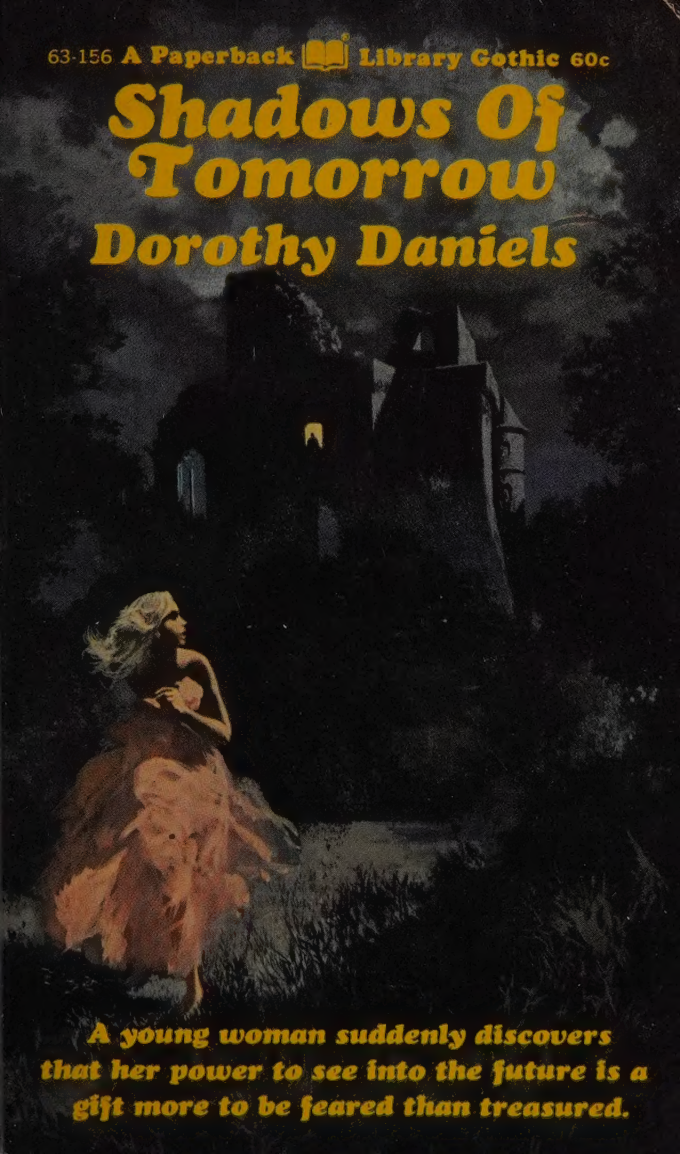


63-156 A Paperback  Library Gothic 60c

Shadows Of Tomorrow

Dorothy Daniels

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a voluminous, light-colored dress, stands in a dark, grassy field at night. She is looking towards a large, dark, multi-towered castle or manor house in the background. A single window in the castle is illuminated from within, casting a small glow. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

**A young woman suddenly discovers
that her power to see into the future is a
gift more to be feared than treasured.**

DID CASSIE INHERIT HER MOTHER'S CURSE?

Cassie Taylor's late mother possessed an unusual gift of prophecy, and after her death, Cassie fears that she may have inherited this mysterious power along with the ancestral mansion her mother willed to her.

For there has to be more than just a coincidence between Cassie's haphazard predictions and the catastrophic events which follow them, more than just a coincidence because even her most casual statements are followed by tragic accidents.

Time and again, Cassie makes the most bizarre predictions imaginable, only to see them come true. And each time, Cassie grows more and more afraid, afraid that this strange inheritance means she will foresee her own death!

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Shadows Of Tomorrow

Dorothy Daniels

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New York

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ONE

I lived in a large house one mile from the sleepy Connecticut village I was now entering. Though born here, I was practically a stranger, having spent most of my growing years in private schools. My father, born to wealth, had been a resident here since his birth and had died shortly after mine. My mother was of different stock, having come from New Orleans, but even after Papa's death, she'd remained, for both her parents had died shortly after her marriage to Papa twenty-three years ago.

And so, though I never knew Papa, I remember Mama telling how when he died the entire village turned out to pay their respects to him. The church couldn't hold the eight hundred inhabitants, and many stood outside. Mama spoke of it often and always ended her story with a sigh which I attributed to the fact that she sorely missed him. As I grew older, I believed it was due to her loneliness.

But not until today did I realize just how great her loneliness was and the true cause of it. The hack I was riding in followed the same hearse which had carried Papa to his grave, but this time it was in direct contrast to his funeral. There was no procession of carriages and mourners. Not a single villager had set foot in the house where Mama lay in her coffin in the enormous drawing room. There were no flowers other than the simple wreath of daisies I'd picked and fashioned in early morn while the dew was still on them. Mama was not deserving of such treatment, because a kinder or more generous person never lived.

There were two other mourners riding with me. One was Tempa Dardanov, a full-blooded gypsy who had served Mama faithfully both as housekeeper and companion for many years. Tempa was swarthy-complexioned, with shiny black hair. She wore it in a thick braid which hung down her back, reaching to her hips. Her eyes were jet black, her features thin and hawk-like. Though the few times I'd met her she'd always been kind to me, I felt a strange uneasiness in her presence. Her bangled bracelets and hoop earrings struck an incongruous note in this solemn proces-

sion, but otherwise she was dressed in conservative black with a fringed shawl covering her head.

The other passenger was my stepfather, Arthur Taylor, who'd won Mama's hand in marriage when I was about three and abandoned her when I was but six. His presence was because Mama's death had made news all over the country, for hers was a household name, one which I'd always felt had been spoken with awe and held in high respect.

I bore the name Taylor because he had adopted me, but I did not think of him as a father, for he was truly a stranger. He was handsome and debonair and, no doubt, a *bon vivant*. Despite that, I was pleased to have him present, for it was a sad and lonely cortege.

So, the funeral procession, if one could call it that, made its slow way along Main Street. The horses' plumes bobbed up and down, their trappings making clinking noises. There were people on the street, quite a number of them, but as the procession passed by, they did a strange and terrifying thing. They deliberately turned their backs on it. From the moment we entered the village proper, I had not seen a face. Only the backs of people, with heads raised defiantly. It almost seemed as if they were glad Mama was dead. I was both stunned and shocked by their behavior.

The church was empty, except for the clergyman, Mama's earthly remains, Tempa Dardanov, Arthur Taylor and me, Cassie Taylor, aged 19, filled with sorrow because the person most dear to me was gone. It seemed I'd given Mama so little—though it had been at her insistence I entered private school when I was scarcely seven. From then on, all through my growing years, I'd led a cloistered life in an institution run by an order of nuns. I'd learned all the social graces from these dedicated women, but I'd also been sheltered from the vicissitudes of life. And so I was ill-prepared to know how to cope with such a situation. My emotions were a jumble of anger, puzzlement and the torment of realizing my mother was a shunned woman. Why? I wondered. Why were these people showing their contempt and hatred for a woman who was a gentle, compassionate individual? A woman who, though I saw her

only infrequently, made me well aware of the love she bore me. And never once to my knowledge had she ever uttered an unkind word about anyone in the village. I had a sudden urge to leave the house in which I was born as soon as Mama was decently laid to rest.

I thrust all thoughts of the spectacle I'd just witnessed from my mind and turned my attention to the clergyman. He stood before the coffin, book in hand, and he was already reading the service for the dead. It seemed to me he read it quickly and without feeling, almost as if he wanted us out of the church.

