-hour traffic . . . You’re sure, Holly, that I should just—wait?” This was one for the record; Margi Leigh flame-flickerish, relying on an outsider’s decision!

“Yes, I’m sure,” Holly said gently.

There was something trustworthy in Holly . . . “We-ell, okay.” Margi slid into her suit jacket. “You’re cosy here, Holly.”

“Oh, very. From where I sit I can make the bed, baste the roast, and turn on television!”

Holly would love Regina House. “Why don’t you and Fredric drive out on Sunday?” In after-thought, she added, “Any time after one o’clock.” Not that church-going was an obligation, or likely to become a habit, but just in case—Margi had stopped off on her way to buy a hat. She was finished with the Edwardian toque.

At Joe’s Place, Margi filled the Heirloom with petrol.

“Running noisy, isn’t she?” Joe patted the scarred hood. “Sounds to me like friction lag. Bring her in and I’ll lubricate her suspension parts. Maybe loosen the shackles and U-bolts and do some realignment.”

Loose spring U-bolts, as Burt Colladine had said. What about Burt’s Sunday-lunch habit now? Sitting across the table from someone he despised as he did Margi might give him indigestion. Maybe that accounted for his not coming to lunch after that Sunday.

“Found a buyer for the house, yet?” asked Joe.

Margi shook her head.

“Where’ll the old girls go?”

“How do I know?” Margi snapped. Everyone assumed that she had the answer to that, or put on her the onus of finding the answer. Even Holly. *You’ll work out something.*

The countryside was full of the dry rustlings of seed pods and papery leaves. Ditches paraded banners of purple and gold, and far fields were a

quiet cadence of browns and greys. Some boys on a farmhouse lawn were scuffling with a collie pup, yelling their heads off, laughing like anything. Dogs were made for kids, like fields for daisies . . .

Now, Margi, you know we've got no place for a dog! Ma had flung up her hands over the lost mongrel pup Margi once brought home. The boniest, homeliest dog in the world; piebald, brush-tailed, feet like dinner plates. Poor little mutt. Cars scared him out of his wits, and big, bullying boys. He just wasn't tough enough for Marmora Street. A truck ran over him.

Margi blinked hard. Memories like that shouldn't be dragged up. But she thought, *If I had grown up here, with a dog, and a house I'd have been proud to bring friends home to . . .* And Pa with a three-day whisker growth, and Ma in metal curlers? When, at what point, must divergence have begun for anything to have been essentially different—before Pa's and Ma's birth, before their grandparents' birth? In the long backward spiral of ancestry and environment, Margi was hopelessly lost.

There was a letter from her mother on the hall table. A flourish of capitals, a volley of blots dotting the i. Margi slit the envelope eagerly. What fun to have Ma here for a week! She'd certainly be impressed, gilt valances in the guest room, a half acre of lawn, no soot on the window-sills . . .

I do appreciate your kind invitation, Ma wrote, her composition-textbook style as predictable as a guided tour. *I would certainly enjoy a visit with you, Margi, but I can't take time off from the restaurant just now . . .*

Margi jammed the letter in her pocket. For twenty years Ma had worked at the Red Rooster; she could get a year's leave of absence if she really wanted it. Was Ma afraid to leave Marmora Street, even for a week, for fear she wouldn't have the courage to go back? Or was her everlasting tirade against a second-rate destiny, like the soldier's against the Army, pure bluff? Margi's nose stung. This *was* her weepy day.

Miss Sims came into the hall, saw the hat-box. "Oh, a new hat?"

"Yes."

"Miss Wilson will think you don't like hers."

"Oh, can't a person have two hats?" For goodness' sake, you had to bend yourself into a paper clip to keep from hurting someone's feelings around here!

Dinner was by candlelight, a gala affair. Miss Mullins had named a comic-strip character and won a major contest prize. This time, not

merchandise, to be peddled around for cash, but a cheque for one thousand dollars. “Well, congratulations!” said Margi. “There’s more to this contest business than meets the eye.”

“Oh, there is,” said Miss Mullins earnestly. “It’s not easy. The simplest entries are the hardest to write. You know, Margi, I think you would be good at it. As a team, you and I might come up with a lot of winners.”

“Thanks, but I won’t be here, and neither will you,” Margi almost said. Couldn’t they get it through their heads? But a reminder now would wet-blanket their party. Margi gave Miss Mullins’ hand a pat. “You’re doing fine on your own.” Then it struck her. First a dim wonder, then an angry certainty. Miss Mullins thought she was broke. That team-work offer was a helping hand—to Margi-the-proud, Margi-the-independent Leigh! Why, the meddling . . . But Margi’s anger shamed her. How could Miss Mullins know that self-reliance was a corner-stone, of such basic importance that without it one was nothing at all?

There was a bottle of wine in celebration; wild grape, vintage 1945, sparkling with the carbon dioxide retained by bottling it while fermentation was still in progress. “I do wish Regina had left us her recipe,” said Miss Sims, pouring herself another glass. “This is the last bottle.”

Maybe it was the wine, or maybe the flicker of fireplace flames and the thick-as-purée fog at the windows, that engendered a reminiscent mood in Miss Sims. She began to talk about the old days, and they all listened—though Margi had difficulty in picturing Miss Sims fighting black flies and windfall and marsh, making long portages, snow-shoeing for miles around break-up time.

“There were some that had the Midas’ touch,” Simsy remembered. “And some that never hit ore, though they drilled enough holes to make it look like Swiss cheese underground!”

“All that hard work,” Margi said, “and nothing to really count on.”

“Who ever got anywhere by refusing the beginning because she couldn’t see the outcome?” Simsy retorted.

“I like to know where I’m going,” Margi said firmly.

Simsy looked at her. “I wonder if any of us really knows? . . . Well, one thing, you can’t be a prospector and a cry-baby, too.” Simsy picked up the wine bottle. Empty. She sighed. “In nineteen thirty-nine, I found a place . . . Everything was wrong with it, the geologists said. No rocks, no carbonates, no gossan, no hills or mountains. Nothing. Nothing but bush and flies and

mud. But the slide-rule boys don't know everything! There's gold there. I know." The way she said it Margi suddenly *could* see this old lady in the ghostly parade of old-timers, in knee boots and breeches, the bush her true love.

After Margi was in bed that night, a knock came on her door. Miss Wilson, in a faded old robe, peered in. "Are you awake, Margi?"

Was she sick? "I'm awake," Margi said.

Miss Wilson padded over. "It was kind of you not to laugh at Miss Sims, Margi. She had too much wine, of course. Otherwise, she'd never have talked so much. But it was real kind of you not to laugh at her."

"Laugh?"

"People do, usually. They think she makes it all up, all that talk of prospecting. That's why she hardly ever talks about it, because people only laugh at her."

"I think it all happened," Margi said slowly, "just as she said."

"Bless you, dear! By the way, I saw your mother's letter on the hall table. When is she coming?"

A nameless hurt burst through, but Margi's voice hardened. "She's not coming."

"Oh, I *am* sorry."

Then Margi received a shock. Miss Wilson bent down and kissed her cheek. She was gone, wraith-like, and the door closed behind her before Margi lifted her hand. The skin on her cheek still tingled. A good-night kiss. The first in her grown-up life . . . Margi ignored the choky feeling in her throat and pressed her lips together hard. All right, so Miss Wilson had kissed her. It meant nothing. Nothing at all. She was just pulling out all the hearts-and-flowers stops so Margi wouldn't kick them out of the house. What a sneaky trick! Well, it would take someone smarter than an old woman in a Mother Hubbard nightgown to outsmart *her*.

Morning brought Mr. Pringle, his smile as sparkling as the chrome on his car, and a prospective buyer for the house—a Mr. Ralph Koffey. "Owner of a cross-country chain of night clubs," Mr. Pringle told Margi, while Mr. Koffey went after an ash-tray.

Their businesslike tour of the house trailed smoke and aroma from Mr. Koffey's Havana cigar. Alien in this house. Subtle symbol of new

ownership. For, of course, he was going to buy the house. Within ten minutes, Margi was sure of it. Mr. Koffey was going to buy the house and turn it into a night club.

Margi listened while he knocked out walls, built on a mammoth L-shaped wing, assigned Miss Wilson's room to his bartender, Simsy's to his manager, Miss Mullins' to his head-waiter. She saw his crew of painters and paperhangers doing the house over, gaudy as a juke-box. She visualized his opening night—costumed hill-billy band, door prizes, radio, TV and newsreel coverage, and a mile-long traffic jam. At last, breathless from Mr. Koffey's flight of fanciful showmanship, Margi said lamely, "I can't, somehow, see Regina House as a night club."

She clapped a hand over the words. Was she trying to discourage a sale? As if it mattered what the house became! Sell it, that was the main objective. Sell it and be rid of the three spinsters, and hurry back to Sam.

So she listened while Mr. Koffey said that the house was just what he wanted: a nice little drive from town, privacy, atmosphere, plenty of parking space, perfect. Then there was hand-shaking all round, and off went the two men—Mr. Pringle nodding approval of Mr. Koffey's plan for a special police detail to unscramble his opening-night jam.

The house was sold. Sound the sirens, ring the bells, toot the horns! But Margi just flopped on the couch with no wind left. A sale was what she wanted, so why feel so unenthusiastic? She wanted to jump up and open all the windows, but Mr. Koffey wasn't all that objectionable. He was a shrewd businessman, and it was his own affair if he wanted to bring in a hill-billy band and give away refrigerators as door prizes . . . *I need an aspirin!*

Miss Sims brought a plateful of doughnuts from the kitchen. "Have one." She offered her own brand of comfort. "Did he buy the house?"

"It's not final."

But it was, and Margi felt as if she had pulled a fast one on Miss West.

Margi went to bed early and read herself to sleep. The star-dials were still pointing to morning when she awoke. Simsy's dog, Dome, was snoring loudly; otherwise the house was quiet. Margi glanced at the luminous face of her bedside clock. Twenty-past five. In a few hours, Mr. Pringle would telephone to verify the sale. There would be papers to sign, and then Margi could pack her bag and go to Sam. No; first she'd have to do something about the furniture. Mr. Koffey wouldn't buy it. None of it would fit into his ultra-modernistic juke-box.

Margi closed her eyes. She could still smell cigar smoke. *Who are you going to sell it to? Just anyone?* Burt Colladine thought of the house as a unit in some pre-arranged pattern, some master plan. Some plan into which Margi fitted, too, and all humanity. Burt thought there were personality clues and hints to listen to and follow in order to find your right place in the plan. Margi knew exactly what Burt would say. *You're trying to force the wrong piece into place, and it won't fit, Margi. It won't fit, and you know it. Miss West never intended Regina House to become a night club.*

She's dead, Burt Colladine. She can't go on running things her way after she's dead. She gave me the house. And I don't care if it's turned into a doughnut factory!

But Burt had given up answering her back. The voice that came next was Margi's own, from somewhere deep down inside her. *Only someone you really trust can fail you. Miss West trusted you, and you have failed her, Margi Leigh.*

Oh, darn, darn, darn.

At eight o'clock, she dialled the office number of Haskell and Jones. There was no answer from the agency. Margi ate a sketchy breakfast. At eight-thirty, a secretary at Haskell and Jones said that Mr. Pringle hadn't come in yet. Would Margi leave her telephone number? "I'll have him call you, Miss Leigh."

"The minute he comes in," Margi emphasized.

At nine-fifteen: "Ah, Miss Leigh," said Mr. Pringle. Heartily, with a twenty-five-thousand-dollar sale under his belt . . . he thought. "Mr. Koffey's lawyer is going over the deeds this morning, Miss Leigh."

Margi swallowed. "I am not going to sell the house to Mr. Koffey."

"What's that? I thought—ha, ha!—I thought you said you weren't going to sell . . ." He stopped dead. "You *did* say that, Miss Leigh."

"I've made up my mind. I can't sell the house to Mr. Koffey."

Yesterday's smile left his voice. "Why not?"

"I—I don't want to talk about it." She heard him strike a match, suck cigarette smoke down deep. "I—I'm sorry."

"Well! You understand, of course, that I shall expect you to pay my commission, Miss Leigh."

"What?"

Mr. Pringle was very patient with her, even apologetic. But inflexible. Haskell and Jones had an exclusive listing, he explained. Point by point, as to a wayward child. His client was prepared to pay the pre-arranged price. Cash. “So I’m afraid you are obligated to pay my commission, Miss Leigh.”

Oh, Lord. Four per cent. of . . . “Why, you—you” she gasped—“you swindler. I’ll see my lawyer.”

It made a neat exit line, except that “my lawyer” was just a frantic fabrication . . . His name jumped into her mind, then, from nowhere. Mr. Tobias Thorpe, the only lawyer she knew. The memory of his solid jaw was comforting as she looked him up in the telephone directory, made a two o’clock appointment, and drove to town after lunch.

Mr. Thorpe’s office was air-conditioned, diploma-hung; floor-to-ceiling books lined two walls, and a silver-framed photograph of a pleasant-faced woman was on his desk. A rose in a vase, too—character clues nicely balancing that strong jaw with sentimentality. Not only would Mr. Thorpe understand why she could not possibly let Mr. Koffey have the house, but he would give Mr. Realtor-Pringle his come-uppance. Or so Margi thought.

She was wrong. Mr. Thorpe was warmly sympathetic, appreciative of a decision made in accordance with what she felt a sense of right, but . . .

“According to law,” he said, “Mr. Pringle has a right to his commission.”

“Isn’t there something I can do?” she appealed.

He looked at her curiously. “Are you sure you want to abide by your decision not to go through with this sale?”

“Yes.” She had to live with herself. Face herself in the mirror every time she brushed her teeth and combed her hair—a shattering experience, she had discovered this morning. Worse, she’d have to work, breathe, walk, eat and sleep with the knowledge of having failed Miss West. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Then, I am sorry, Miss Leigh. You’ll have to pay the agent’s commission, if he insists. You can, of course, appeal to his generosity.”

Remembering yesterday’s knuckle-crushing handshake and today’s tough-alloy steel voice, she decided to save her breath. Besides, in all fairness to Mr. Pringle, he probably needed that commission. He had obligations, too. A mortgage to pay off, six children to support, alimony—who knew? Without his smile, he looked harried and worn. Ulcer-ridden, maybe, with a stack of doctor’s bills. How could she ask him to give up a commission he was legally entitled to simply because a girl named Margi

Leigh had to make a quixotic gesture to the memory of a woman who was dead?

She rose to go, thought of her two-figure bank balance, and sighed. “Mr. Pringle will just have to wait for his money, that’s all.” Until she sold the house. *Please, Sam, please, darling, wait for me!*

“Another thing,” Mr. Thorpe said. “Mr. Pringle’s client can hold you personally responsible for any expenses he may have incurred in connection with this deal.”

Margi sat down again. “Oh, no.”

“And be entirely within his legal rights.”

“*What expenses?*”

“Travel, if he’s from out of town. His hotel bill.”

“I won’t pay him a cent!” She looked hopelessly at Mr. Thorpe. “Must I?”

He smiled. “Who is the man?”

“A Mr. Koffey.”

“*Ralph Koffey?*”

“I don’t know. I think he’s from Chicago. Do you know him?”