At the graveside, his manner was similar, and when he approached me, murmuring a few words of sympathy, he spoke so softly that I had no idea of what he'd said. Even the two gravediggers seemed to have the same attitude, shoveling the dirt into the grave with a speed which was obviously alien to them, for they were huffing and puffing with each mound of dirt they scooped up. It was as if the grave were now tainted by my mother's remains and they wished their task over with so they might depart the spot.

I was too numbed, when we once again took our places in the carriage, to cry. But through my mourning veil I observed Tempa's black eyes flash angrily and her mouth crease to a thin line. She loved Mama, knew the innate goodness of her and resented the disrespect she had received. Certainly Tempa knew the reason for it and I would question her about it immediately on our return to the house. I glanced at my stepfather. There was neither sadness nor resentment on his features. In fact, I would say his handsome face bore an expression of complete benignity. I wondered what Tempa would do, now that Mama was gone. I wondered what Arthur's thoughts were. I even wondered what I would do. Certainly I would have to start life anew, and in the sequestered life I'd led, I was ill-prepared for it.

The driver urged his horses to greater speed and their hoofs made clacking noises on the cobblestones of the main street which we were once again traversing. It was as if he too had had no wish to be a part of the services just

completed, and now that it was over with, he wished to be rid of his passengers.

The villagers were moving about in obvious pursuit of whatever business brought them abroad this early afternoon. They didn't turn their backs now, but stared openly and brazenly in their efforts to observe me and, I suppose, my stepfather. I regarded them also, and if the occasion had been different, I'd have allowed myself a bitter smile, for as far as I was concerned their curiosity was unsated. The heavy mourning veil gave no hint of my features.

"Vultures," my stepfather commented, regarding them indifferently.

"Worse," Tempa said scornfully. "Your Mama did many kind things for them, without letting them know. Yet they did know, for who else in the village was generous with their money?"

"You must tell me the reason for their shocking behavior," I said.

"I will," she replied, her voice tight with anger. "Your Mama and I, we did much together. We worked together."

"What do you mean, worked together?" I asked.

"I mean. . . ."

She had no opportunity to reply, for suddenly one of the women on the sidewalk came rushing toward the carriage, waving her arms excitedly. She shrieked for the carriage to stop and leaped about so much that the horses reared up and almost trampled her. The driver finally quieted the frightened animals and stopped the carriage.

The woman pulled open the door and half leaned inside. I was stunned by the look of abhorrence in her eyes as she regarded me.

"Tell me if my little boy is going to die," she screeched. "Tell me! You know if he will live or die! Tell me!"

"This woman is mad," I said in consternation and just a bit of fear, because her features were distorted with hatred. When I drew back, she cursed me in a shrill voice, calling down every evil she could think of.

Tempa said, "Your little boy will die if it is his time. If not, he will live. Driver—whip the horses. Get us home."

The woman was almost thrown to the road as the car-

riage started up. Horrified, I looked back to see if she had been injured. I was only slightly relieved to see her still standing there, a forlorn figure, hands pressed to her face and being enveloped in the dust thrown up by the wheels of the vehicle.

"What possessed that poor woman that she should regard me with such scorn and make such a demand upon me?" I asked, sorely bewildered.

"She is deluded," Tempa said coldly. "Forget her."

"How can I?" I argued, feeling sudden irritation toward this woman sitting beside me. "I always believed Mama was highly respected in this village, yet on the occasion of her death, no one came to pay their respects. There were no floral offerings, not even a note of sympathy. The villagers on the street deliberately turned their backs on the funeral cortege. No one attended the services at the church or the grave. Now a madwoman shrieks that I must tell her whether or not her little boy will live or die. So how can I forget her? Or the other things that have happened? There must be a reason for all of this and I wish to know what it is."

"There's no question but that you're entitled to an explanation, Cassie," Arthur said somberly. His glance switched to Tempa. "The villagers feared Virginia, did they not?"

Tempa's black eyes were still glittering in anger. "Feared her and hated her."

"Feared Mama?" I asked in awe. "Even after death?"

Tempa nodded. "They will fear her more as time goes on. They won't know why, but they'll flinch at shadows. Humph! Weak-minded people with their superstitions and their hates."

"Will you please tell me what this is about?" I begged.

"When we get home, my dear," Arthur said. "I don't know too much about it, but I will tell you what I do know. Tempa can tell you a great deal more. There will be difficult days ahead for you, but I'm sure you have your mother's strength of character. It will serve you in good stead, for I fear you will have great need of it."

"I daresay you're right," I replied, feeling all anger and

bewilderment and hurt drain from me, to be replaced with a chilling numbness, for suddenly I remembered an incident from my childhood. It was long forgotten, yet it apparently had been tucked into the back of my mind and only now burst forth upon my consciousness.

It happened but a year or so after I had been placed in the private school by Mama. One of my classmates had asked me what it was like to have a mother who was a witch. I was clearly puzzled by what she meant, though well aware, from her mocking smile, that she meant to be cruel. Sister Mary Theresa was passing by and heard the question. First, she took the little girl aside and spoke to her. Then she brought me to the little chapel and there, in the quiet and serenity of the hallowed spot, told me the girl had been unintentionally cruel. That my mother was not a witch. That she'd been blessed with a gift and used it wisely and benevolently. I asked her what the gift was and she replied that it was one of vision. She added that while I was probably too young to understand, when I was older I would, and I would have a deep respect for the mother I now loved.

I was eager to tell my classmate what the good sister had told me, but I was never given the opportunity, for the girl was withdrawn from the school a few days later. Whether by her parents or at the request of the sisters, I knew not. But the incident soon left my mind, though not before I had given it a lot of thought.

However, because of those few kind words spoken in defense of Mama by Sister Mary Theresa, from that day on, I regarded Mama as a very special person, someone whom everyone held in great respect. What a different picture I now had. The thought of it made me ill, even though I was still puzzled by the behavior of the villagers. I again thought of the woman who, moments ago, had stopped the carriage and demanded of me the answer to whether her child would live or die. Did they come to Mama with their questions and problems? And had she answered and thus antagonized them when her predictions had come true? I couldn't wait until we returned to the privacy of the big house where I would get the answers my mind des-

perately sought. I knew, until the day I died, I would never forget the look of desperate anguish on that poor woman's face.

"Did you fear your Mama?" Tempa eyed me belligerently as she spoke.

"Good heavens, no," I exclaimed. "I loved Mama. I shall always revere her memory. And unless I learn that she did something to cause the villagers great grievance, I intend to see to it that they realize the error of their ways in condemning her as they have."

"You are your Mama's daughter," Tempa said, sounding pleased. "If you stay on here, I beg of you to allow me to also, in order that I may serve you. I promised your Mama that if it was your wish, I would be as faithful to you as I was to her."

"I will be pleased to have you remain," I told Tempa. "I feel I will have great need of you. I have many questions to ask you, some of which may not come to me immediately and most of which I am sure only you can answer."

"Whatever I tell you of your Mama will be good," Tempa replied. "She sought only to do good in this world, to help people. She had great compassion for others. She loved you dearly and worried about the day when you would learn the truth about her, for fear you would turn from her."

"I don't know the truth yet," I replied, pleased at the calmness that now possessed me. "But I will."

"If I may serve you in any way, Cassie, consider me your servant," Arthur said, breaking into the conversation. "I loved Virginia—your mother—dearly, though that may be difficult for you to believe."

"It is," I replied, eyeing him directly, "quite impossible to believe when you abandoned her after three years of marriage."

"Do not condemn me until after you have heard my story," he said. "However, I can understand your animosity toward me since that is what you believe and I will depart the premises immediately on our return. I can stay at the village inn until the morning train."

"That is not necessary," I replied, my manner sincere. "I bear you no malice. In fact, I may have need of your help also, if you wish to stay."

"It is good to be needed," he replied. "God knows, I haven't been in a long time."

I was touched by his words and by the beseeching look in his gray eyes. It was as if he was pleading with me for understanding. I knew then that he was as lonely as I. And perhaps as frightened. However, I cautioned myself not to allow compassion to sway me before I learned why he abandoned Mama, for I was certain that was what happened, since Mama never would answer my questions about him and in later years never referred to him. Slowly, in my mind, the pieces of the puzzle were coming together to form a clear picture, and as they did, I felt my bewilderment and anguish return.

TWO

I was pleased when the carriage left the road and turned to pass through the two high, red-brick posts to which the iron gates were attached. Beyond them was a sweeping drive up a gradual slope, grass-covered and studded with bushes and shrubs and trees, all neatly clipped and well cared for.

The drive to the house was bordered with stones, painted white and wide enough for two carriages, with space to spare. The slope was so gradual the horses didn't even slow down.

It was a house of great charm, built in 1795, which made it exactly one hundred years old. My great-grandfather, who had acquired tremendous wealth from profits derived from whale-oil, built it when he retired from the sea. It was a red-brick structure, three stories high and rather plain, for that was not the era of gingerbread and lattices. It was large. Great-grandfather believed in entertaining, so our drawing room was the equivalent of perhaps four ordinary parlors and it occupied one entire side of the house on the first floor. Uniquely, the second floor was equally as grand, for it had been built two-stories high and looked more like the interior of a cathedral than a room where there used to be music and dancing and laughter.

There were twenty rooms, exclusive of the servants' quarters on the top floor. People who came to visit in those days usually stayed awhile.

Until I'd returned from school two days ago, after having been notified of Mama's death, I'd not set foot in this house since I was eleven and before that, only briefly. Mama used to come to the finishing school at the start of summer vacations, and from there she would take me to various European countries where we would stay in secluded, out-of-the-way places. During the brief school holidays, she would seek out nearby resorts not too far from the school. To me, it was always exciting, discovering new locales. Perhaps that was because Mama made it

seem so, for not once did I question the reason as to why she never had me come home. I suppose because it was always such a joy to be with her that where we spent the time was of no importance. Suffice it to say that when we were together, she was loving and gay and fun-spirited.

Yet, when I returned to this house two days ago, I had no awareness of ever having lived here. I moved through the rooms, hopeful of feeling her presence, looking for something that would bring her close to me, that would give me assurance I belonged here. I entered her suite, regarded her sterling silver toilet articles on the bureau. I let my fingers lightly run over their embossed surfaces, hoping that just by touching them the overwhelming feeling of loneliness engulfing me would shed itself. Nothing had helped. Neither Tempa's consoling presence, nor the arrival of my stepfather the following day.

The house had seemed dismal and murky, filled with shadows and strange noises during the night. Even worse, it seemed hostile, as if it wanted to reject me. That was the feeling I had and, regarding it now, despite its attractiveness, I had the same feeling.

The porch ran the width of the house. There was but one step leading to it. Fluted white pillars with an iron railing also painted white enhanced its regal appearance. The oak and reed-bottomed chairs had been turned and were tilted against the wall, indicating they hadn't been used in a long time.

Tempa unlocked the door and I entered, followed by Arthur. Tempa relieved me of my black gloves and my bonnet and carried them upstairs. I moved directly to the family parlor, which also served as the music room. There was a grand piano and, alongside it, a harp. It had been years since I saw Mama play either instrument. She was very accomplished, both as a harpist and a pianist, and she would play by the hour. I remember a beautiful doll I had with natural hair that fell in curls. It had a pretty china face and gave off the same delicious fragrance as Mama, for she had tucked one of her violet sachets into the bodice of the doll's dress.

I glanced over to the foot of the dais and was pleas-

antly surprised to see the child's chair I used to sit in while listening to Mama play. Occupying the chair now was the same doll I used to hold as I sat there. Tears of remembrance filled my eyes, but I quickly blinked them away. If my stepfather noticed, he gave no sign of it.

There was a table in the center of the room, with four chairs around it. I sat in one of the chairs and motioned him to another. We remained in silence, each with our memories, until Tempa entered the room. She carried a tea service on a tray and there were also little cakes which she no doubt had made.

I heard the jangle of tiny bells as she moved about the table, placing cups and saucers for us and also for herself. Though her many bracelets gave off a metallic sound as they clacked against one another, this was different. I looked up, my eyes questioning.

"What is that sound?" I asked.

"It is an anklet I wear," she said. "Your Mama gave it to me. If you disapprove, I will remove it."

"No, Tempa," I said. "But let me see it."

She thrust forward her bared foot, having removed her shoes once we'd returned from the cemetery, and raised her full skirt enough to reveal a gold link chain encircling her ankle. From it, were a series of tiny bells which tinkled as she walked.

"It is a gift I cherish," she said. "I removed it for the funeral, for it would be unseemly to wear it in the church."

I silently agreed. I wasn't shocked by Tempa's bare feet, but apparently Arthur was.

"I think it a rather unseemly thing to wear about so soon after your mistress's death," he said.

"My mistress, as you refer to her, was also my friend," Tempa said.

"How did you address my mother?" I asked.

Tempa was about to pick up the teapot, but I motioned her aside and poured the beverage myself.

"At first as madame," she replied. "Then, as your Mama's loneliness became greater, she asked that I call her by her name. She wished to hear it spoken."

I noticed Tempa had brought out three cups and saucers

and plates and I was pleased, for it meant she had accepted me.

"Please sit down, Tempa," I said. "The cakes look delicious."

"Yes, Miss Cassie," she said. "I hope they will taste as well. It was your Mama who taught me to cook."

I smiled reminiscently. "Mama did everything well. And since you called her by her first name, you may as well call me by mine. I hope to earn your friendship."

"You have my loyalty," she told me. "The rest will come. Do you wish me to wear shoes? And to remove the anklet? I meant no disrespect."

"No, to both questions," I replied, helping myself to a cake. "I'm sure Arthur will adjust to it."

"Certainly," he said. "Though I doubt my stay will be long. I feel I have no right to be here."

"I may have need of you," I said, regarding him thoughtfully over the rim of my cup.

"My dear, you are now a young lady of wealth," he replied, his smile benevolent. "You will find there is little that money can't bring."

"It can't buy happiness," I said, thinking of Mama.

"I disagree," he replied, looking amused. "But then, our outlooks on life are quite different."

"They must be," I replied. I was purposefully keeping the conversation light while we partook of this slight repast. "I'm surprised and quite pleased to see my favorite doll in the little chair I used to occupy."

"Your Mama kept it there always," Tempa said. "Each day, for a little while, she would play the piano or pluck the strings of the harp. I believe then her mind was filled with thoughts of you."

I was touched at Tempa's revelation.

"I never saw a woman as brilliant or beautiful or gifted as Virginia," Arthur said musingly, adding, "Nor one as lonely."