Mr. Thorpe nodded, pressed the intercom, buzzer, instructed his secretary to get Mr. Ralph Koffey on the telephone. “Try the Royal Acres Hotel, Miss Winters.” It took three minutes. “Ralph, you old wretch. I didn’t know you were in town! How about coming out to the house for dinner tonight? Seven-thirty-ish? Fine.” Mr. Thorpe gave Margi a conspiratorial grin. “There,” he said, “that’s that. Known old Ralph Koffey all my life. He won’t come on you for any expenses. I’ll promise you that.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Thorpe.” Margi stood up again. His fee. Lawyers didn’t give advice for nothing. Every minute was costing her money. “If you’ll send me your bill— —”

He made a gesture of largess. “Let’s just forget about that, Miss Leigh. This business is costing you enough already.”

“Yes, but— —”

“I’ve enjoyed talking with you. An encounter with a conscience like yours is a unique experience. A refreshing one, I may say.”

A conscience like hers? That was funny. Burt Colladine would hoot derisively. But the lawyer's words were an accolade. The way he looked at her made Margi feel as if she were a credit to humanity.

The exalted feeling deteriorated rapidly. By dinner-time, Margi was down to earth. Her report that the house was not to be sold to Mr. Koffey was received by the Misses Wilson, Sims, and Mullins with a collective sigh of relief—though in the back of their minds they hadn't really expected the sale to go through. Margi could tell. Well, let them enjoy their fools' paradise!

The full impact of her one-thousand-dollar debt to Mr. Pringle struck Margi afresh. The fact that he was legally in the right didn't soften the blow. She grew angrier by the minute; angrier at Mr. Pringle, at herself, at the spinsters.

Tomorrow she would list the house with another agency. She had had enough of Haskell and Jones. And this time, no sentimental tie-ups to hinder a sale. The house would go to anyone who could pay her price.

CHAPTER TEN

Sam Ryall's mind was on his afternoon rounds, nothing more, as he hurried along the busy hospital corridor. A door opened, room 412; a special nurse came out and moved smoothly to block Sam's progress. "Dr. Ryall! You're just the man I want to see. My patient would like to talk with you, if you have a minute."

Room 412 was not on his list of rounds. Sam frowned a busy signal. "I'm sorry — —" he began.

"Mrs. Talbot. Mrs. Lawrence Talbot. She won't keep you long. She wants to say thank you, that's all."

No earthly reason to play coy. Mrs. Talbot wanted to thank him for Lawrence Talbot Junior, who might never have drawn his first breath but for Dr. Sam Ryall, senior houseman.

It had been touch and go with Mrs. Talbot, an accidental hæmorrhage case. On arrival at the hospital she had been in shock through blood loss; pulse fast and weak. Sam was on hand, and an anæsthetist, but a Cæsarean section had been unnecessary, after all. Nevertheless, in the immediate urgency of ordering up blood plasma, ordering blood samples typed for transfusions, delivering the baby, packing to control the bleeding, Mrs. Talbot's obstetrician had left the baby—a seven-months three-and-a-half pound boy—to Sam.

The procedure was routine. Carry the spindly, faintly blue baby gently on one hand to the humming incubator. Mucous drawn through suction tube from baby's trachea. Part baby's lips; order oxygen mask over the face. Apply gentle artificial respiration; one hand over tiny chest, press down lightly, release. Again and again, rhythmically. Improvement in the skin colour, still no birth cry. Alternate hot and cold tubs? No; the shock might be fatal. Five more minutes. Tired hand and arm. Don't break the rhythm. Keep it up. Hope the child breathes soon . . . Whimper from under the mask! A thin cry . . . Close the incubator. Mrs. Talbot? Still under anæsthesia, getting plasma. Besides, Mrs. Talbot was her obstetrician's job, not Sam's. An hour . . . Unplug the incubator, hurry it to the nursery. There: a fifty-fifty chance for a newborn baby.

Any doctor could have done it. Sam had been there, that was all. He didn't want a tidal wave of gratitude from some emotional woman. "Sorry, I'm busy," he told the nurse.

But he couldn't evade her with that easy excuse. She opened the door of her patient's room and nudged Sam in.

Individuality is not often achieved in a hospital room, but it was stamped on every inch of 412. Flowers were not just pushed into any old jug; they were in Rockingham vases *circa* 1800. A houseman's yearly income couldn't have bought them. There was a needle-point footstool. Cloisonné ash-trays. A priceless hand-made heirloom of a bedspread. Sam multiplied this by that and came up with a fairly solid conclusion in ten seconds: money. Resentment flooded him. Money had ordered him in here, money was responsible for the nurse's overbearing arrogance, money was about to patronize him. Sam approached the bedside as carefully as if he were driving over a stretch of slippery asphalt.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Talbot."

She was a tawny-blond, but the streaks of grey were honest, and Sam grudgingly approved of her smile. "You are not in a receptive mood for my thank-you's, are you, Doctor?"

"It's hardly a matter of mood, Mrs. Talbot. It's time. I have a schedule."

"Forgive me. But I had to say thank you, Dr. Ryall. My own doctor had his hands full with me, didn't he? But you saved my baby's life."

"Mrs. Talbot, that's what I'm here for. Housemen, nurses, technicians, that's what we're here for, all of us."

"Doctor, I am forty-two years old," she said simply. "You can't know what this means to us, our first child . . ." She broke off with a small apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. You haven't time for the long story of our frustrations, my husband's and mine. Our hopes and dreams and prayers. You've heard it all before, many times. But this to come to us, after all these years! The one thing we couldn't buy. And you gave it to us, Dr. Ryall. So I — I had to say thank you. I had to. Do you understand?"

Sam did; all of it, and more. The doctor is the demigod! he thought wryly. Oh, Lord, all the romantic claptrap of films and fiction about doctors. Among the professions rarely viewed as simply another way to make a living was Medicine. *Any* work well done deserved recognition for its own sake . . . but who ever put a halo on a plumber?

However, there was no time to cut himself down to size for Mrs. Talbot. He'd already lost ten minutes of afternoon rounds. If she chose to consider him a superior mortal, so be it.

Besides, he might need the easement of her high opinion of him, some day. Perhaps before too long. A memory to counterbalance self-knowledge of his own frailties. So Sam graciously accepted her gratitude, stored it up, and went back to his rounds.

At eight o'clock on Saturday night, Sam was on a bus heading across town to a date with Shenna Vaughn. His wallet was in its customary state of end-of-the-month flatness; but when Shenna earlier in the week had offered to supply tickets for the Thomas L. Thomas concert at Convocation Hall, the savagery of Sam's refusal had startled him. Shenna had been mildly surprised, too. But after a slow scrutiny of his face, she had shrugged and said laughingly, "All right, Sam. All right. Hold your fire."

Analysis of the scruple was beyond Sam. Dutch dates, so casually all right with Margi, were with Shenna unaccountably wrong. Though why, Sam couldn't say. So tonight was to be a recorded concert for two in Shenna's library. By a stroke of luck, Sam had the bus fare. He often hadn't by the thirtieth of the month, but rather than accept a pick-up in Shenna's convertible he'd have walked the four long miles across the town. The scruple again, indefinable.

The Vaughn library was familiar to him, now. Shenna was on the floor loading the gramophone. She was in black toreador pants and an Italian-style brocade pullover. "Hi," she said. She tipped back on her heels and lifted her flower face, and all Sam could think of as he kissed her lightly was that her spicy perfume undoubtedly came from a de luxe *flacon* at fifty dollars an ounce.

Darn it, price tags were inseparable from Shenna. The secret identity of meaning infuriated him. One salient fact was emerging in Sam's mind: unless a man's conscience was clear, it was easier to live with none at all.

"Drag over some pillows," Shenna said. "Or do you like lying on the floor for music?"

Sam piled cushions on the floor.

"My parents were disappointed at us not accompanying them to the concert," Shenna said.

So the evening was to have been a foursome. It was a toss-up whether Sam was pleased or sorry. Inevitably, if his plans carried through, he must meet Shenna's parents. His future in-laws. Though so far he had not consciously avoided an encounter, he recognized an ordeal.

Shenna looked at him. "Do you know any Welsh, Sam? Hardly any of the Thomas L. Thomas recordings are on current lists. I managed to get the *Ave Maria*, but the rest are folk-songs, in Welsh."

He laughed. "Not a word."

"Oh, well, neither do I . . . Turn out some lights, please?"

It was a command. A simple enough little feminine request, but nevertheless a command. Her second in five minutes. And again, as for pillows, Sam jumped to obey. For another woman he would have done it unthinkingly, but with Shenna it had a special significance. Sam had a formidable prescience of the stereotyped marriage pattern of the woman-with and the man-without the money. Of himself as a sort of lackey in an animated cartoon . . . Oh, rot.

He crossed back to the fireplace, to Shenna. Her arms were folded under her cheek, her skin as satiny as the cushion. Flamelight gilded her cap of hair and threw smudgy eyelash shadows on her cheekbones. Sam dropped down beside her and willed the tensions out of him. Relax, idiot. This is cosy, very.

Y Deryn Pur. (O lovely bluebird of happiness, fly to my love and tell her how I long to see her, whose beauty is torment to my soul.)

A rustle in his coat pocket reminded Sam of today's letter from home. His first free moment to read it had been on the bus. It contained, as usual, the family gossip: Aunt Mary had moved to Philadelphia as nursing supervisor in a large hospital, Cousin Sally's twins had arrived on schedule, boy and girl as they'd hoped. Uncle Rupert, last heard of in Australia, had turned up in South Africa, according to a report from a neighbour just returned from Kimberley. Sam had grinned at that. Rupert Ryall was a geological engineer. The one unsevered link with the family was his name. He never corresponded with any of them, never contacted them in any way. Occasionally some traveller reported seeing him on a drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico, in some Nissen hut on the sands of the Arabian Peninsula. To Sam, Uncle Rupert was a legendary figure, colourful but unreal.

"You haven't mentioned Margi in any of your recent letters," his mother had gone on. "I do hope you two haven't quarrelled. From all you've told

me about her, Margi seemed so right for you, Sam. So sensible and gay. A nurse, too. Couldn't that be helpful to you when you start in practice for yourself, dear?"

Oh, yes, Margi would have been a regular little helpmate. A regular little secretary, alter ego, and maid-servant, answering the telephone, making medical appointments for him, cooking his meals, darning his socks. Was that all he had ever seen in Margi, really? Sam didn't stop to think it through . . . *Wrong girl, Mother. Shenna Vaughn is our special providence, our fairy godmother. Shenna's our girl.*

Sam turned his head and looked at her. The curve of her throat was childish and vulnerable. Over no other girl in his life had Sam ever felt protective. For all Margi's quality of delicacy, fine bones and bloneness, she was bullet-proof. If anyone had suggested that she needed a defender, she would have laughed outright. But the need to protect Shenna swelled in Sam's throat. A more illogical emotion he couldn't conceive. Shenna didn't need a twenty-five-dollar-a-month houseman to melt away life's jounces. Shenna had her own crash cushion. Half a million dollars.

Ffarwel, Mari. (Goodbye to you, my native land. My heart is heavy . . . Farewell to you, Mary my own.)

Behind closed lids, Shenna saw Sam's face. It was a disconcerting image that appeared to her in the most unexpected places, across a dinner table, in the shower, on duty. Her high-faluting assurance of immunity against Sam's attractiveness wilted more woefully with every date. Intelligence told her to stop seeing him, but she didn't; to stop thinking about him, but she couldn't. With her whole being furiously resentful of the truth—that Sam was interested only in her money—she could still be with him, as she was tonight, and close her mind and heart against his lack of principles.

Thanks to Ryrie, she had positive control right at her fingertips. But suppose he kissed her? Now, this minute. How terribly humiliating if she couldn't help herself, if she put her arms around him and kissed him back.

What was he really like, the man under the opportunist? The physician Shenna knew; conscientious, skilful, wonderfully kind. Sam liked people, enjoyed being useful and helpful. If, added to these qualities, he gave to a wife respect and affection and fidelity, would it do?

Ah, Ryrie's dangerous sophistry was tinging *her* thinking, now.

The possibility that Sam might fall in love with her, honestly in love, couldn't be entirely overlooked. Her fortune had riveted his attention, but a

denial of her personal desirability would only have been false modesty. Even so, how would she know if it was really love, or just her money? How would Sam know? The true would never be quite distinguishable from the false, for either of them. Ever.

Rhyfelgyrch Gwyr Harlech.

The stirring battle song which for centuries had inspired all Welshmen to unite against the enemy now set Sam's American pulses hammering to action, rebelling against delay. Was it too soon to ask Shenna to marry him? With only every other Saturday, he had to work fast . . .

Men of Harlech. The baritone voice took him back to high school Glee Club sessions; to keep-your-eyes-on-me Mr. Flannigan, with a dragon's roar for flat notes and slurred lyrics! Was Pat Flannigan's tongue still whipping the Nilestown Glee Club into trophy-winning calibre at the intercollegiate music festivals? Something to ask Tom, next trip home.

Next trip home . . . with an announcement of his forthcoming marriage to Shenna? No, better to work up to that by a telephone-and-mail campaign. Prepare the family for Shenna. But could he prepare them for her, for her clothes, her manners, her imported car? Shenna would be a peacock among the Nileston sparrows. Not that she flaunted her wealth, but it was in her every word, her every movement. There were no girls like Shenna in Sam's home town, none with an ounce of style in comparison, and her very difference would arouse comment. And questions. Friendly, from his family, and in good taste—but his mother would put two and two together and know exactly why Sam was marrying Shenna.

Sam might fool everyone else, but not his mother with her fade-proof integrity tag. His mother wouldn't like what she saw, nor pretend to like it. Pretence wasn't in his mother. *When we pretend, we are no longer ourselves, Sam*, she had once said to him. It was one of the many truths instilled in him, smoothly, easily, lovingly, but with purpose through the years. *Pretence is a demonstration of failure and inadequacy*. This she believed. This part of the code she lived by. This was one of the things Sam had learned by rote in childhood, as unforgettable as his A B Cs. But why start remembering all his mother's old maxims *now*?

The trend of thought was a landslide, overwhelming him. Copybook proverbs, the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule; the simple basic formulas spooned into him with his cod-liver oil—these were for ever with him, as vital a part of him as his bloodstream. They gave him belief in his

own capacities, respect for the job of living. Without them, he ceased to be Samuel Ryall; he lost his link with all the wisdom of the past.

Thou shalt not steal . . . His motive for marrying Shenna was no violation of any law, but the taking of something that was another's was still theft. *Do unto others . . .*

It was no use. No use at all. In a single all-revealing moment, the tide of truth flooded Sam's heart. He could not marry for money. Not Shenna Vaughn, not any girl. Shunt aside everything he had been brought up to believe in? He might as well try to stop a full-grown hurricane.

Sam punched the carpet softly with his fist. His palms were wet. If he had made the Pike's Peak run on foot, he couldn't have felt more exhausted, or more triumphant. For the first time for weeks he was at peace with himself.

So where was he now? His obligation to his kid brother couldn't be swept under the rug. He couldn't set himself up in private practice without money, nor struggle through the unprofitable first years without money; the size of that job had not diminished. Nothing was solved. Nothing was changed . . . except that he had made a return to true values. Medicine just a business like any other? Just a service to be sold for a fee? Oh, no. Not ever. Sam remembered his exultation at the first whimper of the Talbot baby under the oxygen tent. No; being a doctor was more than just being licensed to take care of human bodies and prescribe medicines for them. In Sam it had been a boyish dream, one he hadn't outgrown as his friends had outgrown fixations on their ideals of wanting to be cowboys or railway engineers. Once, on a shell-rutted foreign battlefield, Sam had tried to tell Lieutenant Steve Graham what he wanted to do with his life. "A doctor," Sam had said. "A G.P. in a town or a small city. That's what I'm going to be."