I felt that was my cue to learn all I wished to know. "Why was she lonely? Why did she force such loneliness on herself?"

"It was people who did it," Tempa said, her husky voice tightening. "All kinds of people."

"But Virginia tortured herself also," Arthur said.

"Tortured?" I asked.

I held up the teapot in silent offering. He allowed me to refill his cup. Tempa's head moved negatively. I set down the pot, my eyes beseeching him to answer my question. But he kept me waiting while he took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. Not until he was certain it was burning to his satisfaction, did he resume speaking.

"Perhaps I should let Tempa speak first," he said.

"What do you wish me to say?" she asked bluntly, addressing Arthur, not me.

"Why not begin by telling Cassie how Virginia regarded me?" he replied.

"I couldn't," she replied simply.

"Why not?" he asked, his eyes regarding her coldly.

"Because she never once, in all the years I knew her, ever mentioned your name," Tempa said. "Until you came to this house yesterday, I never knew of your existence."

Arthur lowered his eyes and bowed his head. "I had no idea she was so bitter."

"I do not know if her feeling was one of bitterness, indifference, hatred or heartache. No—not hatred," Tempa corrected herself. "Virginia never hated. She was too filled with compassion. Nor would she allow me to hate. I was filled with bitterness when I came here, for I had been abandoned by my own people who thought I was dying of a lung illness. Perhaps I was, but in my desperation I wandered into this village from the wilderness nearby. This house was the first I came to. I could travel no further, for it was winter and I was barefooted—I hate shoes—so I staggered up to the door. I had not even the strength to knock, but I grasped the doorknob. Your mother was inside and heard it turn. She opened it and found me on my knees, so ill I couldn't even speak. I could do nothing but grasp her skirt and plead with my eyes. She took pity on me, brought me into the house and nursed me back to health. It was almost a year before I was able to move about without help. To me, she was like a saint. So good,

so kind, so generous and never wanting anything in return except friendship. But she had no one except me—and you, Cassie. Her one great fear was that one day she would lose you.”

All Mama had ever told me about Tempa was that she had no one in the world and Mama wanted someone living in the house with her and had invited Tempa to do so. Thus, I listened in utter fascination to the story of how she happened to come here. Yet, I had still to learn the story of how Mama was different from other people and why she was feared and hated.

“Please tell me why she thought she would lose my love and my respect,” I said, turning to Arthur, feeling he would be better informed.

“My dear,” Arthur said with a sigh, “this may be a little difficult for you to understand, but your mother had the gift of prophecy.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, frowning. “What are you telling me?”

“I’ll make it as simple as I can,” Arthur said. “Virginia—your mother—sent me away. She said if I remained here, I would die a violent death.”

My hands clasped tightly in my lap as a shudder of fear passed through me and, once again, the words my classmate had spoken years before, in taunting fashion, rang through my mind. *“What is it like being the daughter of a witch?”*

“Oh no.” My words were barely audible, so great was my shock.

“It is true,” Tempa confirmed Arthur’s statement. “Your Mama could predict great things. Shipwrecks, earthquakes, tidal waves. She even predicted the tragic death of her parents.”

“I didn’t know my grandparents died tragically,” I said.

“One night, shortly after her first marriage,” Tempa said, “she was sitting before the fireplace, and instead of the flames, she saw her mother and father falling from a great height. She wrote to them, telling them of her dream, warning them to take care, for she’d foreseen other catas-

trophes, but had never realized her gift—that is what she called it.”

I recalled Sister Mary Theresa had also called it a gift, but hadn't gone into detail. Now I realized what she meant.

“Go on, Tempa,” I urged.

“Your grandparents had already left for a voyage to Europe, so they did not receive her letter. In Paris, there was a fair going on. One of the attractions was a ride in a balloon. Somehow, it exploded, and your grandparents fell to their death.”

I closed my eyes, as if, by doing so, I could shut out the vivid picture Tempa had painted.

“That is true,” Arthur said. “Virginia told me about it, exactly as Tempa related it to you.”

“How horrible,” I exclaimed, meaning the accident.

“No,” Tempa contradicted me. “It was good. A gift. She foretold many things. She would warn people—even countries, when a disaster of some kind was about to strike.”

“Did they heed her?” I asked, though not really wanting to hear the answer. The shock of learning Mama was a seeress of some sort seemed more than I could bear. I didn't like it. I was fearful of it without knowing why.

“Rarely,” Arthur said. “But your mother gained a worldwide reputation as a result of her prophecies.”

“But why do the people of this village hate her?” I asked.

“Because they fear her,” Arthur replied calmly. “You see, my dear, she could predict if people who were ill would recover, linger for years, or die quickly. She could foretell the sex of an unborn child, and did, never erring once. She predicted storms and disasters. Also, she could look into the future, presage whether the stock market would rise or fall—wars which would soon be fought, great and important men who would sicken and die. She even predicted murders and assassinations.”

“Was it visions or dreams she had?” I asked.

“Not always,” he replied. “Sometimes she needed only to look at a person. Or it might come to her when she was talking with them. It was almost as if she was one person,

living in two worlds. That of the present and that of the future."

"And of the past?" I asked. "Did she communicate with the dead?"

"Not that I know of," Arthur answered. "She did live with the secret knowledge of the day when your father would die."

"Did she know when your time would come?" I asked.

"Yes," came the startling reply. "Though she would not tell me."

"You said," I reminded him, "that she sent you away, stating that if you remained here, you would die."

"That is correct," he replied.

"Weren't you afraid to return?" I asked. "I assumed you learned of Mama's death from the newspapers since you arrived the day after her death."

"I was here two days before her death, but I remained at the inn," Arthur replied. "I feared that if I came here I might upset her."

"Why?"

He arose abruptly and walked to the window. He stood there looking out, though I sensed he was not admiring the spacious grounds. I repeated my question, and after a long moment, he turned slowly and came back to the table. He moved his chair so that when seated he faced both of us.

"I have a confession to make, Cassie," he said. "When I finish speaking, I will take my leave, for I know my presence will be repugnant to you."

Tempa regarded him scornfully. "I thought there must be some reason for Virginia never to speak of you to me."

"Please, Tempa," I said, my voice stern, "I wish to hear what Arthur has to say."

"Your mother did order me out," he said. "She was enraged because she discovered I had been using her gift for my own financial advantage. I committed a great wrong, did her a great injury. I have never forgiven myself, though at the time I felt no guilt, for I didn't believe I was harming anyone, but your mother was a woman of very high principle and she despised me for what I did."

"Pray tell me, Arthur, just what *did* you do?" I asked, my patience fast waning.

"Your mother enjoyed visiting New York City, as you no doubt know and after our marriage, we made several trips there. We dined at very fashionable restaurants and in the course of the evening, she would look about, point out various gentlemen and tell me what was in their future. One time I asked her about a financier, very well known. She had no awareness of his identity, but she told me of his great wealth and that he was about to make a large investment which would mean his ruin. I pondered that and went to him with the information. At first he laughed, but he took my name and the hotel at which your mother and I were staying. Two days later, he sent a message to meet him at his office. I did and he gave me a substantial check. He'd had second thoughts about the information I'd given him and had not invested. Your mother's information had proven correct. His check to me was his form of gratitude. After that, while pretending it was all in fun, I challenged Virginia to regard certain gentlemen and tell me what was in their future. She did. I passed on the information and was well paid for it. I once told a man who was on the point of taking his life for fear he was losing everything, that he should not despair, for his holdings would show a great gain in a matter of days. They did—five or six hundred percent, making him today one of the wealthiest men in the world."