"Well, I guess there's money in Medicine," Graham had dubiously conceded. "Me, I'm going to South Africa. My brother's there, in the Johannesburg gold fields. He's made a fortune there. I will, too."

"I don't care much about the money," Sam had said.

"Ha, one of the dedicated ones!"

"No . . ." Sam had felt self-conscious. "I just want to help preserve life, if I can." There was more, much more, but he found he couldn't say it.

"Eliminate war, then," Graham had said dryly. "Can you think of a better way to preserve life?"

Sam just grinned, knowing within himself what he could and could not do, what he might become. Even then, he had seen the rugged road ahead, and he saw it again now. The struggle for tonight's decision was a prelude to new struggles. But the road ahead was an expanding road, not a limiting one.

The music stopped.

Shenna sighed. "There's only the *Ave Maria* left."

The prayer. The benediction. It began softly, filled the room's confines. Sam looked at Shenna and smiled. It was fine to be able to meet her eyes squarely, not to slide his glance away in shame. Fine to see a girl, not a fat wad of money, when he looked at her.

How could he ever have thought there would be any peace for him without integrity? The lies it would have been necessary to tell Shenna, among them, "I love you," would have destroyed him, destroyed them both.

Sam reached out and touched her hand. In a tone of discovery, he said, "Hello, Shenna Vaughn!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On the seventh of November, Mrs. Leigh died. Margi was informed of her mother's death in a telegram from Mrs. Switzer, Ma's next-door neighbour, closer to Mrs. Leigh in a hundred ways than Margi had even been, Margi thought guiltily, Mrs. Switzer will really miss Ma.

She packed a bag and took the train to Jasonville, to learn with relief and shame that the funeral arrangements had already been made. Mrs. Switzer again. "You never were very close to your Ma, were you?" said Mrs. Switzer accusingly.

Pity beyond tears was Margi's chief emotion. But how could she have been closer to her mother, unless by becoming a rubber stamp of her? In order to be uniquely herself, to be an individual in her own right, she had had to free herself of Ma. Ma had never resented that, surely. She had wanted her to amount to something, hadn't she?

Cold, she heard Mrs. Switzer say in a carrying aside to a neighbour, after the funeral. Not a tear beside the casket. Why, my own Joanie wept buckets. But there, my Joanie is affectionate and warm-hearted, like me. That Margi's cold as a dog's nose.

At eight o'clock that night, Margi stood alone in the flat. Memories should be here; the dear things like candles on a birthday cake, Christmas stockings on a bedpost, the strictness and sweetness of parental control and love. But there was no remembering in Margi, only the unbearable familiarity of things. She had spent a lot of time here, while the other kids on the street haunted the amusement hang-outs. She had eaten and slept and studied here, and counted the time until she could get away. Now she was back, counting the time again, watching the clock. Old Clanky, a cheap, chipped alarm clock with the same asthmatic tick counting off the minutes, the three hours till train-time.

There was nothing to do. Mrs. Switzer had made all the necessary arrangements. "I took your Ma's African violets for a keepsake," she told Margi. Ma's personal things were in cartons destined for the Salvation Army, and the furniture would be sold piece by piece as soon as possible to clear the way for new tenants. Soon Ma would be forgotten even by Mrs. Switzer, who would shake her dust-mop out her bedroom window and shout

across the alley to her new neighbour, whoever she was. People like Ma came and went and left no trace; but Marmora Street went on for ever.

Margi went to the window and looked out. Some kids on the street were giving a judo exhibition to a curbside reception of cheers and boos. A boy in a grey sweater was pushing a stalled jalopy. The Iroquois were scalping the Algonquins again on the corner.

Everything was the same. It would always be the same, because the people who lived here would never truly look at what they were: they were too afraid of what they might see. They would never escape from unhappiness because they would never take stock of themselves and discover they *were* unhappy. Just as well, perhaps. But how awful to be a machine, grinding out the days, the dull routine of days, settling for half a life! *Oh, Ma, forgive me. I had to get away. Forgive me, please, wherever you are, and try to understand.*

A knock came on the door. Margi frowned slightly and went to open it. It was Joanie Switzer, in tight dungarees and shirt. When Margi went in training, Joanie had been a skinny kid with broom-handle legs popping flies off a baseball bat with the boys. Now her bursting curves were a preview of her mother's vast bulk.

"Hello," said Joanie, all this afternoon's funeral tears gone. "Can I come in?"

Margi's polite gesture was automatic. "Certainly." What in heaven's name would they talk about?

Joanie curled herself on the couch; her cheap perfume spread through the room like blown smoke. It reminded Margi of Ma. Joanie smiled companionably. "I'm getting married next Saturday," she said.

Seventeen, if that. But Marmora Street girls grew up fast, and Joanie Switzer was as mature as she ever would be. "How nice," Margi said lamely. "I hope you'll be happy." She made it as buoyant as she could, but there was no common parlance here.

"I'm going to live here, did you know, after I'm married?"

"Here?"

"Right here, in this flat," Joanie giggled. "Chuck—that's the man I'm marrying, Chuck Mather—he telephoned the landlord as soon as your mother died." Joanie recognized tactlessness, but lacking the grace and words of apology, she merely went hastily on: "So with this flat vacant, and

handy next door to Ma, and all . . . Well, the landlord said we could rent it. I chipped in with half the first month's rent. Chuck's always broke! We're moving in right after we're married. Cigarette?" She extended her pack to Margi.

"No, thank you."

"We haven't got any furniture, of course. But this of your mother's will be here till it's sold. Then we'll buy some of our own. On time, of course. Ma says the only way to get things out of a husband is to tie him down to a budget plan. So I'll get some modernistic stuff on h.p.—you know, pieces in that wheat-colour finish, and a dreamy ranch-style breakfast set with chrome legs and leather seats—you know. Real cute. This old dump won't be too bad with some nice new things in it. I should think this stuff has been here for ever, eh?" She looked at Margi. "You're catching the midnight train, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"I suppose there's not much here for you to stick around for."

Full of curiosity, but Margi just shook her head.

Joanie blew smoke towards the ceiling. "You were the smart one, getting out of here and off on your own. Sometimes I wish I could."

Just sometimes you wish it, Joanie. Not every minute, not every waking, sleeping minute of every day and every year. Not badly enough to do something about it. You're just like Ma.

Joanie made a queer little shrugging movement. "It's not so bad here, though. I've got no big complaints. I'm stuck here, anyway. For life, I guess, once I'm married to Chuck."

"What does Chuck do?"

"He drives a cab for Aboutown. He wants to buy his own cab someday, he says. He won't though. He never will. Not Chuck."

"Why not?"

"I told you, he's always broke. He just can't save money. These days, who can?"

The whine in her voice, just like Ma's. The symphony of defeat and resignation in one octave. Blame inflation. Blame taxes, the Government, the atom bomb. Blame anything but yourself for the rut you're in! *Stop the clock right where it is now, Joanie, because the only time worth counting is*

the time you use, and all you're going to do for the rest of your life is use it up. Waste it. Just like Ma.

“Joanie . . .” Advice? To slide off Joanie like mercury? “Joanie,” Margi began again, “there’s no need to sell Ma’s furniture. You and Chuck are welcome to keep it if you want it.”

“Margi, you angel!”

The triumph in Joanie’s eyes! Margi almost laughed. Why, all Joanie had come over for was to get the furniture! *Heavens, I’m a king-size sucker!* Well, no matter. Without furniture to buy, Joanie’s Chuck might get his own cab . . . If he wanted it badly enough, if he wasn’t too wobbly a young man. Was that why she had given them the furniture, so a man she didn’t know could have a chance, a better chance than before, of realizing at least one goal?

Oh, I don’t know. All I want is to get out of here. As fast as I can. And never come back.

A man once started out in a plane for California and landed in Ireland by mistake. Margi had a reverse reaction when she arrived back at Regina House. She had started out for just a house; instead, she had come home.

A welcoming committee of two met her at the door. Miss Wilson took her overnight bag; Miss Mullins helped her off with her coat. Margi wanted to kiss them both, but she’d feel terrible if today she hugged and kissed them and tomorrow—or whenever the house was sold—told them they’d have to find somewhere else to live. It would be—well, a betrayal. That man Judas two thousand years ago must have felt awful! No wonder he committed suicide. So Margi only said, “Oh, it’s good to be back. I’ve missed you.” No use trying to be lukewarm about them. They turned her inside out and upside down. “Where’s Simsy?” she asked.

Then Margi saw their faces; they looked like the grey sickness. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Margi grabbed Wilson’s arm. “Where’s Simsy?”

Miss Sims, they said, was gone.

“Gone?” Margi echoed it blankly. “Gone where?” They didn’t know. The day after Margi left for Jasonville Miss Sims had taken the car . . .

“The Heirloom?”

“You left the keys in the ignition, Margi.”

“But I always do! I never thought . . . I didn’t even know Simsy could *drive* a car.”

“Oh, yes. She said she was going in to town to deposit my cheque in the bank,” Miss Mullins said. “I endorsed it and gave it to her— —”

“Your thousand dollar cheque?” Why hadn’t that been deposited long ago?

Miss Mullins nodded. “I didn’t deposit it right away because it was— well, a sort of symbol of success . . . When Miss Sims didn’t come back, we began worrying. I—I telephoned the bank. She’d been there, all right. She’d cashed the cheque and deposited five hundred dollars in my account.” Why had Simsy kept out five hundred? “After that,” Miss Mullins shook her head, “no one knows where she went. We’ve telephoned all the neighbours. Everyone we could think of. No one has seen her. She took Dome with her.”

“People don’t just vanish,” Margi said, sounding repulsively cheerful. “They don’t— —” But Simsy *had*. Intentionally, too, if she had taken Dome and five hundred dollars of Miss Mullins’ money with her. Maybe there had been an accident. It shouldn’t be difficult to check on that. “Have you called the police?”

They chorused no, horrified, as if only with crime did they associate the police. “Oh, no, Margi.”

“We have to find her,” Margi said sensibly. “The police can help us.” She lifted the receiver, cradled it. “Do either of you know Burt Colladine’s number?”

They found it in the directory. Burt Colladine, Simsy’s nephew. If Simsy was anyone’s responsibility, she was his. Not mine, Margi reminded herself as she dialled his number. Let Burt Colladine worry about Simsy. Let *him* check with the police and the hospitals. And the morgue . . .

Oh, God, no, please. It wasn’t a prayer. Margi didn’t know how to pray. It was just . . . well, this was bigger than she could handle alone, perhaps. She was sick and scared and angry. Why hadn’t Simsy had enough sense to stay put and keep out of trouble? All this fuss and fury; people worrying their heads off over her!

Margi shut her eyes. Behind closed lids, it was easier to deny the reality of Simsy on the highway in that old car, with speedsters swooping by her and at her . . .

“Hello?” Her eyes flew open. “I want to speak to Mr. Burt Colladine. And hurry, *please*. It’s urgent.”

The west windows of Regina House were gold-tinged with early sunset when Burt Colladine’s saloon swung through the wrought-iron gates. Amused indulgence rather than anxiety was Burt’s reaction to his aunt’s disappearance. If his hunch proved right, he knew where she’d gone, bless her foolishly incurable old prospector’s heart. With five hundred dollars in stolen money for a grub-stake! But Simsy would consider it a loan, to be paid back, with luck, a thousandfold. Yes, Burt was fairly certain of Simsy’s whereabouts, and as soon as he had reassured the occupants of Regina House, he was going after her.

Margi had sounded anxious on the phone. For a girl who so grimly insisted that the three old ladies meant nothing to her, that their welfare was no concern of hers, she’d sounded sick with worry. That surprised Burt. It broke the pattern, didn’t fit the picture he had of Margi.

In a sweater and skirt, she looked about sixteen when she answered his ring. She drew him in with both hands. “You’re here! I’m so relieved. I didn’t know who to call. We’re so worried. Where could she have gone, Burt? She’s driving the Heirloom, and that’s what really bothers me . . . that old wreck . . .”

“Hey, calm down,” Burt said. “She’s all right. I’m sure she’s all right.”

“Then uncross your fingers!”

“All right, let’s both relax. No use flying apart.”

“That murderous highway traffic, Burt. That helpless old woman . . .”

He looked at her curiously. “So there’s a heart under that rust-proof aluminium skin of yours.”

“Oh, shut up! I should have had my head examined before I called you.” She started for the phone. “I should have called the police right away.”

“Wait, Margi. I think I know where Simsy is.”

“You do?” She swung back.

“Sit down, Margi . . . Remember I told you Simsy went broke up in Canada in thirty-nine?”

Margi nodded. *No rocks, no carbonates, no hills, nothing but bush flies and mud. But I know different.* “Don’t tell me she’s gone back there!”

“I think she has. She lost her claims, but never her faith in that gold property.”

Margi tried to laugh. She couldn’t. “Has she gone to look for gold?”

“To stake out her claims again, yes.”

With Miss Mullins’ contest money for a grub-stake! “Burt, this would be funny, just terribly funny, if it weren’t so pathetic. And why did she go off without saying a word to anyone?”

“Would you have let her go, if you’d known?”

“I’d have chained her to the bedpost!”

He grinned. “Prospecting is in her blood, Margi. I think she just couldn’t resist the temptation of that cheque.”

He lit two cigarettes, gave Margi one. “There’s that compulsion in Simsy. Age can’t quench it, nor circumstance. And if you are still curious about why Regina West didn’t make one or all the spinsters her beneficiary, there’s your answer. Simsy would have sold the house, or mortgaged it, and gone off prospecting. She’d have gambled their security on the chance of finding a fortune. And if she lost? There’d have been nothing left. No home, nothing for any of them. I think Regina West knew that, and did what she could to protect them from Simsy’s prospecting fever.”

So, another answer. One by one they were coming. The only one unaccounted for now, the only one who might logically have been Miss West’s heir, was her sister, Elizabeth West. The process of elimination would soon leave only the one unanswered question. Why me? But even if Burt could answer that for her, this was no time to ask it . . . “You’re going after Simsy, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Can you find her?”

“I think so. Here, I’ll show you the location of her claims.”

“You know where they are?”

After a pause, he said slowly, “Yes, I know.” He used an envelope from his pocket to draw a map on: the Canadian-U.S. boundary line, the Great Lakes, Hudson’s Bay. He pencilled in Moosonee, Sudbury, Kirkland Lake;

then, on the vast empty space north of Lake Superior, he put a dot. “There. She’s there. One hundred and fifty miles due north of Lake Superior. I can get within eight miles of that dot by train from Toronto. Then I’ll go by canoe, if the waterways are still open.”

He snapped his fingers. “There’s an emergency landing field. I’ll borrow one of my company’s planes and fly up. Hold everything a minute. I’ll check the weather.”

While they waited for the commercial flying weather report, Burt told Margi the real tragedy of Simsy’s journey back to yesterday.

“Simsy can’t stake those old claims of hers, Margi. Someone else has moved in and taken over.”

“And found gold?”

“Yes, a big company.”

“It justifies her faith, doesn’t it?” But it would break her heart. *You can’t be a prospector and a cry-baby, too.* If it broke her heart, no one would ever know. “Oh, there’s the phone.”

Burt took the weather report. Blizzard conditions from Lake Superior to James Bay. Visibility zero. “So flying is out,” Burt told Margi. “I’ll take the train.”

The telephone rang again. This time it was Joe, from the service station. “Hello, Miss Leigh?” Joe said. “Want me to run your car over?”

“My—car?”

“‘Fix her up,’ Miss Sims said, couple of days ago. So I’ve lubricated her suspension parts and— —”

“Joe, where did she go after she left your place?”