"And for that you were paid," I observed quietly.

"A fee of ten thousand dollars was modest."

"And Mama knew nothing of this?"

"Nothing."

"How did she learn about your dealings?"

"One day a gentleman journeyed here to ask me about an investment. He'd already paid me a substantial fee. I was away at the time and he spoke with Virginia. She ordered him from the house after learning from him what I'd been doing. When I returned, she ordered me from the house."

"So," Tempa said, regarding him contemptuously.

"I deserve your scorn," Arthur said. "I've never forgiven

myself. Through my greed, I lost the love of a wonderful woman."

"Then she didn't predict your death," I said coldly.

"Yes," he said, nodding slowly. "That very day. She was extremely angry. She ordered me from the house, saying it was as well, for to stay would mean my death. She also added that if I ever returned I would die violently."

"Then you must go," I said.

"I don't blame you," he said, rising. "What I did was despicable. I only hoped I could seek atonement in some way by serving you. But you must hate me."

"No," I said thoughtfully. "But I think, if Mama really had that gift, you are foolish to remain here."

"I beg of you to let me," he said. "The villagers are already antagonistic toward you. It may not be safe for you alone."

"She will not be alone," Tempa said, "for I will never leave her." Her voice became very emotional as she added, "It may well be you have the gift your Mama had. I have known only three families who possessed the gift. In each case, it was passed on to the daughter."

"Oh, dear God, no," I exclaimed in sudden fear. "I want no part of it. To me, it smacks of witchcraft. Perhaps Mama didn't have it. It could have been something else."

"Cassie," Arthur said, "long ago, when I lived here, Virginia regarded her reflection in the mirror. Speaking slowly and calmly, she predicted the exact date and hour of her death. That is why I arrived at the inn beforehand, though this is the first you knew of it."

"I can't believe it," I said, rising abruptly to pace the floor. "I won't believe it."

"Your mother's death was sudden and unexpected, was it not?" Arthur asked.

I nodded my head, too overwrought to speak. I wanted to thrust everything out of my mind as pure fiction, yet I could not, for it all smacked of the truth. Horrible, but true.

"Did you consider Virginia ill?" Arthur asked Tempa.

"She just seemed tired," Tempa replied calmly, "but she told me her time had come. She spoke to me of Cassie

and asked me to tell her daughter she truly loved her and hoped her little girl would understand that her mother only tried to do good in this world.”

I paused before the child's chair and regarded the doll, with its pretty, lifelike face. For the first time since I returned, I felt Mama's closeness. I bent forward and picked up the doll tenderly and held it to me. The dress had been freshly laundered and the delicate violet fragrance touched my nostrils, bringing back a flood of tender, happy memories which touched my heart. I had completely forgotten, in those few precious moments, of the presence of the room's two other occupants until Tempa spoke, breaking the spell.

“I shall speak with your mother,” she said and her voice had an eerie sound, “for I can converse with the dead. I shall find out if it would be wise for you to leave this house and return to school or if you should remain here and try to make your peace with the villagers.”

“You don't know what you're saying,” I whispered. “That's evil talk.”

“Not evil,” she contradicted. “Do not fear. The dead cannot harm you. I shall speak to your Mama about you.”

It was too much. My emotions were a mixture of fear and anger at this stupid, superstitious gypsy. I flung the doll from me as if it were tainted. It struck the harp and the strings made a discordant sound. At the same time, the lovely china face broke and it fell in pieces on the floor. All the grief and sorrow that had built up in me and which I'd held in restraint these last two days suddenly broke loose. I screamed and ran from the room. Arthur jumped up to intercept me, but I thrust him aside. I wanted no further part of either of these people. At that moment, I had no fear of Mama. Just Arthur and Tempa. I hated them for what they'd told me. I wanted them both out of this house and as soon as I got my emotions under control, I'd insist they leave.

I ran up the stairs and entered my rooms, locking the door behind me. I ran into my bedroom and threw myself across the bed and cried until there were no more tears.

THREE

After my tears had spent themselves, I lay there staring at the ceiling. At first I was too numbed from the shock of learning about Mama to want to think of anything; but gradually rationality returned and I knew I had no right to feel anger or resentment toward either Tempa or Arthur. Hadn't I wanted to know why Mama had been so hated by the villagers? And hadn't they supplied me with that knowledge? My supposed anger had really been fear. Fear of what they said Mama had been, fear that I might have inherited that so-called gift which, to me, seemed more of a curse. Fear that Tempa might be telling the truth when she said she could contact Mama. I loved Mama alive, but dead I did not wish to see her shade or hear from her. Nor would I believe I'd ever be able to predict the future of anyone in any way,

As for Tempa and Arthur, I wanted them both to stay. At least for a while. I was alone. I had to make a future for myself, but I would need help and I would be grateful for theirs. I was pleased I had not rained maledictions on them or ordered them from the house. My years of having lived in the private school, surrounded by the goodness and holiness of the nuns, even though I was not of their faith, had served me in good stead and would continue to do so, for I would bear no hatred or animosity toward the villagers who had done so toward Mama and now, I supposed, would do so to me. But perhaps, in some way, I could show them the error of their ways. I would never believe Mama was a seeress. She was a brilliant, well-educated and well-read woman. What others thought were prophecies on her part were, no doubt, plain common sense and the result of hours of deep thinking.

With that resolve, I arose, bathed my face, smoothed my hair and decided on a brief tour of the house. I didn't bother with the floor above, which had been the servants' wing, for none occupied the house now. I knew Tempa and Mama had performed all menial duties and I no longer wondered why. Obviously no one would work here. There

were eleven bedrooms on this floor besides Mama's suite and mine. I looked in a few of them, but I found the same dark mahogany furniture in each and, strangely, even after my absence of years, they had a familiar appearance. I paused before the door to Tempa's room and my hand reached out for the knob, but as quickly, I withdrew it. It would be wrong for me to intrude on her privacy. I had assigned Arthur to a room in the opposite wing.

I moved on to Mama's suite and entered it, closing the door behind me. Strange that a woman who held such a fearful reputation and was, no doubt, regarded as a dealer in the occult, would prefer furnishings so daintily feminine as the French provincial furniture with its delicate contours and painted in cheerful white and gold designs. The draperies were a soft shade of green, as was the rug. I moved through the little sitting room to the bedchamber which was furnished in the same cheerful fashion, with the window draperies a cheery rose, with matching bedspread and gauzy curtains enclosing the bed. I went to Mama's dressing table and sat down in the little chair. I regarded my reflection in the large mirror. My features were somber and my eyes swollen from my tears. But their blueness was still apparent, and that I'd inherited from Mama. My hair was the same chestnut color as hers. But where her nose had been straight, mine had a Roman cast, inherited from Papa. I'd also inherited his firm chin and full lips called sensuous by some. Like Mama, I was slender and moderately tall, but where she was soft and gentle, I believed I was stubborn and spirited.