“Miss Sims? Search me. She called a taxi from here . . . Say, I heard something about her being lost, you folks worried. Hasn’t she turned up yet?”

“She’s okay, Joe, we think.” Not buried under some traffic wreck, anyway. “Joe, I’ll be grateful if you’ll run the car over for me.”

“Sure, Miss Leigh.”

Another repair bill. Another hole in the bank balance.

Margi turned from the phone. “I’m coming with you, Burt.”

“Oh, no need.”

“Supposing she’s sick?” In what sounded like igloo country. “Where is she eating and sleeping?”

“Some trapper’s cabin,” Burt said. “She knows her way around up there.”

“Look, I’m a nurse. You may need me. I’m coming with you.”

She suddenly thought of the train fare, the three dollars and some change in her purse. Well, Miss Mullins and Miss Wilson would stake her to train fare. Burt Colladine needn’t know how badly off she was financially. After Joe’s repair bill, she’d have about ninety cents in her account. And debts! Mr. Pringle’s commission, and now train fare to some God-forsaken outpost in Canada . . . Oh, well. The house sale would get her out of the red.

While Margi negotiated her loan, repacked her overnight bag and added a first-aid kit, Burt made inquiries about train times. By driving all night, they could catch the Canadian National’s Super Continental out of Toronto tomorrow at 6 p.m., and eighteen hours later reach their destination.

“Why not drive all the way?” Margi asked.

“There’s no highway,” Burt said. “No road in.”

Oh, wilderness! What was she getting into? Margi slung her muskrat coat over her arm. “I hope Simsy took lots of warm clothes with her.”

“Stop worrying.” Burt shook his head at her. “For a girl who doesn’t care two hoots about anyone but herself, you are certainly in a dither.”

Margi ignored that. “I’m ready. Are you?”

“Do you mind if we drop in at my place for my toothbrush and a top-coat?” Burt said meekly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Through most of that long night ride Margi slept. The journey back to Marmora Street had accumulated more exhaustion in her than she realized. Besides, there was nothing to talk about to Burt Colladine. Their one common interest was Simsy, finding her, bringing her back, and Burt had made it clear he'd have preferred going alone. Her insistence on accompanying him was something Margi couldn't explain to herself. Certainly, Simsy might be sick, might need a nurse. But more likely she was having the time of her life in knee boots and breeches, living on coffee and sourdough, whatever that was.

So Margi slept.

In thin grey dawn, she awoke. They were crossing a bridge. Lights shone on dark water. The industrial smoke had a thick, sulphurish odour. Margi yawned.

"Hello," said Burt. "Good morning!"

"Where are we?"

"Crossing the border, the Bluewater Bridge. That's Sarnia up ahead. You'd better stay awake for the Customs' men."

"I haven't a passport!"

"You won't need one."

Margi remembered a television drama where, a man had committed murder, then suicide, because he couldn't cross a border without a passport. But that was Europe. She stretched up her arms. "I'm hungry!"

"We'll stop somewhere for coffee."

But the highway bypassed Sarnia, and it was broad daylight before they found an eating place open. They had ham and eggs and flapjacks. Burt said admiringly, "You're not a nibbler, thank goodness. Half the female neurotics get that way by going half a day on black coffee. That's one thing your medical boy friend and I would agree on."

The reference to Sam she ignored. "I've made a pig of myself. I skipped dinner last night." With the worry, the telephoning, the rush of packing.

“This is my first meal since yesterday noon, on the train.”

“Oh, you’ve been away?”

“My mother died.”

He looked at her. “I didn’t know,” he said slowly. “I’m sorry, Margi. I didn’t know.”

“Please don’t say anything. There’s nothing to say. I’m all right.”

He was still looking at her oddly. “You’re a funny girl.”

“Funny?”

There was a baffled, angry look on his face. “I can’t figure you out. You behave as if your mother’s death doesn’t touch you at all. You’re granite. Yet last night, over Simsy, you were so worried you were—jelly.”

He marched away from her and paid their cheque at the cashier’s desk.

Outside, Margi drew in great punishing gulps of cold morning air, though why she felt the need of some form of penance she didn’t know. For pretending to be tougher than she really was? And how tough was she? Did anyone really know? There were certainly conflicting opinions! The granite-theory adherents were the Marmora Street kids, Mrs. Switzer, the nurses at training school, and possibly Sam. She wasn’t sure about Sam. But upholding the jelly theory were the Shores, Joanie Switzer, Regina West—surely!—and probably Simsy after this rescue trip. Burt Colladine apparently couldn’t make up his mind one way or the other. Not that it mattered . . . Margi got back in the car, Burt started the motor, and they were on their way again.

Margi was now too wide awake for sleep. She didn’t mean to talk about Ma, but there didn’t seem anything else . . . “All her life she wanted so many things she never had. A garden. If she’d only had a garden, Burt. But she never did. There weren’t any gardens on our street. Just cement. The back-yard was just a place to hang out the washing and throw out tin cans. Not enough good soil to fill a flowerpot.” *I’m talking too much, telling him too much.* But she went on: “Ma grew African violets. She had them all colours. She had to buy the soil to grow them in. She’d skip the dusting and the dish-washing, but she never missed watering those violets. She even gave them vitamin pills. It seemed like, of all the dreams that never came true for her, she had to keep *one* alive and strong and growing . . . I was sorry for Ma. All my life I was sorry for her.” All at once Margi wanted to cry. She swallowed hard.

“Pity’s a terrible emotion,” Burt said. He spun the wheel to clear a truck. “It sucks you dry and leaves you empty. A terrible emotion.”

Empty, yes. And terrible. “You’re quite a philosopher, aren’t you?” she said shakily.

He grinned. “I’m a geologist.”

A neat change of subject. Margi was grateful. She fished two cigarettes from her pack, bent to the dashboard lighter, handed Burt one. “Tell me about your work.”

“Well”—he shrugged—“apart from the book-work which Simsy so deplores, there’s a lot of field work. Take last month. I boarded a plane with my boss and his general mines manager, and we made a tour of some property in Ontario. In one hour Anthony James directed the disposal of half a million dollars. Settled on a shaft site, ordered the one-thousand-foot vertical hole drilling, chose the sites for buildings—cook-house, hoist room, shaft house, warehouse, bunkhouse—while I examined a lot of ore samples.” His hands tightened on the wheel. “They were very good ore samples. They were excellent. That property will be a gold mine: A big one. The biggest.”

Margi’s breath caught. “Oh, Burt, that’s —”

“Yep. Simsy’s old thirty-nine claims. How am I going to tell her I was the one who did most of the ground surveying work—for Anthony James?”

“But it was your job!”

“That won’t make it any easier to tell Simsy. She’ll hate being licked by big money and a slide-rule boy.”

“She’s rugged. You said so yourself. She can take it.”

“Yes, she’s rugged. She’s like you, granite and jelly.”

A compliment? Margi didn’t know, or particularly care. But now that they were together in this project of bringing Simsy back home, they’d have less of a cat-and-dog time if—well, if it *was* a compliment.

Traffic was heavy along Toronto’s waterfront. Sunnyside’s side shows and hot-dog stands and rides were deserted and boarded up. Lake Ontario was grey and choppy. Burt said, “You’ll need some boots and breeches.”

Oh, fine. More expense. “I’ll be warm enough.” Before asking Burt Colladine to stake her to a bush-country winter wardrobe, she’d freeze to death.

“I’ll borrow an outfit for you,” he said.

“Are boots and breeches standard equipment of Toronto girls?” she said scornfully.

He laughed. “Of one girl, anyway. Mary Copeland. She’s about your size.”

“And just who is Mary Copeland?” She was horrified by the edge to her voice; would he interpret it as jealousy?

“She’s another Simsy,” he said, “but luckier. Prospecting gave Mary a penthouse and a million dollars.”

The penthouse was on top of a Bay Street skyscraper. Mary Copeland, small, vivacious, grey-haired, pushed aside a pile of ore reports and maps and rummaged through her cupboard for bush clothes for Margi.

“Here,” Mary Copeland tossed over some boots, “try these.”

Spit and polish didn’t hide the scuff and rock-abrasions, but they were Margi’s size. Margi shook her head at the older woman. “Burt says you’re a prospector.”

“That surprises you?”

“It’s not exactly a peaches-and-cream occupation for a woman!”

Mary Copeland laughed. “There are Herculean obstacles. You live months on end in a pup tent miles from civilization, no medical facilities, no comforts. The biggest obstacle is getting people to forget you’re a woman, to stop offering favours. You have to be able to take it, and want that sort of life so badly you’ll sacrifice anything for it.”

That was something Margi could understand; the need, the drive, the compulsion.

Mary Copeland looked at Margi. “It’s none of my business, but you don’t look the tent-and-bedroll type.”

“I’m not. I’m a nurse. The only reason I’m going into the bush with Burt is to help find his aunt.”

“Find her? Is she lost?”

“Burt says he knows where she is.”

“I hope he does. Being lost up there is no picnic. How old is she?”

“Nearly seventy.”

“Then I hope he finds her quick. She’s too old to be up in the bush country with winter coming on.”

That thought rode with Margi as they sped northwest on the Super Continental: Simsy, old and cold. It was frightening enough while she brooded on it in her berth; it was worse by morning in the observation car while she watched the endless panorama of the bush unfold. Where was Burt’s dot on the map in this vast country? Occasionally there were tiny board stations. A few log huts beside the tracks, a few stolid Indians, packs of big mongrel dogs. That was all, except the untamed, measureless bush.

At noon the train slowed. “Here we are,” Burt said.

Yesterday’s blizzard had left only a fine powdering of snow on the platform. There was a station restaurant, a relay telegraph office. Across a mud road there was a white-painted Hudson’s Bay store, a Chinese laundry, a hotel, post office, two hundred or so houses. Beyond that the bush closed in, its black spear points of spruce touching the sky.

The wind had a bite to it. Margi shivered and thought of Simsy. Burt took her arm. “Let’s register at the hotel, change our clothes, then scout around and see what we can find out.”

Steam sizzled from the radiator in Margi’s room at the hotel. She put on her borrowed wardrobe: boots and breeches, woollen socks, mittens, a plaid flannel shirt, a fur-lined coat. She surveyed herself in the mirror and said with a grin, “Ring up the first-act curtain!”

Burt was at the desk when she went downstairs. “Very chic,” he approved with a smile.

Was he making fun of her? The familiar angry, unsure feeling came again. She swallowed a return compliment, though he *did* look attractive and at home in bush clothes.

The Super Continental had pulled out, but a handful of men still lounged in the lee of the red frame station building, out of the wind. A short stockily built French-Canadian trapper climbed off his perch on the baggage truck. “Hello!” he called, hand out-held to Burt. “You here again, eh? With your notebook and slide rule, eh?”

But the burst of laughter was friendly.

“Johnny, this is Miss Leigh,” Burt said. “Johnny Dupuis, Margi—best trapper in the north country.”

“Best doggone in the world.” Johnny grinned. “And this year I catch plenty fur, I bet. My Squaw River country’s full o’ mink. But you’re not here for mink, Burt, I bet?”

“Nor gold, Johnny, this time. Look, you’ve had lunch, no? Good. Come on into the station restaurant with us. I think you’re the man to help us. We’re here to look for my aunt. An elderly lady, a Miss Sims.”

“Ah, *that* one!” Johnny threw up his hands. “She’s not here for mink, neither, I think. But I don’t ask no questions. If I do, she shut me up pretty quick. She’s crazy, I think, that one.”

“You know where she is?”

Johnny knew. She was at his cabin at the head of Squaw Lake. Johnny had taken her there himself, and had received instructions to go for her in two weeks. “She’ll blow my head off if I turn up there one day ahead of time,” he said.

“Nevertheless,” Burt said, “you’ll take me there—tomorrow?”

“*Us*,” Margi corrected him.

“She’ll blow my head off,” Johnny insisted. But when Burt produced a five dollar bill: “Okay. Jus’ as well, I guess, the old lady come out. In two weeks she’ll be snowed in. What’s she doin’ in there, anyway? Five, six years ago there was a writer from New York . . . She writin’ a book?”

“No,” Burt said.

“Okay, she’s crazy, like I said,” Johnny decided cheerfully.

Margi borrowed an alarm clock and set it for seven. But in the morning there was no sign of Burt in the lobby. The sleepy-eyed clerk told Margi he had gone off with Johnny Dupuis. “An hour ago.”

Margi bit her lip. “How do you get to Johnny Dupuis’ cabin on Squaw Lake?”

“You start from Corderly Lake, three miles from here, and you need a truck—the road’s a quagmire. Then you go by canoe seven miles across the Lake into Cranberry River, and four miles through the bush to Spriley Lake, four miles of open water, another small river, and there you are at the head of Squaw Lake, and Johnny’s shack.”

Johnny and Burt were undoubtedly loading their canoe this minute . . . “Is there a truck for hire around here?” Margi asked.

There was. It pulled laboriously through the mud. Twice it bogged down in holes to the rear axle, but after three miles of bush, tiny clearings and rough log shacks, Margi saw the lake. There was less than a mile of open water, but the waves came in on the rocky landing ledge with a sullen clop. There was a scud of clouds from the north. The sky was grey and forbidding. And across the lake, in the lee of the woods, was the canoe, its two occupants fighting their way into the racing whitecaps at the point.

Margi climbed back into the truck. By noon, she was back at the village. The round trip had used up the whole morning. She was angry; she was hungry.

“Where can I send a telegram?” she asked the station restaurant waitress.

“The relay office, Miss, next door.”

But Burt had already sent a reassuring wire to Miss Mullins and Miss Wilson, the relay attendant said. Burt thought of everything. Now what? How could she pass the time away, with not even a cinema? Talk, maybe, to this man behind the counter in rolled-up shirt sleeves and a green eyeshade? . . . “Why do you have two radio programmes on at once?” she asked him, just to make conversation.

So that he could monitor both networks, he said. Part of his job here was listening for trouble—noises, defects, cuts; the effect of northern lights, sudden temperature changes, rain. The twenty-second interval between programmes was for a reversal of amplifiers if the origin of programme feed changed direction. Every two hundred miles across the continent were similar stations, he said, restoring frequency loss, equalizing current.

Margi listened, she nodded, but she had no intelligent questions to prolong the conversation, so she went back to the hotel.

This, she thought, was called painting oneself into a corner. She might as well have stayed home. To top everything, not even a radio in her room! There was a stock of hotel stationery on the table, but to whom could she write? In training school the girls used to wonder why the only letters she ever got were from Ma. They thought it strange she never got any special little gifts, had no photographs or souvenirs on her dressing table. Margi always stared them down stonily and pretended it didn't matter. But it would have been nice to have someone, somewhere, who cared about whether she was happy or sick or scared or lonely.

She sat down and slid over a sheet of notepaper. Why not write to Sam? About her trip, and Simsy, and Burt Colladine. Oh, fine! A stranger's

photograph album would stir as much interest in him as a letter about people he didn't know. Besides, there was nothing to say to Sam, yet.

Two strange days. Meals at the station restaurant, cribbage games with the hotel manager's wife, magazines from the Hudson's Bay store, day-old newspapers from Toronto. At night, the northern lights wove their cold white way back and forth across the sky. Margi drew her blinds against them. She felt too small in their presence, as if what she thought and felt and did was of no consequence at all in some vast mysterious scheme of things. Why was she here, anyway—alone, far from everything known and familiar?

But she waited. And at dusk of the second day they brought Simsy out from the bush. Simsy sick, in a sleeping bag on the toboggan with Dome trotting along behind. There were no telephones, so Burt went for the doctor. There was a hospital, a Red Cross unit, but would a competent doctor live and work in this backwater? He arrived, dressed like Burt in boots and breeches and top-coat, and he said that there were no available beds at the hospital. The only thing to do was to fly Miss Sims out to Waverton, the nearest town.

"No," Margi said. She looked at the doctor, who looked like a prospector but somehow inspired confidence. "It's pneumonia, Doctor, isn't it?"

"It's pneumonia," he said.

"I'm a nurse," Margi said. "I'll take care of her. Right here."

Pneumonia wasn't so bad since the triumph of penicillin over bacterial infections. Margi put Simsy in her own bed, had a small bed brought in for herself and told Burt to keep Dome out of the way. Margi didn't sleep much that first night; she kept going over to the bed to look at Simsy. Licked by the bush again. Licked this time before she even got started. But Simsy didn't know that yet.

Burt knocked on the door at dawn. Over striped pyjamas he had a faded robe. A grey patina of fatigue showed through his whiskers. "How is she?"

"Resting comfortably," Margi said, professionally, the way of all nurses. "You'd better go back to bed."

"I'm out of practice with a canoe," he groaned. "Simsy's right. Aeroplanes have made things too darned civilized."

"You sneaked out on me!"

"What could you have done to help?"

“I certainly wouldn’t have allowed Simsy to be moved in this condition!”

“You’d have kept her there in a sleeping bag on a bunk spread with balsam boughs, no sick-room grub and the only water melted snow?”

“Oh, go back to bed.”

When the door had closed on him, Margi looked down at Simsy. She hadn’t wakened. Her pulse was slow. Margi’s faith in penicillin wavered. But what else was there? *If I were the one on that bed, Simsy would know what to do!* Simsy would get down on her knees. With faith, Simsy would pray.

Well, there was a first time for everything. This was it. Margi knelt by the window. Was it hypocrisy to turn to God as a last resort with a hasty emergency plea? Was it blasphemy? How did you ask a favour from a Stranger? *Please, Sir, don’t let her die . . . Amen.*

Kindergarten effort number one. But surely better than no prayer at all? Margi opened her eyes, stood up, raised the window blind. It was like looking through a panoramic windshield; the fading northern lights, the endless bush, the vast grey immensity of dawn. So big, so big.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Within five days, Simsy was sitting up in bed, thinner, more finely drawn about the face, with all the grouchiness of a typical convalescent.

“Dishwater!” she said of the coffee the hotel manager’s wife sent in on her meal trays. “A Chinaman’s chance I’ve got to get well on mush and dishwater!”

“It’s better than we get at the station restaurant,” Margi said, grinning. “They brew it on Monday to last the whole week.”

“Just how I like it,” Simsy said contrarily.

“Shall I read you the newspaper?”

“Yesterday’s news? No, thank you!”

Burt looked in. “Hello! How’s our patient today?”

Daring Margi’s denial, Simsy said grumpily, “I’m weak as a kitten.”

Margi chuckled. “You’re doing fine.”

“You’re looking peaky yourself.” Simsy gave her a scowling scrutiny and turned to Burt. “Take her out for a walk. You needn’t worry about me. Just hand me over that newspaper.”

Margi put on her coat and woollen mitts. “You’re sure you’ll be all right?”

“Why not, stuck here like a log?”

“Nice mood she’s in,” Burt said, outside.

“Oh, grouchiness is a good sign. Usually indicates a return to normal temperature. Besides, I think we’re the whipping posts for her guilty conscience. She’s sorry about all the trouble she’s put us to. And in the back of her mind she half thinks this whole thing from the start was a wild-goose chase.”

“Has she mentioned Mullins’ money?”

“Not yet.”

“Have you told her who owns her gold property?”

“That’s your job, my friend.”

“Fair enough.” He sighed. “You’ve done your share, twenty-four-hour duty.”

“Oh, I slept a bit.”

“Yeah, one eye open. I’m grateful, Margi.”

She shrugged. “My job. I’m a nurse, remember.”

He looked down at her, started to say something, but thought better of it. He grinned. “All the same, I thank you.”

It was snowing. Big puffy flakes from some inexhaustible source of supply, softening the ugly buildings, blotting out the bush. Margi matched her stride to Burt’s on the hard-frozen mud road. “Where are we going?”

There wasn’t much choice. Beyond the telegraph station, they took to the railway tracks and walked the sleepers. “How long would it take us to walk home?” Margi wondered aloud.

“For ever, in this direction. We’re heading for Winnipeg. Toronto is seven hundred miles behind us.”

Margi glanced back at the settlement huddled beside the track. “Why do people live in a place like this?”

“Their jobs are here,” he said. “A good percentage of this population is transient. Railway and telegraph men, marking time until seniority promotes them to a better location. If you stay up here too long, you’re bushed, they say. A mildly mental state. Mostly, the men’s wives don’t come. Some, of course, do. The ones who’d rather put up with the inconvenience than stay in some soft nest worrying about their men’s loneliness.”

I’d come, Margi thought. But she kept that to herself. Burt wouldn’t believe her, anyway.

A mile along the track was a log cabin, snow-roofed, a stand of bare hardwood trees behind it, stately pines in front. This, Burt said, was Johnny Dupuis’ summer home. Johnny himself came from the cabin as they approached. From the whining and panting of the dogs as they hurled themselves the length of their chains in the kennels, it was obviously feeding time.

“Hello!” Johnny called, waving them over. “How’s the ol’ lady?”

“She’s going to be all right, Johnny.”

“She don’ look so good when we brought her out, eh?”

A wash boiler of cooked corn meal and meat scraps was cooling beside the outdoor fire’s embers. The dogs set up a hungry yelping as Johnny began ladling the mush into pans. They were of mixed breeds. Apart from one or two pure Huskies and several rangey police dogs, the rest were a cross of Husky, Airedale, and St. Bernard. No racing lines, but full-furred and powerful, strong pullers built for heavy work in the bush. Johnny warned Margi and Burt back to a safe distance. “They’d tear a stranger to bits,” he said. “They’re soft now from a summer of idleness, but they soon be in good condition again after some work in the snow.” He clouted a Husky aside. “They want to be eating whitefish again! It won’ be long now, boy.”

On the walk back, Burt told Margi about Johnny Dupuis, one of the settlement’s permanent residents. He had spent his entire life here, guiding parties of hunters and fishermen all summer, outfitting them with tents and bedrolls and packsacks. In the winter, Johnny worked his trap lines. “Sometimes, in the dead of winter, he doesn’t see a human being for weeks.”

Such a primitive pattern for living. “Isn’t he interested in the current mining boom?” Margi asked curiously.

Burt shook his head. “With tourists and furs Johnny has a sure thing . . . with gold, who knows?”

On their return to the hotel, Simsy was asleep. In a low voice so as not to waken her, Burt suggested to Margi: “We could have dinner together.” Up to now they had dined separately in order not to leave Simsy alone.

Margi shook her head—reluctantly, to her surprise. Not that dinner with Burt would have been any great treat, but it would have broken the monotony of solitary meals. “No . . . She’d have to eat her dinner alone.”

“You run along, then,” Burt said. “I’ll eat with her.”

Later, from the look on both their faces, Margi knew that Burt had told Simsy the truth about “her” gold claims.

“You know, don’t you, Simsy? Burt told you,” she said, after he had departed for dinner.

Simsy sighed. “I should have known all along. If I hadn’t been so pig-headed . . . If I’d told Burt before I started out on my own . . .” She thrust up her chin defiantly. “But I was right about the gold! The gold was there, as I always said.”

“Yes, Simsy, you were right.”

“Was Mullins in a blue funk over the money?”

“You know she wasn’t. She was more worried about you than the money. We all were.”

“She’ll get it back. I’ve got it all but what I used for my grub-stake, and Burt is going to make that up to her. I’ll pay Burt back, too . . . I was going to give Mullins ten times what I took from her, if . . . *If!* All my life I’ve been saying *if*, and now I guess I’ve said it for the last time.” She smiled a little. “I’m free of it, Margi. I’m free of the bush fever. It’s over. And it makes me sad. All endings are sad, aren’t they? But it’s time for me to make peace with myself. Peace, and a good life. And a fine time to be doing it, at my age! Do you know, I feel old? I suddenly feel ninety. And tired. Very tired all of a sudden, Margi.”

“Let me fix your pillows.”

“Not that kind of tired, dear . . . Are you angry with me, Margi?”

“Angry — why?”

“Worrying you, dragging you all the way up here, getting sick and being such a blessed nuisance — —”

“Ssssh, I’m not angry. I wouldn’t have missed this trip for anything.” What a silly thing to say! This wilderness, nothing but trees and log cabins and great big ugly dogs. . . . She bent and tucked the bed-covers in around Simsy. “For anything,” she said defiantly.

Why? Because Burt Colladine didn’t despise her quite so wholeheartedly? But Burt’s opinion of her, good or bad, meant nothing at all . . . Because she and Simsy were friends; not just two people thrown together by circumstance, but friends? *But I’ve never needed friendship, never given it, never sought it!*

Was it, then, the growing sureness that coming here, being here, was part of some vast intricate design of events and incidents? Fate, in Ma’s parlance. Ma’s doctrine was that all things were predetermined and therefore would happen regardless of one’s own efforts. That had been Pa’s belief, too. But they’d both been so *passive*, so resigned to following a blueprint from which there was no deviation, no escape, no choice. Shouldn’t you strive for meaning in the pattern, try to see purpose beyond bare facts? Like Burt Colladine, who in a way was a fatalist, too. But different from Pa and Ma. Burt looked at the world around him with the light of knowledge, with an open mind and hard, honest thinking. Then he was free to make a wise choice . . . Oh, very different from Pa and Ma.

It would be a week, the doctor said, before Simsy could attempt the trip home.

“You needn’t stay on,” Burt said to Margi. “I can take care of Simsy now. I’ll play scrabble with her and put her hair in pin-curls. You have that house to sell—remember?”

As if she could forget! With Simsy out of danger, “Sell the House!” was her theme song. But it was financially impossible to go back to Regina House without Burt. She had a return train ticket, meal-money, and no more. Without Burt’s car, how was she to get from Toronto to Regina House—hitch-hike?

“I’ll stay,” she said. Instantly she regretted it. Suppose *he* decided to go, and left her stranded here? If so, she’d have to borrow some money from Simsy, Mullins’ money, really. *By the time I sell the house I’ll owe money to everybody and his uncle.*

To her relief, Burt said, “We’ll both stay, then.”

“What does your boss think about you taking all this time off?”

“I wired him. I’m on holiday pay.”

“A fine holiday this is!”

“I’ve no complaints.”

To her horror, she blushed under the look he gave her.

So they took turns reading aloud to Simsy, and they walked along the roads that were hard-packed snow, now, with sub-zero temperatures. They got along fine, until one evening at the station restaurant Burt mentioned Sam.

“You haven’t had any letters from that doctor boy friend of yours,” he said casually.

Margi was unable to deny it. Every day, after the Toronto train, Burt went to the post office and picked up the mail at the general-delivery wicket. He knew that Margi’s only mail was the daily bulletin from Regina House. But how could Sam write to her when he didn’t know where she was? Margi waited until a wedge of rubbery cherry pie was set before her, then said coldly, “He doesn’t know I’m here.” She stabbed her fork at the pie and decided to eat just the cheese. “I haven’t seen him since I left the hospital.”

“Ah,” Burt said amiably, “a lover’s quarrel?”

“No.” True, Sam had jilted her, but they hadn’t quarrelled—exactly.

Burt had that queer smile she remembered, not touching his eyes. “He has never seen Regina House, then?”

“Never seen it, never heard about it. It’s to be a—a surprise.” Rubbery cheese, too. Margi gave up. How had they got on to this controversial subject, after getting along so well?

“Some surprise,” Burt said dryly. He bent to her across the table. “Margi, can’t you see something is very wrong when an attractive girl like you has to buy a husband?”

She jerked back from him. “What an ugly thing to say!”

He shrugged.

“You’re wrong!” she said furiously. “Sam loves me. He won’t marry me just for the money.”

“But he won’t marry you without it?”

“Oh, stop pestering me!”

Burt shrugged again. “If he can live with the knowledge of being bought and paid for, fine. I say he can’t. Not possibly. Unless he has a hide like leather.”

That had troubled Margi, too. Sam’s conscience might be uncomfortable to live with, uncomfortable for both of them. But suppose he never knew where the money came from? Step by step, Margi had thought it through, and the solution was really quite simple. A cashier’s cheque. Sam needn’t ever know it was Margi’s money. Mr. Thorpe would handle the whole thing for her, keep her identity a secret. Of course, there would be some minor complications. Since housemen can’t accept pay, Sam’s first natural assumption that the money came from some wealthy patient would necessitate an immediate refusal. But Mr. Thorpe could handle that. And on Mr. Thorpe’s assurance that the money was not from a patient, had no association whatever with his work at the hospital, Sam would finally accept it—even if the donor’s identity puzzled him for the rest of his life.

Margi drank her coffee serenely. “Sam won’t ever feel bought, to use your hateful word,” she told Burt.

“I would, if I gave a girl a wedding ring in exchange for twenty-five thousand dollars!”

Margi sighed. “It won’t be twenty-five, after I’ve paid two estate agents’ commissions.”

“Two—for one sale? How come?”

The very thought of Mr. Pringle made Margi’s blood boil, but she told Burt about him and the sale that had not gone through.

Burt just stared at her. “I don’t believe it,” he said, awed. “A cash sale, the money practically in your pocket—and you turned it down. Just so Miss West’s house wouldn’t be turned into a night club. Phew!”

Margi stiffened. “Don’t you laugh at me, Burt Colladine.”

“Laugh at you!” He bent to her again, eyes bright on her, and intent. “I’m proud of you. You’re making progress. I think there’s a chance of your becoming a warm-hearted member of the human race. I honestly do!”

A lovely warmth spread through Margi. He liked her again! She picked up her fork. The pie was even more rubbery than it looked, but she was suddenly hungry enough to eat it.

When staying up all night with Simsy was no longer necessary, Margi had moved into the room next door. She no longer drew the blinds against the northern lights. She was beginning to like them. They made the night so bright. Burt said that in mid-winter they were multi-coloured. Burt knew this country well. He knew the structure of the earth. Of course, that was part of his job; to know and wonder and learn about the make-up of the earth. Burt knew people, too. Knew them through and through. Knowing people and getting along with them was also part of his job. In the mineral industry a man had to be a team player . . . Like a doctor, Margi thought, swerving guiltily to Sam. Though why *guiltily*? Technically she owed Sam no loyalty —yet.

Technically, too, Margi had no further need of prayer. Among the thousands of prayers offered up every minute, hers had been heard and answered, and she was grateful. She had asked for and received one specific thing. Simsy was well, and that was that. No need to go on thanking God every night for not letting Simsy die. No need at all. Why not give medical science and penicillin the credit, and let it go at that? But Margi couldn’t, quite.

Besides, *if* God had had a hand in Simsy’s recovery, then He might help Margi with a problem of her own, if asked.

“Don’t let Sam marry someone else before the house sells,” she prayed one night. She bit her lip. It sounded as if she was telling God what to do and what not to do, dictating to Him. Besides, it was pretty selfish. She added hastily, “Look after Mullins and Wilson, and keep an eye on Ma.” Margi hesitated, still on her knees. If God answered prayer, really concerned Himself with the welfare of humanity, it seemed unfair, while you were at it, to ignore *anyone* in your supplications. It was like a chain reaction: you found yourself thinking and caring and worrying about the whole world, your neighbours, fellow citizens, fellow men, people you’d never seen in your whole life and never would see. You found yourself—all right, *loving* mankind, wholesale. What’s more, you got into the habit of kneeling there and listening, not saying a word, just listening . . . “Bless everyone, everywhere. Amen.” There, that ought to do it. If Burt Colladine could see and hear her, would he call *this* progress, too?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At 8.30 p.m. a week later, they boarded the Super Continental for Toronto. Burt had a lower berth, Margi and Simsy shared a compartment. After Margi had settled Simsy down for the night, and had read her a chapter from the Bible, she joined Burt in the Coffee Shop car.