However, I was really interested in none of these observations. My sole reason for regarding my reflection in the mirror was to see if I could conjure up any predictions regarding myself. After a few moments of this, I felt ridiculous and, much to my amazement, threw back my head and laughed aloud. I was not blessed with the gift, if such it could be called. Nor was Mama. The thought was ludicrous and I would treat it with the contempt it deserved. I felt as if all the horror and terror I'd been treated to these last two hours had never happened. I regarded my black mourning dress and my eyes shifted to the furnishings of

the room. They were bright and gay and cheerful, just as mine were. At least, Mama had been able to take refuge in pleasant surroundings. I went to her closet and regarded her dresses. They, too, were colorful. I did notice one strange garment set apart from the others. It was black, of gauzy material, Grecian in design, with wide flowing sleeves and a hooded cape. I was puzzled by it, for it seemed out of place, but I gave it no further thought, believing Mama had purchased it on a whim.

I left the suite and returned to my room. There I removed my black dress and chose a pale blue day-blouse, with magenta satin stripes and matching Marie Antoinette skirt. I wasn't being disrespectful to Mama, but in order to lighten my spirits, I knew I had to dispose of the black garb.

I placed a toque atop my head, picked up a pair of gloves and went downstairs, passing through the large dining room, with its long oak table and its twenty chairs. The seats and backs of each were upholstered in heavy leather and carved in fanciful design. The serving table and buffet stretched almost the length of one side of the room. There was a smaller dining room for the family, which was furnished in cheerful tones of maple.

I walked through the pantry and entered the large kitchen. Tempa was busily engaged in preparing a beef roast for the oven. I'd thought she might express displeasure over my costume, but she had changed her own and was wearing a gaily embroidered blouse with matching skirt. As she moved about the kitchen in her bare feet, the bells on her anklet made silvery sounds.

"I'm glad you've taken off the black," she said, regarding me. "Your Mama didn't want you to mourn her. She said true grief comes from the heart."

"I agree, Tempa," I replied. "And I remember Mama's gay manner. I'm going to the village, but I don't know how to hitch up the buggy."

"Don't you think you should let your stepfather go with you?" she asked. "He told me he did not want you going out alone."

"I'll not be treated like a child," I said. "Besides, I have business in the village. Do you wish any groceries?"

"Yes," she replied. "Three pounds of flour, two pounds of sugar and a dozen eggs. But I've always performed the errands, Cassie. It's not seemly you should do it."

"I have a good reason for doing so," I replied. "I can think of no better way of becoming acquainted with the villagers."

"Watch out for that Oliver Seaton," she warned. "He owns the general store and cheats everybody except me. I know when his thumb is on the scale even when my back is to him. We quarrel each time I go there, for he always felt he should cheat your mother more than the others, for she had the most money."

"I shall watch him," I said. "One more thing, Tempa. What is the name of that woman who stopped our carriage today?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I wish to pay her a visit so I may assure her I could not answer the question she asked me about her son. I must convince her I have no such powers as to tell if any individual will live or die."

"How do you know you haven't?" Tempa asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, regarding the woman disdainfully. "I can look you straight in the eyes and I couldn't tell what's going to happen to you two minutes from now, or two years."

"You may not know you have it yet," she replied somberly, "but I believe it will come to you."

"I have no further time for such nonsense," I said. "Will you please come with me to the stable and show me how to hitch up the horse?"

"I grew up with horses," she said, as we left the house and walked the path to the stable. "There will be no need for you to learn that."

"Nevertheless, I wish to," I said. "I will also write the good nuns and tell them I will not return to school. I am now about to apply the knowledge I have acquired through the years."

"You must grow up sometime," she acquiesced.

At the stable, she hitched the horse to the buggy, gave me a few instructions on handling the animal and helped me into the seat.

"You didn't tell me the name of the woman," I reminded her.

"I was hoping you'd forgotten," she said. "Her name is Priscilla Larkin. Her house is located alongside the road to the village. A small white bungalow. A beautiful rose arbor leads from the road to the door."

"Ah, yes, I've seen it."

I urged the horse into action, gave Tempa a farewell nod and was off. It was a gentle animal, but it moved at a brisk pace and in no time we were approaching the home of Priscilla Larkin.

I pushed open the squeaky gate and walked up to the porch. Before I ascended the three wooden stairs, the door opened and Mrs. Larkin came out to greet me.

She'd been crying, for her eyes were very red and she looked more haggard than she had a few hours ago. But the look of hatred she'd borne me was missing and she stepped back to allow me entry.

The tiny parlor, now opened for my benefit, smelled of camphor and dust. It was dark, for the curtains were drawn, but streaks of light from the sides of the windows gave sufficient visibility for me to see that the furniture was sparse and modest. A vase on a table held pussy willows and dried flowers.

"Thank you, miss, for coming to see me," she said. "I'm sorry I stopped your carriage and behaved as I did."

"You might have gravely injured yourself," I told her, keeping my manner sympathetic, for truly, my heart went out to this woman.

"I am desperate and have no thought of my safety. It is my son, my only child—he's all I have, for my husband died but two months ago."

"Haven't you had the doctor for your boy?"

She nodded. "The doctor tells me little, but you can tell me. If your mother were alive, I would go to her."

"Did you know my mother?" I asked.

"Everyone knew her," she said. "She was accursed, but she could tell us of our future."

"I am not my mother," I said coldly, hurt by her derogatory description of Mama. "I can tell you nothing."

Her face hardened. "At least, look at my son."

"It will do no good," I said. Suddenly I wanted to escape this house, for it seemed, even though I'd never seen the boy, I could feel the presence of death. "I must go—at once."

She grasped my wrist in a vise-like grip. "No. You must look at my son. You must tell me he will get well."

I tried to get free of her, but her desperation had given her added strength. She pulled me from the room, through the hall, to a rear bedroom where lay a boy of about eight or nine, wasted by illness, his cheeks hollow, his eyes sunken. He breathed with only the greatest effort and there was upon him the unmistakable stamp of death.

It was so pitiful that I clapped my hands to my face and burst into tears as I turned away and stumbled out of the house. Behind me I heard Mrs. Larkin's first wail of anguish. I thought them the sobs of a harried mother. I didn't know that by bursting into tears, I'd given poor Mrs. Larkin to believe that was my prophecy and the boy was going to die.

In the buggy, I forced myself to a semblance of calm, after which I drove to the center of the village. I tied the horse to the hitchrack in front of the only bank, entered and identified myself to a clerk who brought me directly to Mr. Greenbough. He was the president and owner of the bank. He was portly and very proper, his long sideburns and goatee making him seem more so. He rose, bowed courteously and seated me in a chair alongside his desk.

He didn't speak, except for a formal greeting, until he had resumed his chair behind his desk. "I'm sorry about your mother, Miss Taylor. It was quite unexpected, was it not?"

"It was," I replied, my manner as proper as his.

"She will be sorely missed," he said in continuing politeness.

"I find that difficult to believe," I replied. "Particularly since no one saw fit to express their condolences either by word or a simple wreath."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "They're simple-minded people around here, Miss Taylor. They believe in spooks, little green men, a spectral world."

"And you, Mr. Greenbough? Do you believe?"

"Hardly, Miss Taylor. I happen to be an educated man."

"Then why didn't you attend my mother's funeral? After all, since she is a large stockholder in the bank. . . ."

"*Was*, Miss Taylor," he corrected, his glance benign. "Also, it would not be wise for the officers of the bank to antagonize the villagers."

"Even though it's the only bank in town?" I looked skeptical.

"Exactly."

"Mama told me that Papa did all of his banking here and conducted all his business through this bank," I said quietly. "Is that not the truth?"

"Yes, indeed," he replied, attempting a heartiness that was completely out of character. "Your great-grandfather really started this bank. The family had large holdings in it until recently."

"You mean that has been changed?" I asked, openly puzzled.