Burt ordered coffee for both of them, lit up cigarettes, then said casually, "Well, it's nearly over."

"Yes." Could that be regret in her voice?

"We'll stay overnight tomorrow in Toronto."

Margi thought of the hotel bill. "Must we? Can't we push right through without stopping?"

"If Simsy could stand an all-night car ride—"

"No—o. No, we'd better stop over, I think." A dip into Miss Mullins' money, for sure.

But when they dropped in at the penthouse to return Margi's borrowed wardrobe, Mary Copeland offered Margi and Simsy her guest room, overriding Margi's token protest. So Burt stayed overnight at the hotel and picked them up in the morning after breakfast.

The car ride home was uneventful. Simsy sat quietly, more fatigued than she would admit. Burt thought his own private thoughts, and Margi worried over a possible lost sale during her absence.

She needn't have worried. According to Miss Mullins and Miss Wilson, no one at all had been out to look over the house. There had been no calls from the real-estate agency. Nothing.

A letter awaited Margi. The postmark was Kimberly, Ohio. Margi slit it open curiously. Whom did she know in Kimberly, Ohio? She glanced first at the signature. Elizabeth West in a thick-stroked back-hand. West? Miss West's sister! Margi took the letter up to her room.

Dear Miss Leigh, she read. The crushing news that my sister had left all her worldly possessions to a total stranger so upset me that I have put off writing you until now. Undoubtedly, in making

you her beneficiary, Regina followed her usual behaviour pattern of indulging every foolish, impulsive whim that caught her fancy.

Margi scowled, sat down on the bed, every nerve and cell and muscle instinctively against this unknown woman.

My firm intention, after my first shock, was to contest my sister's will. However, my lawyer advised me against this course of action. I am still unable to understand why I, Regina's only kin, should have been left nothing but her silver tea service—which she knew I always considered too elaborate for everyday use, and a great nuisance to keep free of tarnish.

You may know, Miss Leigh, that Regina's lifetime income was quite small, covering only the barest necessities of living. On several occasions I strongly advised her to supplement her income by turning Regina House into a financial asset. She chose to ignore my advice. Regina always was a benevolent fool. I, however, cannot overlook the practicality of turning Regina House into a paying guest home for senior citizens. With this in mind, I shall come to see you, with the intention of buying the house from you. I know its exact market value, and will pay you twenty-five thousand dollars, cash.

Unless you are inconvenienced by the date I have chosen, I shall arrive on November 16th, by train. Do not meet me at the station. If you are driving Regina's old car, I prefer to take a taxi.

*Yours truly,
Elizabeth West.*

Margi flopped back on the bed with no breath left. A sale! This was the eleventh. She counted up to the sixteenth on her fingers. Thursday. By this time next week she would be free of everything: the house, the spinsters, debts, everything! A month from now she might be Mrs. Sam Ryall . . .

“Margi?” Burt Colladine shouted up the stairs. “Where are you?”

She ran to the head of the stairs, clutching Elizabeth's letter as if it were her stranglehold on reality. “Here!”

“Come on down. Dinner's nearly ready.”

Margi took a shower. The avalanche of hot water was delicious after the lukewarm trickle of the past two weeks. There hadn't even been a shower in

the hotel up north, just an old enamel bath-tub the whole floor used, with a high-water ring to be scrubbed off before you got in, and draughts straight from the Arctic whizzing in around the window-sills. Well, she was finished with all that. Finished with defending her behaviour to Burt Colladine, too, and walking around the subject of Sam gingerly, as if she had a pebble in her shoe. Finished with it all.

She brushed her hair until it crackled with electricity, put on a red jersey dress with a patent leather belt, and went downstairs. Burt looked at her admiringly and Margi's colour rose. What did he expect her to wear for dinner, boots and an overcoat?

It was another candle-lit dinner, reminding Margi of the one celebrating Miss Mullins' contest jackpot. There was roast chicken and peach Melba, and even a bottle of port wine which Burt had dashed out to get—*not* up to Miss West's wild grape, Simsy maintained. Simsy drank only one small glass, Margi noted. Her recovery was not so complete as she pretended. After dinner, Margi hustled her off to bed.

"You're still convalescing," she said, when Simsy balked at the invalid routine. "Pneumonia's not just a cold in the nose, you know. You've been pretty sick."

Simsy got into her nightgown, flannelette with rosy apples printed all over it and a ruffle around the neck. Margi felt like kissing her. Instead, she went into her own room and came back with a perfume atomizer. "There." She sprayed Simsy with Bright Night. "You might as well feel glamorous."

"I feel awful," Simsy said.

"I'll take your temperature, then."

"Your thermometer won't tell you anything about the sick lump in my stomach." Simsy took a forlorn breath. "She was so sweet about it, Margi. I—I feel terrible."

"Sweet—who? About what?"

"That money."

"Oh, Miss Mullins." Margi grinned. "Did you expect her to clap you in jail?"

"Maybe she ought to. I ought to make some atonement."

"You didn't exactly get off scot free," Margi reminded her. "You nearly died."

“I didn’t die, thanks to you.”

Thanks to her! Well, why not take the credit? After all, who sat up with Simsy two whole nights? . . . “Thanks to penicillin,” said Margi. No, that wasn’t altogether it, either. “And God.” Margi suddenly felt shy and self-conscious. She cleared her throat. “Now, out with your lights,” she said briskly.

“I haven’t had my chapter.”

That was something else Margi was just about finished with. The Bible chapter with Simsy every night. Only a week or so more of it. But it was too heavy a Book for Simsy to hold in bed . . . “What do you want me to read you tonight?” she asked.

“The twenty-third Psalm,” said Simsy.

“You know that by heart!” But it had something. More than poetry, more than rhythm. So incredibly simple, yet deep and comforting. It had something you could hold on to, no matter what. *I will fear no evil . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .*

Margi closed the Book.

“You know that by heart!” But it had something.

Margi flushed. “I ought to. I’ve read it over and over to you!” Like the hit-parade lyrics. Hear them on every channel and you had them. But not for ever, the way these words had lasted and would last. Thousands of years.

It was altogether too nice an evening to mar by an announcement of the forthcoming sale of the house, so Margi said nothing of Elizabeth West’s letter when she went downstairs to rejoin the others. Later, rereading the letter in bed, Margi was unable to visualize Elizabeth West at all. Regina’s sister she might be, but blood was surely their one kinship. This Miss West of the belligerent handwriting and cash-on-the-line offer of purchase was a woman who, Margi felt, would live by all the rules and never amount to much as a human being. Not that it was necessary to *like* someone with whom you contemplated a strictly business deal. If Elizabeth West were a female Boris Karloff, it didn’t matter one scrap . . . except if she *were* such an unpleasant person it would be hard on the spinsters, who’d have to live here with her. Margi wondered if Elizabeth West would institutionalize Regina House: line-ups for laundry and bathroom privileges, bells for meals. Oh, probably not.

Obviously Elizabeth West intended to make Regina House a *paying* guest home; what if her prices were beyond the spinsters' limited means?

Another bridge not to be crossed.

But that "senior citizens" phrase troubled Margi, too. It had an indefinable stigma; no, not that exactly. But when you said "senior citizens" you lumped human beings anonymously into a category, like those magazine articles. Made people ciphers. Branded them no longer useful, unneeded, out of the swim . . . "Oh, so what!" Margi yanked her bed-lamp chain and said into the darkness. "I'm free of it all, thank goodness."

In the morning she blamed the port wine for her restless, dream-ridden night. Elizabeth West was probably a fine woman, down-to-earth and businesslike. No one could possibly run a senior citizens' home without rules and regulations! Simsy and Wilson and Mullins might lose some of their individuality, but did that matter too much when you were old? They might lose a few personal minor freedoms, but at least they'd have a roof over their heads . . . provided Elizabeth West's rates weren't too high for them. And there she was again, back at the beginning of the circle.

At midday, Margi telephoned Holly Shore. "Can I come and have a talk with you, Holly?" *It's not an S.O.S.*, Margi defended herself. *I just want to share all the excitement with someone.* So far, she hadn't told anyone about the sale. Tomorrow, for sure, she would tell the spinsters.

"Come for dinner," Holly said.

A taxi was now definitely off Margi's budget, so she drove the Heirloom. Another thing to be free of, this creaky old jalopy. Almost with human prescience the Heirloom perked up protestingly and behaved like a lady in town, not once stalling at a traffic light. *Too late*, Margi said grimly. *You and I are finished. I'll leave you to the spinsters.* Simsy could drive. A car of their own would give them the illusion of independence. They could drive around the country, just get off by themselves, sometimes, away from the "senior citizens'" atmosphere. Yes, she'd give the car to Simsy. A doctor's wife couldn't drive an old hack like this.

Before Fredric Shore came home for dinner Margi had time for a *tête-à-tête* with Holly. She told Holly about Elizabeth West's offer of purchase. She told Holly her plan to send Sam the cheque anonymously. And Holly listened politely, looking bored—or was it worried? "Isn't it exciting?" Margi tried to drum up responsiveness in Holly. "Isn't it, Holly?"

"My, yes, isn't it?" Holly agreed, like a parrot.

It isn't exciting at all! Margi suddenly discovered. It should be, but it wasn't. It was like reaching the house on the hilltop and discovering that the golden windows were only sun-tinged, after all. *What's wrong?*

Shortly before six, Fredric came in for dinner. They ate in the pocket-size kitchenette, knees bumping under the small table. Fredric, Holly said, was retiring from his job at the factory next week. There was to be a big ceremonial dinner, a presentation. But although Fredric smiled, and Holly tried to sound happy about it, neither of them seemed very enthusiastic. "Forty years with one firm is a long time," Fredric finally said, abandoning optimism. "I'm going to feel lost." He looked lost already.

"We'll buy a place in the country," Holly comforted. "We can have a garden. You know you've always wanted to grow asparagus and raspberries, Fredric."

A place in the country. The highlighted phrase struck Margi. She suddenly saw a loophole, a way out, a solution for everybody. She felt serenely confident. She had the answer, now. The way of settling everything for the spinsters and the Shores and her own conscience. Why hadn't she thought of it before? It was all so very simple, and right under her nose all this time.

"Why don't you and Fredric buy Regina House?" she said. They had fallen in love with Regina House that Sunday they came for dinner. Fredric could have his garden, the spinsters would have Holly, and Holly would have a houseful of people to take care of, people who depended on her and leaned on her strength. Oh, this was the answer!

Holly looked at Fredric, whose face had dropped ten years. "Dear," she said regretfully, "we can't afford to pay what Margi is asking for the house. You know we can't."

Margi swallowed a big lump in her throat. "How—how much could you pay?"

"Twenty thousand."

It was their absolute limit, Margi knew. On a retirement pension, the Shores couldn't risk mortgaging their future. But to lose five thousand dollars! Elizabeth West's thick-stroked back-hand offer was briefly a strident voice in Margi's ears. *Twenty-five thousand cash.* Margi clapped her hands over her ears and looked at Holly. The honest, good, kindly face . . . To make the sale legal it would have to go through the real-estate agency. Much as Margi would have liked to save the commission, that was the law. She

didn't want a law-suit over an illegal sale . . . "I—I'll have to think it over," Margi said shakily. "You—you really would like to buy the house, wouldn't you?"

"There's nothing'd suit us better," said Fredric, the glow still on his face.

A dreamy, sentimental look was on Holly's face, too. "Those dear old ladies to look after!"

"Then it's a deal." *No! Push the button, go into reverse, unsay it!* Margi swallowed hard. "It's a—deal." But instead of feeling sick—certainly she ought to, she'd just lost five thousand dollars!—there was an unbelievable lightness in her midriff. Maybe this was what Burt Colladine meant by living according to the dictates of your conscience. There would be considerably less money for Sam, of course. But there would be plenty to equip his office and give him a foothold, and put his kid brother through law school. "Plenty," she assured Holly serenely, later.

Holly looked worried. "Are you still eating your heart out for Sam?"

"Oh, *Ho-ly!* Ever since I inherited the house, that's all I've been thinking of—the money for Sam, so we can be married."

"You're an optimist, I'll say that for you," Holly said.

Margi's eyes clouded. "Holly, do you mean . . . Do you think Sam won't — —?"

"All I meant," Holly patted her hand, "is that sometimes optimism is the madness of maintaining everything is right when it is wrong."

"But — —"

"Everything will work out the way you want it to, I'm sure," Holly said glumly.

Yes, Margi knew that. She had always believed that. You thought wisely and then you started. You chose your own design and made it a rock and built on it. You never doubted yourself. You were never led off on to side issues. Yes, everything would work out exactly according to plan. Just as it always had, all her life.

Telling the spinsters that the house was sold was no ordeal now. Holly would make no radical changes. Everything would remain as it had always been, as Regina West had wanted it to be . . . only better, with Holly to look after the garden and save Simsy's back.

Margi felt quietly jubilant telling Elizabeth West, in a long-distance call, that Regina House was sold.

“I’ll give you thirty thousand!” Elizabeth West bargained.

Whew! That would really set Sam up in a plush office! But what about the Shores, and the spinsters? “I’m sorry,” Margi said firmly. “The house is sold.” She said goodbye quickly and hung up on temptation. *I’m a fool*, she told the telephone happily.

That evening, Burt drove over to see Simsy, who promptly told him that the house was sold.

“So.” Burt lifted an eyebrow at Margi. “You’ll be getting married right away, eh?”

“Married!” Miss Wilson looked up from a doll’s skirt she was pleating. “That’s nonsense. You’re not even engaged.”

Simsy looked accusingly at Margi. “You haven’t a diamond.”

“She’ll get one,” Burt said nastily. “A whopper.” And his eyes mocked her: *How does it feel to buy your own engagement ring?*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At midday, Sam collected his mail at the desk. The legal letterhead of the solitary letter was unfamiliar. Sam gave it an incurious glance, stuffed it unopened in his white jacket pocket, rode the lift down to the basement cafeteria. Monk Avery, halfway through lunch, called a cheery, "Hello!" and waved Sam over to his table.

Withdrawal from the marry-for-money policy made Sam's association with Monk, now, easy and pleasurable. It was a relief not to calculate some advantage for himself in Monk's social position, and a similar buoyancy permeated his new relationship with Shenna Vaughn.

After lunch, Sam reached into his pocket for cigarettes and brought out the letter. He lit up, touched his lighter flame to Monk's cigarette, slit the envelope and drew out a cashier's cheque.

Nothing cushioned the shock. Sam simply stared at it, stunned. Seventeen thousand . . . *Some crazy crook's stunt!* He laughed, slid the cheque aside, read the accompanying letter and stopped laughing.

The salient facts sank in. Mr. Tobias Thorpe, according to instructions from his client, was enclosing a cheque for Dr. Samuel P. Ryall. The donor's identity was to remain anonymous.

Sam picked up the cheque gingerly. He exhaled smoke. "Monk," he said as calmly as possible, "take a look at this, will you?"

Cheques that size didn't knock the wind out of Monk Avery. His shoulders merely went up queringly. "Who's it from?"

"Search me!"

That jolted Monk. "Good Lord, man, don't you know?"

"I haven't an inkling." This belonged in the category of the preposterous. "Some practical joker is pulling my leg, no doubt."

"If so," Monk gave the cheque a long, scowling scrutiny, "this is a masterpiece in counterfeit."

"You think it's genuine?"

"As the gospel, I'd say." Monk grinned at him. "Some rich relative die?"

“I haven’t any rich relatives, chum.” Wait a minute, though. Uncle Rupert Ryall, last heard of in South Africa; the family legend, conflictingly rumoured to be affluent and beggarly. But if this came from Uncle Rupert, why anonymously?

Sam passed Tobias Thorpe’s letter across the table. “Read this.”

Monk read it, handed it back.

“Do you know this man Thorpe?”

“I wouldn’t know him from Adam.”

“Maybe he’s made a mistake, got the wrong boy?”

Sam considered that, then shook his head positively. Coincidence might account for two Samuel Ryalls, even for two *Dr.* Samuel Ryalls, but for two *Dr. Samuel P. Ryalls*? Only the family knew his middle initial. Sam rarely used it. No one outside the family, and that included Uncle Rupert . . . Sam snapped his fingers at a memory. Margi. Once, reaching for cigarettes, Sam had pulled from his pocket a letter from home, and Margi had teased him into telling her his middle name. “P for Philander,” he had said with an embarrassed grin. “And if you care for the etymology, it’s Greek, meaning ‘lover of men.’”

Margi had said, “Oh, cute!” One thing was certain: Margi wasn’t involved in this. Sam swerved back to Uncle Rupert, whose known eccentricities might account for the quirk of anonymity.

Monk brought up the one possibility Sam was carefully, stubbornly rejecting. “Whose wealthy life have you saved lately, my friend?” He was grinning.

“Don’t be a fool! Seventeen thousand? Anyway,” Sam faced it soberly, “housemen can’t take pay, Monk. You know that.”

Monk was regarding him curiously. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Talk to this lawyer, this Tobias Thorpe, right off. Send the cheque back, I suppose. I don’t know.”

The problems it could resolve! True, Tom’s college education was no longer Sam’s financial responsibility. Tom was enrolling next year at a university with easy-payment arrangements whereby he could learn now and pay later; one of the new work-while-you-learn schemes. So that load was off Sam’s shoulders. But he still had to set himself up in practice, and seventeen thousand dollars would not only do it handsomely but would tide

him over the waiting period of perhaps five years until he could make a decent living. It would also make marriage to the girl he loved a possibility . . . Sam let the pipe dream go and called Tobias Thorpe's office.

The lawyer was out to lunch, so Sam plunged into the afternoon's work, the cheque temporarily forgotten. But at dinner it was still in his pocket. Sam skipped dessert and called the lawyer's residence. A pleasant-voiced woman informed him that Mr. Thorpe was at dinner. With due respect for the meal-time privacy of any busy man, Sam thought of his own heavy schedule of night work, and said, "Will you ask Mr. Thorpe if he will speak to me—Dr. Sam Ryall?"

Half a minute later, "Yes, Dr. Ryall?"

"Forgive this intrusion, Mr. Thorpe, but I'm all at sea over this cheque I received from you today. What's it all about?"

"I think my letter made it clear, Doctor."

"But unless I know where the money comes from, I can't accept it!"

"I'm sorry. I am not at liberty to disclose the donor's name."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Perhaps, but not illegal."

Sam gripped the receiver hard. "I'm a houseman, Mr. Thorpe. The ethics of my profession make it impossible to accept pay." That the cheque had come from a grateful patient was an unavoidable assumption. Unless that point were clarified beyond reasonable doubt, there was no question at all about the disposal of the money; no alternative but to return it. "Is the cheque from a former patient of mine, Mr. Thorpe?"

"Dr. Ryall, I cannot divulge—"

"Then I can't keep it," Sam cut in angrily. The man was a parrot!

"I have given my word." The lawyer's mildness was subtle reproof. "Medicine is not the only profession with a set of ethics, Dr. Ryall."

Sam swallowed the coppery taste of angry disappointment. "I shall return the cheque, Mr. Thorpe. Tomorrow."

"Why not think it over a couple of days?"

"Thanks." Tomorrow, a talk with the hospital superintendent. But even before arranging an early-morning appointment with Dr. Endicott, Sam knew only too well what his superior's scrupulous attitude must be.

Until eleven Sam worked on The Floor and then he went to bed. Sleep usually came easily, from habit and fatigue, but tonight it eluded him. Methodically his wide-awake mind worked back. Somewhere along the line a life saved, thanks to Dr. Sam Ryall? But that was his job, any doctor's job, all in the day's skilled, devoted, conscientious, prayerful work. Success was cause for deep humility, not something you wrote up in a log book as worthy of reward.

Then, suddenly, Sam remembered Mrs. Lawrence Talbot.

Who else?

You gave us the one thing our money couldn't buy. So please accept our cheque? For our son, and cheap at twice the price? Oh, Lord, I'm getting maudlin! Sam punched his pillow.

Tomorrow was already on its way down the starry tracks; a new day with its claims upon him, its endless demands. For peak performance he needed sleep. One way or the other, Dr. Endicott would resolve his dilemma in the morning.

Although in his sixty-five years of living, Dr. Endicott had learned the power and importance of the Ten Commandments as a historic code of conduct, he knew that no simple formula could solve all the problems in a complex world, that it was not always easy to live by one's own inner integrity.

To Endicott, young Sam Ryall's prompt disclosure of the anonymous cheque was proof of an inner integrity. He could have just cashed it and said nothing. Whether the young man could live up to that integrity was anyone's guess. There were roundabout ways by which Sam, on his departure from this office, could still violate the strict hospital rule involved. There were always ways and means of doing and getting what you wanted, even if what you wanted and got was wrong.

Endicott knew more about Sam than Sam realized. He knew the young houseman's family background, his character. That Sam had good judgment and the special kind of courage needed to act upon it, that he had patience, optimism, equanimity—all qualities of a good doctor, he knew. Also that people believed him, believed in him, and above all that Sam liked people, Endicott knew. But Sam's idealism had not, to Endicott's knowledge, been tested, and Endicott knew only too well the temptations to settle for false

values; he knew how easy it was to confuse accomplishment with fulfilment, to succeed without being a success.

He picked up the cheque and looked at Sam. “You need this money, don’t you?”

“It could change the whole pattern of my personal life, sir.”

Endicott frowned. Sam’s interest in Shenna Vaughn was hospital gossip . . . but Sam had not come here this morning to be told that marriage for money would be self-defeating and lacking in any true satisfaction. He said, “It’s an odd sum, a large sum.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Thorpe’s refusal to divulge his client’s identity is quite final, you think?”

“Yes, sir.”

The older man smiled slightly. “You want me to say that in my opinion some eccentric philanthropist picked your name at random from the telephone directory, and mailed you this cheque. That’s what you want me to say, don’t you?”

Sam’s dull flush was half anger, half admiration of the older man’s sensitivity to human emotions.

Endicott met Sam’s eyes squarely. “Have you any idea who the donor might be?”

Uncle Rupert, on no more than a wild hunch, was too much the proverbial red herring. Sam said, instead, “There was a woman. An accidental hæmorrhage.” Briefly he recounted the Talbot case. “Later,” he said, “the woman was embarrassingly grateful.”

“Seventeen thousand dollars’ worth of gratitude?”

It was Sam’s turn to smile slightly. “To her, the price of a fur coat, or a trip abroad.”

Endicott glanced at the cheque with distaste, as if it might have come from under some damp rock. “You think she might have sent this?” If so, he said without words, you have no alternative but to return it. As we both very well know.

But back of the gift stood the giving, the sensitive nerves of giving. Sam thought, Is it fair to hurt Mrs. Talbot by refusing her gift?

Endicott read his mind. “The search for inner truth isn’t easy, Sam,” he said. “It makes the wisest man tremble.”

Sam was desperate. “If Mr. Thorpe gives me his word of honour that this cheque is not from some former patient of mine—what then?”

“Then we can accept the eccentric philanthropist myth, can’t we?”

It was far-fetched, all right; no wonder Endicott was sceptical.

Sam went through the morning’s work. At noon, on his way to the telephone, he picked up his mail—a letter from his mother. Dr. Samuel P. Ryall, as usual, but today Sam was more sharply aware of that middle initial.

How had his anonymous benefactor known it?

The receptionist at the lawyer’s office put Sam’s call straight through. “Yes, Dr. Ryall?” said Tobias Thorpe.

“One thing, before I mail this cheque back.” This was it, the final yes or no. “Can you, without violating a confidence, assure me that your client’s intention is not to pay me for some medical service I may have rendered?”

The answer came unhesitatingly. “You have my word, Dr. Ryall, that in acceptance of my client’s cheque you will not break any of the principles of right conduct involved in your profession.” No false note in his voice. The ring of truth.

“Thank you, Mr. Thorpe.”

So it was not Mrs. Lawrence Talbot! Elation swelled in Sam. He opened his mother’s letter. It contained all the usual neighbourhood chatter, coloured and sparkling with his mother’s special touch. “Your uncle Rupert died three months ago . . .” Sam was into and beyond that sentence before its significance sank in.

He re-read the paragraph.

“Your friend Steve Graham,” said his mother, “sent Tom some old Johannesburg papers a few days ago.” Steve Graham, making his post-war fortune in the gold fields! “And in one of the papers was your uncle’s obituary. With such an unusual name as Rupert Philander Ryall, I’m afraid there can be no doubt at all that your father’s brother is dead . . .”

It fitted. It fitted to a T! The cheque was from his uncle’s estate. The caprice of anonymity only added one more peculiarity of character to the man none of them had ever really known, and now never would know. So that was where the *Philander* had come from. He was his uncle’s namesake.

Had that created some bond, made Sam the beneficiary instead of some other member of the family? Well, here was proof for Endicott; Tobias Thorpe's word of honour, and now this.

Sam looked up. Shenna Vaughn was walking towards him down the rubber-tiled incline from the physiotherapy wing. She had her coat on over her uniform. Mink, Sam would have thought calculatingly, two months ago. Now he hardly saw the coat at all. He saw the girl. A very lovely girl, her cap of dark hair shining, her grey eyes warm and honest.

"Hello," she said. "I'm on my way to lunch."

"Me, too." And for once he could afford to skip the monotony and economy of the basement cafeteria. Excitement ran through him. "I'll treat you to lunch at the Snack Bar!"

She laughed at him softly. "This isn't pay-day, is it?"

Sam laughed, too. "I'll get my top-coat. I'll only be a minute." He touched her hand. "Wait for me!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was Saturday evening. Margi was waiting for the telephone to ring. An hour ago she had left her name and number with the girl at the hospital switchboard, with a message for Sam to call her. Wouldn't he be surprised, after nearly five months? Would he telephone during his dinner hour? If this were his free week-end, would she see him tonight?

Her bags were packed. The Shores were moving in and Margi was moving out. She couldn't clearly define her urgency to leave Regina House, to stay at a hotel until after her marriage. But a clean break seemed best. The house, the people in it had played their part in her life; they had no place whatever in her future. Anyway, the spinsters no longer needed her. They had already deserted her for the more permanent security of Holly Shore—or so Margi felt, in this strange, unreal interlude of suspension and transition.

Besides, if she stayed on to be married here at Regina House, Burt Colladine would come to the wedding. With or without an invitation, he would come, from curiosity and pure cussedness. He'd be ironic and nasty in that smooth, lazy, smiling way of his; laughing up his sleeve at the bride, curling his lip at the groom. No. Margi didn't want Burt Colladine at her wedding.

A furniture van pulled up at the house. Some of Holly's furniture was arriving. Margi went to the window to watch the unloading. In the attic, stored until she and Sam had their own flat, was the furniture Margi had chosen to keep. Everything else she had sold to Holly, with a sense of relief that it was not passing into strangers' hands. The proceeds from the furniture sale would buy Margi a lovely trousseau, with enough left over for all the extras that would inevitably crop up when she and Sam set up housekeeping. Sam could keep his seventeen thousand dollars intact for his own needs.

Oh, wouldn't he be riding on a cloud, with his financial worries over! And racking his brains to find out where the cheque had come from! But Mr. Thorpe would keep her secret, and the only other persons in the world who knew about it were the Shores. No, Burt Colladine, too. If only she hadn't lost her temper that day at the creek and blurted it out! The bitterly familiar memory of Burt's scorn scorched her again. Not that she was at all desirous of Burt's approval, she reminded herself fiercely, but she had shown Sam in

such a false light. But Burt would never openly taunt Sam, even if they ever met, which was unlikely. About such things men had a gentlemen's agreement.

Why didn't Sam call?

Helplessness touched Margi. What could you do about a telephone that didn't ring? The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half hour after six. Margi picked up the newspaper. The full-page spreads of spectacular pre-Christmas sales reminded her that Christmas alone in a hotel room wouldn't be much fun. But Christmas had never been anything but a lonely time for Margi . . .

She turned to the society pages. Of the several newly-wed photographs, two were of doctors who had married nurses. Triumph soared in Margi. It wasn't coincidence. Propinquity made marriages—not heaven, as Ma always had believed.

Margi closed her eyes for a rosy preview of the announcement soon to be in the newspapers: Miss Margi Leigh, R.N., Dr. Samuel P. Ryall . . . She opened her eyes.

So smooth was the transition to reality that for a moment, seeing Sam's name actually in the newspaper, Margi felt nothing astonishing in it, nothing at all. Then, suddenly, she sat bolt upright, wrenched from illusion. Sam's name was here. Linked with someone else's in the engagement column. Sam's name was right here in the newspaper.

In a daze of disbelief, Margi read the paragraph.

Mr. and Mrs. Dirk L. Vaughn, of 17 Arlington Crescent, Randome City, have announced the engagement of their daughter, Shenna Louise, to Dr. Samuel Philander Ryall, son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur S. Ryall, of Nilestown, Ohio. The marriage will take place on Saturday, December 22, at 3 o'clock, in St. Joseph's Cathedral, Randome City.

No, no, *no*. Sam hadn't received her cheque. That was it. He thought he had to marry that girl . . .

It was too late to catch Mr. Thorpe at his office. Margi called his house. Calm as the deep blue sky, Mr. Thorpe. Calm and explicit and positive.

"Dr. Ryall accepted your cheque two weeks ago, Miss Leigh," he said.

Margi just sat there, stunned.

"Is anything wrong, Miss Leigh?"

Wrong? Everything was wrong! “No,” she said. “Thank you, Mr. Thorpe.”

She stared dully at the phone’s perforated black disc, then clicked down the receiver.

If he had the cheque, then money problems hadn’t driven Sam to Shenna. Sam hadn’t any financial worries that seventeen thousand dollars wouldn’t solve. That meant he had chosen Shenna of his own free will. Margi put her hand up to her throat to stop the pain there. *What about me?*

“I can’t afford to marry you,” Sam had said. Had that been kinder than, “I don’t love you enough”? Had Sam found a handy loophole to wriggle out of a relationship his whole heart wasn’t in?

Had Sam ever talked about a future in which she had a part? Reluctantly Margi faced it: not ever. “I love you,” he’d said. Oh, easy to say, “I love you,” to a girl who was eager and available! A girl who had tricked and schemed and plotted to be always there when Sam was in the mood to say, “I love you.” To any girl? No, Sam wasn’t like that. He had loved her, in a way. Just for fun, nothing serious. Maybe even Sam hadn’t known it was like that. But it must have been. Otherwise, he would never have let her go . . .