"Quite," he replied. "Your mother made large withdrawals. She even sold bank stock."

"I fear you will have to be more explicit," I said, sensing more bad news. "I was of the opinion Mama was a very wealthy woman."

"She was," he replied. "But she made very large withdrawals."

"For what purpose?" I asked.

"I have no idea," he replied. "However, I will say this. You are not destitute. If you manage your money wisely and frugally, you will have no problems. However, I must relate the bad news that you are far from an heiress, which, I believe, you thought you were."

"I fear I did," I said with a sigh. "However, such knowl-

edge does not frighten me. I am a modern young woman and believe I can manage my affairs quite capably."

I felt far from capable, but I'd not give this smug gentleman the idea that the news of Mama having disposed of her wealth in some mysterious fashion came as a distinct shock.

"I shall provide you with an accounting within the week," he went on in businesslike fashion. "I shall give you a checkbook immediately. If you have any questions, or if I can help you in any way, do not hesitate to come to me."

"I'm deeply obliged," I said as I rose.

Mr. Greenbough presented me with the checkbook and escorted me to the door. Outside, I fought off the stunned feeling that came with learning I was not wealthy. It took only minutes to reconcile myself to the idea. After all, Mama's wealth had brought her no happiness. Perhaps that was why she had disposed of most of it.

I drove the buggy along the street until I came to the general store operated by Oliver Seaton and his wife Amanda. It was the only general store in the village, a fortunate thing for the Seatons, for certainly they did nothing to create good will among their customers. Mama used to tell me how he was as close as skin with his money and did his best to pass off shoddy merchandise on some of the lesser knowing of the villagers.

I found him to be heavysset and pink-jowled, and his apron, which reached his chin, was smeared with a mixture of blood, grease and plain dirt. He had small eyes set in a large face and was as different in appearance from his wife as he could possibly be.

Amanda was lean and hard. Her thin face was gaunt and sickly, just as Mama had described her, adding that she'd never been ill in her life and she possessed more physical strength than her husband. Her brows raised in open disapproval as she regarded my costume, but her greeting was courteous.

"You back to stay, Miss Taylor?" she asked.

"I am," I said firmly, returning her stare.

"Hope you'll do business with us," Oliver said. "The gypsy did."

"You mean Miss Dardanov, I suppose," I said.

"The same," he replied. "A strange one with those weird outfits she wears and her bare feet, even when the snow is head high."

"She favors the costume of her people. As for my trading here, I expect that since it's the only store in town I have little choice."

"Guess you're right," he said, his smile smug. "What'll you have?"

I gave the order and while he went about filling it, I meandered about the store. I noticed a fire burning in the old potbellied stove. Piled around it were cracker barrels, kegs of pickles, a counter of cheese. Directly next to it was an iron barrel of kerosene with its smelly tin-measuring receptacle beneath it. Now and then a drop of oil oozed from the spigot. A dangerous place for an inflammable liquid. Obviously, the Seatons were careless as well as untidy, for certainly the crackers would pick up the fumes of the kerosene. I moved on to the dry goods counter at the opposite side of the store and started to inspect the yardage. And so, though I believed my attention was focused on the material before me, I was stunned to hear myself speak out a reprimand to Oliver Seaton.

"Take your thumb off the scale while weighing the flour," I said, still with my back to him. "You're giving me a pound less than I ordered. You did the same with the sugar."

"She has eyes in the back of her head," hissed Amanda. "Like her mother."

"And the gypsy," Oliver added sourly. "Don't know as we want the likes of her in the store."

"There is Springville, only eight miles distant," I said, turning about to face them. "I will have lots of leisure time to go there."

"And put a curse on us, I suppose," Amanda said, her features bitter. "Burn us down, no doubt."

"I don't need second sight," I replied, amazed at my calmness, "to know that if you don't move that barrel of

kerosene away from the stove, you will have a serious fire here. How much do I owe you?"

I was watching Oliver cram my purchases into a too-small paper sack which would scarcely hold until I got to the buggy.

"You still believe I'm cheating you?" he asked, his manner challenging. "You can weigh the stuff."

"That won't be necessary," I replied with a smile. "You rectified your error when I spoke to you."

"So you *are* like your mother," he said. "Don't try any tricks in here, miss. Don't try to frighten us with your prophecies about our store burning down."

I smiled patiently, knowing further argument would be useless. "Please tell me what I owe you."

He obliged and I was glad to have the exact change for I was anxious to get out of there. I had plenty to think about on my return trip. I already knew the villagers felt the same antagonism toward me that they had toward Mama. I'd learned one thing more. Without even turning around, I knew Oliver was attempting to cheat me and I'd called him on it. Was I like Mama? And Tempa? Or was it that Tempa had warned me that he did that and the thought had so consumed me that I spoke out automatically? That had to be it. I'd not believe otherwise, for I didn't even believe it of Mama.

I reached the stable and, despite my clumsy efforts, managed to unhitch the horse myself and lead him into his stall. I took the groceries into the kitchen and set them on the table. Tempa was nowhere in sight and I moved through the pantry, the dining room and glanced into the small parlor. Arthur was there, sitting by the window, smoking another of his cheroots.

He jumped up when he saw me. "Tempa told me you'd gone to the village. You shouldn't have done such a thing alone."

"I had business to attend to," I replied. "And I have to start learning to accept responsibility."

"I realize that, Cassie," he said, moving over to me. "But just now, I'm concerned about your safety."

"I'm back," I replied with a smile. "I had no problem."

"How were you received?" he asked, eyeing me carefully.

My smile was pensive. "Not too kindly, I fear. But I don't intend to give up easily."

He managed a smile. "I admire your courage, but please allow me to feel useful."

"Had you been about, I would have invited you to come with me," I told him.

"I'd gone for a stroll in the woods," he said. "I, too, have a lot of thinking to do. At any rate, I'm glad you returned safely."

"I must go upstairs and wash some of the travel dust from my face and hands," I said, moving to the stairway.

"You look very pretty, despite the traces of it on your face," he said. "I'm glad you're not wearing black. Did you know your mother loathed it?"

"No," I replied. "But I never saw it on her."

"Nor I," he said. "Run along, my dear."

Upstairs, I met Tempa coming from her room. She, too, seemed relieved to know I was back safe. She called to me to hurry, as supper would be served in fifteen minutes.

FOUR

At supper, I told Tempa and Arthur about my visit to Priscilla Larkin and how the poor woman had insisted I look at her son and tell her whether he would live or die.

"She really wanted me to tell her he would live," I said.

"How could you, when you knew he would die?" Tempa asked.

"I knew no such thing," I said heatedly. "I hadn't even seen the child."

"But you sensed death in the house," Tempa said.

"No," I contradicted her sternly. "I observed the woman's anguish. She knew nothing could be done for her son, yet she wanted reassurance from me."

"Did you give it, Cassie?" Arthur asked.

"No," I said solemnly. "Mrs. Larkin grasped my wrist and dragged me into the room of her son. One had no need to be a seeress to know that death would soon claim the pitifully wasted frame of the little boy. I ran from the house to the accompaniment of the poor woman's wails of anguish."

"By running, you prophesied his death," Tempa said.

"Oh, please stop it, Tempa," I exclaimed impatiently.

"Where else did you go?" Arthur asked, no doubt with the idea of getting my mind off the unpleasant incident.

"To the general store where Amanda and Oliver Seaton made it quite evident they had no more use for me than they had for Mama."