If he had loved me, he would never have let me go! It was as simple as that. All these months Sam hadn’t once tried to find her, to get in touch with her. He had just let her go. He didn’t love her. He never had loved her. *I had to have it spelled out for me*—she crushed and dropped the newspaper—in *black and white*.

So, she said scornfully to her image in the bevelled mirror on the wall, *you’re the girl who had a pattern for the future safe in the palm of her hand!*

The telephone rang.

“Margi?” Sam’s voice.

“Oh, hello, Sam!” Thank heaven for hospital training in emergencies, to give her casualness in a split second! What if he’d called half an hour ago, and she’d made a fool of herself? “I—I read about your engagement, Sam,” she said.

A wary silence from Sam. Did he envision hysterics from a cast-off love? “I—I hope you’ll be very happy, Sam.” She almost choked on it.

“Why, thank you, Margi.” He was relieved, no question of that. And happy. So happy, and so terribly in love that it was in his voice, a vital

emanation. Margi felt it. And she couldn't take it. She made conversation, satisfied the amenities, then, "Goodbye, Sam," she said. At least she wasn't limping off the field. She was carrying her banner of pride.

What was it she had said weeks ago? *I'll have to pay, somehow. This stroke of luck will have its price . . .* But to lose everything? The house, the money—all of it except the furniture money to tide her over till another job—and Sam? Especially Sam. How was she going to fill the dreadful gap of losing Sam?

She was right back at the starting line again. But when the gun went off this time, where was she going? For the first time in her life, Margi didn't know.

Holly came in from the kitchen. "Dinner's ready . . ." She stopped dead at the look on Margi's face. "Honey, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Margi unwadded the newspaper and passed it over. "Read this, Holly. The society page, the engagement column."

"My glasses are out in the kitchen. You read it to me."

Margi didn't have to read it. She could recite it from memory. But she held the paper up before her face, a shield.

"Why, the—the dirty so-and-so!" Holly forgot that she had counted on this, all along. All she knew as her arms reached out and gathered Margi in was that this lost, hurt child needed her, needed mothering, needed her love and reassurance and comfort. "Honey, don't you cry. Don't you cry! He isn't worth crying over."

Margi punched her fists into her eyes. "I'm not."

A terrible thought struck Holly. "Margi, you didn't give him that money, did you?"

She could confess it to Holly. Holly wouldn't sing the I-told-you-so dirge. "Yes, I—I did," she said miserably.

"All of it?"

"All that was left after agents' commissions, and my debts."

"And he had the nerve to take it, the crook!" Holly was angry enough to measure swords with the devil himself. "Well, we'll just have to get it back for you, that's all."

Swallow her pride, and let Sam know what a Simple Simon she was? Oh, no. Anyway, Sam wasn't to blame. Wherever he thought the money had come from, he'd never connect it with Margi Leigh . . . "No, Holly."

Maybe this, this loss of everything, was the price she had to pay for being so cocksure, for thinking everything would always go her way if she just knuckled down and set her mind to it. Maybe Ma was right; you couldn't take Destiny by the two horns and make things go your way. Not *all* your way.

"Thy will be done," Simsy said in her prayers every night. Margi ought to know; she'd heard Simsy say her prayers often enough. She'd learned to pray herself, from Simsy. But maybe she didn't go about it the right way. Simsy had a right relationship with God, gave Him the opportunity to use her for the furtherance of His will. Simsy knew her own powers and her own limitations. But not Margi Leigh. Margi Leigh *hadn't* any limitations! Why should she, when she had health and strength and youth and determination; when she had her head and her own two hands? She'd run her own life, and she'd run it her own way! Well, a fine hash she'd made of it.

Holly said, "We'll see a good lawyer. We'll get your money back."

Funny, the money didn't matter. All she had ever wanted it for was for Sam, anyway. The unbearable things to have lost were the firm rock of her self-reliance, her unshakable belief in herself . . . and Sam. "No, Holly. I don't want the money back. I really don't. And—and please don't say anything about all this to anyone? Fredric, or the spinsters, or anyone." At least she needn't go through the fiery ordeal of laughter at her expense—or worse, pity.

Holly said uncertainly, "I don't understand you. To lose everything, and not lift a hand—"

"I'll find something better to make up for it." Pure optimism. Margi didn't believe it.

Neither did Holly, who said darkly, "I could cheerfully boil Sam in oil."

What good would that do? Margi thought bleakly.

Burt Colladine was there for dinner again. Rather overdoing a nephew's solicitude for a convalescing maiden aunt, wasn't he? Margi hoped he wouldn't notice how she was forcing down her dinner. It was like swallowing sawdust, but she wouldn't give Burt Colladine the satisfaction of needling her about her lost appetite. Thank heaven he needn't ever know what a fool she'd been. Even if he read that engagement, he'd never

associate Dr. Samuel Philander Ryall with “your doctor boy friend.” Oh, wouldn’t Burt have the laugh on her if he knew? But at least she’d had enough sense not to tell Burt Sam’s name.

As usual, Burt helped with the dishes after dinner. Then he joined Margi by the fireplace in the library. The others were in the living-room singing carols around the piano. Miss Wilson ought to stick to dressmaking and leave the piano alone, Margi thought. Thumpety-thump, and a blur of pedal.

“Feel like singing?” Burt asked Margi.

“I’m fed up,” she said fiercely, “with *Jingle Bells* and *Rudolph*.” She felt guilty, making the Christmas songs the scapegoat for her mood.

“You look low,” Burt observed lazily. “A girl soon to have a ring on her finger should have bells in her heart.”

“Oh, shut *up*.” Laughing at her again in that subtle, infuriating way of his. Her temper snapped. “And you’re wrong. I’m not being married. He—he’s marrying someone else.”

His laughter was just something she’d have to endure; a form of penance, like a hair shirt.

But he didn’t laugh. “Someone else?” His smile came, then, a curl of derision. But not for Margi. For Sam. “A higher bidder?”

Why not, in defence of her pride, let him believe that? All Margi had to do was keep quiet. But it was unfair to Sam. Remembering his voice on the telephone, Margi knew Sam was not marrying for money. And all in a moment she realized something else. Something so bitterly ironic she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. *Her cheque to Sam was his passport to Shenna!* It would put him on his feet, get him on his way until he could support Shenna without touching her fortune . . . How else could a man like Sam marry a girl with half a million dollars?

Margi squared her shoulders and faced Burt Colladine. “You’re wrong again,” she said stonily. “He—he is in love with her.” Now what was left of her pride?

Burt was looking hard at her, shaking his head at her with a sort of tenderness. “That wasn’t easy to say, Margi. Why didn’t you just let me go on thinking he was a stinker?”

“Because he’s not. He’s a fine person. He’s going to be a wonderful doctor.” Philander: lover of men. “Someday he will give as much service to the poor, every day of his life, as he does to patients who can pay. He—he

told me he would marry for money, but he didn't really mean it, didn't believe it . . . and *I* only believed it because I wanted to so desperately."

Burt said softly, "I think you are the most honest girl I have ever known."

She laughed shortly. "You don't know me at all."

"Ah, but I do. All that talk about buying yourself a husband—just talk. You'd never have gone through with a phoney marriage deal like that."

"No?" she mocked him.

"No," he said grimly. "Margi . . ." And the grimness was gone; he was gentle and cajoling. "Why don't you stop kidding yourself? No girl as tough and hard as you pretend to be would have worn that bunch of roses on her head to church, so an old lady's feelings wouldn't get hurt. Or pay commission on a sale that didn't go through, just so the wrong man wouldn't get Regina House. Or sit up at night with a sick old lady, and read the Bible to her . . . Why don't you stop pretending, and get acquainted with the Margi Leigh *I* know. She's pretty special, *I* think."

That did it. Something snapped in Margi. Something that had been inside her for so long she hardly knew it was there; a tightness, a too-taut steeliness, a stone wall against the world. It gave, and it released the floodgates of her tears. She crumpled on the couch, sobbing in a quiet, deep, shuddering way that was beyond anything in Burt Colladine's experience. He gathered her up in his arms. "Don't," he said. He stroked her hair back from her streaming face. "Margi, don't. Don't, darling."

But she couldn't stop. This had been too long pent up in her. This was a child sobbing over a puppy's broken body under a truck, over Pa's noisy and profane Saturday-night binges; over an ugly street whose only rules were those evolved by the kids themselves for self-preservation in the community. This was a girl sobbing over a pathetic memory of Ma with her hair in curlers and raspberry jam perfume, bawling across the alley at Mrs. Switzer. This was a girl sobbing at last because all she had been able to feel at Pa's funeral was curiosity, at Ma's pity. You couldn't cry all that, and more, much more out of your system in half a minute.

At last it was over. All but the humiliating aftermath of hiccups. "I'm sorry." She mopped her face on what she suddenly discovered was Burt's white shirt-tail. "*I am* sorry."

"All right?"

“Y—yes.”

He tucked his shirt into his trousers. “We ran out of dry handkerchiefs.” He grinned at her. “Give me warning if another deluge like that is coming. We’ll arm ourselves with a couple of full-size bath towels.”

“I—*never* cry.” A hiccup ruined her attempt at restored dignity. She bit her lip. “Never.”

“What brought it all on?”

“You! What you said . . . Burt, I—I would have gone through with it. That phony marriage deal.” She averted her eyes and said in a low voice, “I—I sent Sam a cheque.”

Burt made a queer, unintelligible sound in his throat.

“Anonymously,” Margi said.

The sound that startled her, faced her around to him, was his laughter. It came from him in great gusty shouts, doubling him over, momentarily obliterating *Good King Wenceslaus* from the living-room quintet. Margi stared at him, jabbed by spasms of anger and uncertainty . . . and then, gradually, the anger began to fade. It *was* funny. To buy Sam for someone else! From Burt’s viewpoint, it was the prize joke of the century. From anyone’s viewpoint . . . A giggle started deep down inside Margi, bubbled up to the surface, and then she was laughing helplessly with Burt, laughing merrily with him . . . at herself.

Burt had his arms around her again, and he was rocking her back and forth. “Oh, Margi, you darling little dope, I love you!”

It meant nothing, of course. Nothing at all. It was just a crazy, exuberant, foolish thing for him to say, with laughter bringing them so close, and all. But it was a wonderfully safe place to be, here in Burt’s arms. And with her face burrowed into his chest she could hide the havoc of tears. Her eyes felt puffy and swollen, and her nose was certainly redder than Rudolph the Reindeer’s, all that weeping . . .

“Burt.” She finally looked up at him. “If I only knew *why* all this has happened to me.”

“All this?”

“The house . . . Burt, why did Miss West leave Regina House to me?”

“Are you still worrying your head about that?”

“Yes, I am.” There must be an answer, somewhere. Otherwise, these past months were a meaningless merry-go-round. “Was it just by chance she picked me?”

“Nothing happens by pure chance, I think,” he said slowly. “There is a pattern of destiny, Margi. I believe in it.”

It didn’t specifically answer her question. “But why *me*?”

“She knew people, Margi. She didn’t make mistakes about people.”

“I might have been the biggest mistake she ever made!” She put her hand on Burt’s arm. “You knew Miss West very well, didn’t you?”

“I was with her the day she died. She talked about Regina House. She talked a lot about it. She wanted it to go on as it was, a refuge for the lonely and the lost. She told me she was leaving it to someone who would do the right thing, the best thing for everyone.”

“Me,” Margi said wonderingly. “But I almost sold the house to that Mr. Koffey!”

“Couldn’t let Miss West down, could you?”

There’ll be some obligation, some requirement in this inheritance. That, too, Margi remembered saying. Not knowing, then, all that it would involve. The decisions, the soul-searchings, the battles with her conscience. Not knowing, then, that she even had a conscience! Or caring . . . She looked at Burt, half-defiantly. “Next thing, you’ll be saying that Miss West knew I’d sell the house to Holly Shore! But she never knew Holly. Except,” she remembered, “Holly sent her a jar of pickles, once.” Margi looked suspiciously at Burt. “Don’t tell me a jar of pickles fits into your pattern of destiny!”

“Why not? It’s a wondrous plan, Margi. Beyond our understanding. Beyond all understanding since the world began. And who knows but that Holly’s place in it was destined for her before she was born? The one place she’d fit in best.”

“Through me,” Margi whispered, in awe. “Through—me.”

So she was merely an instrument, an agent. This was her answer, then, to *Why me?* The answer gave purpose and meaning at last to the unforeseen and puzzling direction her life had taken. That was what had really troubled her, all this time; the thought that she was just a wisp of straw swept along by a torrent, willy-nilly. But now she knew that she was a link in a chain. She had a part to play, as everyone had, and she was free to play it or not.

Strange: all these months, indeed, all her life, to have been so positive that she could pull all her own strings, make her own rules, chart her own singular independent way, free of ties, free of people . . . and now, suddenly, to realize that everything she did and thought and felt had been and for ever would be interwoven and related to the thoughts and feelings and deeds of everyone with whom she came in contact.

Why, all her talk of utter self-reliance was blasphemy! *We're all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.* She'd read that in high school. George Bernard Shaw, wasn't it? But she'd been too much the egoist, bent on her own ends and purposes, to understand it. She hadn't wanted to understand it, or believe it because she, Margi Leigh, had set her mind on licking the world alone; the world that was against her, personally and for ever against her, Margi Leigh. She'd stubbornly refused to believe that anyone was for her, the way some people still refuse to believe the world is round.

But the world wasn't against her, was it? Any more than the moon was against the earth or Jupiter against Saturn. Some law held all the planets together in a pattern; some force, or spirit, or intellect superior to known laws—who knew? The meaning to individual life, the reason for effort, the transcendent aim to attain was *unity* . . . “People are *for* you, aren't they?” she said to Burt.

“Standing up for you all the way,” he said.

Curbside cheers. *And all I heard, all I ever let myself hear, were the boos!*

Was this new insight, this buoyant new knowledge that she was not alone, need never be alone again, the “something better” she'd told Holly she would find? If so, this was her true inheritance, this her legacy from Miss West.

She drew a little away from Burt, the better to see his face, the elegant nose, the clean square face-lines, the putty-coloured hair. She had never contrived to meet Burt, never schemed and plotted and carefully arranged him into her life as she had Sam . . . yet she had lost Sam, and here was Burt in her life, temporarily, anyway.

A discouraging feeling of total loss overwhelmed Margi. Worse than the loss of the house, the money, Sam, her self-reliance, was the realization that Burt, who had walked into her life and played his part in her destiny, was quite free to walk away from her, to walk out of her life again and not look back.

As if reading her heart, he said, “You know what Miss West said to me, one day in the hospital? ‘Burt, I want you to meet my favourite nurse,’ she said. ‘Name’s Margi. You’ll like my Margi,’ she said to me.”

My Margi. Miss West had said that! *My Margi.*

“‘You’ll meet her,’ Miss West said to me. And she gave me that funny little conniving wink of hers. ‘You’ll meet her, Burt. I promise you.’ She said that, Margi. She *knew*.”

Margi’s fear of losing him began dissolving; the giggle started bubbling again. “Aren’t you,” she said, as she had that first day, right here in this room, “the agent from Haskell and Jones?”

“Guess again,” he said. “I’m Simsy’s nephew.”

“Oh let’s start from there, Burt!”

She pressed herself closer into his arms. He wasn’t going to walk away. Margi knew it. Burt knew it, too. And months ago, in some awesome, mysterious, unbelievable way, Miss West had known it, too.

It is a wondrous plan, Margi thought. Beyond my understanding. Beyond all . . . She stopped thinking, then. Burt was kissing her.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Legacy of Love* by Elsie Mack]