"Or me," Tempa added.

"Or you," I agreed with a smile.

"I suppose he tried to cheat you," Tempa said.

"He did, but you'd already warned me of his deviousness, so I was prepared and called him on it."

"And he said you could trade elsewhere," Tempa went on.

I nodded. "It must be a game he plays. Why didn't Mama have you go to Springville?"

"Oh, I could have," she said, with a shrug. "But I liked the little game I played with them. I could tell, even with my back to him, what he was doing and how much he was trying to cheat me."

I was in the act of taking a sip of water and such was

my amazement at her words—for hadn't I done the same thing—I swallowed the wrong way and took a violent fit of coughing. Arthur jumped up and came around the table. He slapped my back soundly a few times, forcing up the fluid which had gone down my windpipe. It helped and I thanked him with my eyes, for my paroxysm of coughing made talking difficult for a few minutes. I sat quietly until I'd regained my equilibrium.

"What happened, my dear?" Arthur asked, once he felt it safe for me to talk. "Did something Tempa say frighten you?"

"No," I lied. "I was quite amused that she would be able to do that. But then, when one knows, or has been warned Oliver Seaton cheats, it doesn't take any exceptional skill to pretend to catch him at it."

"I agree," Arthur said.

"There is more to it than that," Tempa argued. "I even saved other villagers money when I'd be at the store, though I got no thanks for it."

"Did you expect any?" Arthur asked, his glance amused.

"I knew better," Tempa said. "They feared me more than they feared Virginia."

"Why should they have feared you at all?" I asked.

"You do not know what I did when I traveled with my people," Tempa said. "Nor, after your outburst this afternoon, will I tell you."

"I think that's wise," Arthur said. "Cassie should not be upset further today. She's been through enough."

"I'll admit it's been a trying day," I said. "But because of what I've been subjected to, I wish to know everything there is to know about Tempa. I know about Mama and I know about you, Arthur. There remains only Tempa."

"What good will it do?" he argued.

"I don't know really," I said. "Nevertheless, I want Tempa to tell me about her life with her people."

"People say we are lazy, but a gypsy's life is hard," Tempa said with a shrug. "We are nomads, we travel from place to place. We live in the woods where our horses can forage. We steal and beg and read palms. I did none of those things."

"Why did they permit you to travel with them?" Arthur

asked. "You had to earn your keep. I know the ways of the gypsies, even with one another."

She nodded, a smile touching her lips and her eyes and though she lowered her head, her glance encompassed both of us. I shuddered inwardly, for her expression seemed almost Satanic. I had an impulse to jump up from the table and flee to the safety of my room, but I steeled myself to remain where I was and forced my voice to a lightness I was far from feeling.

"You're being foolishly mysterious, Tempa," I said casually. "Please get on with it, for I have more to tell you."

"I earned my way with my people, the Romanies, by conducting seances," she said and a strange, eerie quality seemed to creep into her voice.

"You mean you fooled the ignorant townspeople of the various places you passed through," I said, attempting, but not quite succeeding, in forcing a laugh.

"I fooled no one," she said. "I told you I could call back the dead, converse with them. I was not lying. But when I became ill, I no longer had the strength, for it takes a great deal and the seances always left me weak and spent. When I could no longer serve my people, they cast me out, left me behind. I knew, sick as I was, if I could gather up the strength to come to this house—which I had already pictured in my mind—I would find a refuge. Your Mama was not even surprised when I came. Later—much later—when she learned of my gift, she told me she had been expecting me."

"Are you lying to me, Tempa?" I asked, no longer attempting to hide my horror.

"I swear to you I am not," she said, her voice resuming its normalcy. "I don't wish to frighten you. Nor do I wish you to fear your Mama because of what she was able to do. You asked and I told you."

"So I did," I admitted.

"What was it you wished to tell us?" Arthur asked me.

"Nothing of any importance," I said. "Just that I also went to the bank and spoke to Mr. Greenbough."

"I trust he advised you wisely," Arthur said.

I nodded. "He offered his services and will give me

a full accounting of my worth within a week's time."

"For one who led the sheltered life you did, you're proving very competent," he said.

"I have much yet to accomplish," I said. "Particularly with the villagers and I am sorely troubled as to how to go about it."

"It will take time," he said. "You must be patient, though youth rarely is."

"It is a grace I will learn," I said with a smile. "May I help you with the dishes, Tempa?"

"No," she replied. "You've had a difficult day. You need rest. I must keep myself occupied with household chores, for I am very lonely with your Mama gone."

"That's understandable," I said. "I hope, shortly, to be better company for you. But just now, my heavy heart and my problems consume me. In the meantime, I beg the indulgence of both of you."

"I was hoping you'd join me with a glass of sherry," Arthur said. "It would relax you, my dear. Your tenseness is evident in the lines about your eyes and your mouth. You're much too young for that."

"Grief is no respecter of age," I rejoined. "I would rather go to my room. I hope you understand."

"I do—quite," he said, rising and moving around the table to assist me from my chair.

Tempa said, "I placed a lamp on the console in the hall. Take it to light your way up the stairs."

"Thank you, Tempa," I said. "Good night to both of you."

In the sanctuary of my rooms, I moved about quietly, preparing myself for bed, my mind consumed with the tragic events of the day. I wondered anew if I could continue to live here; if I had the mental stamina to endure the scorn and contempt of the villagers; if there was any way I could convince them Mama was a good and noble woman who meant no one evil. I tried desperately to think of an answer, a solution, but it was all evasive, for I was wearied in both mind and body and the simple act of brushing my hair seemed almost too much.

It was a great relief to extinguish my lamp and stretch out in the relaxing softness of my bed. And in the darkness, I thought of Mama and wondered how she'd ever endured the life she'd led here. I wondered why she'd remained and almost at once, the answer came. The place was secluded, and she had known happiness here with Papa. I don't suppose she'd ever told him of her gift—as Tempa and Sister Mary Theresa had chosen to call it. Perhaps for fear of losing his love, just as she feared the loss of mine once I grew up.

I hoped wherever she was, she knew I'd loved her and would cherish her memory, no matter how others regarded her. I thought of Arthur's treachery and could well understand how deeply Mama had been hurt when she discovered how he had capitalized on her predictions. Yet she'd never spoken an ill word in regard to him. I was certain there'd never been a divorce and since there wasn't and he had adopted me at the time of their marriage, I couldn't truly say I was alone in this world. Yet I somehow doubted Arthur would care about the role of stepfather. He was very handsome and a grown daughter would be rather an encumbrance to him. Yet he'd been kind to me and I sensed his concern for me and his desire to be of service. Perhaps he was truly ashamed of what he had done in the past and hoped that by staying here and watching over me he could atone for his transgressions. At least Mama had considered them such or she'd never have sent him away.

Gradually, my thoughts became fewer, and as they faded from my consciousness, I drifted off into sleep. But I was destined not to have a restful night and my weariness was apparent in the length of time it took me to fully awaken. But, finally, sounds penetrated my consciousness and I opened my eyes to lie very still, trying to locate the noises that had disturbed my slumber. As I oriented myself, I realized the distraction came from downstairs, but I could not identify it. It seemed as if I heard a few steps, followed by either a creak or a loud object banging against something, then a few more steps, and the same noises would be repeated.

Despite what I'd been through, I felt no fear as I sat on

the side of the bed, fumbled for the matches, struck one and lit the lamp which sat on the commode. Nevertheless, I rose quietly, slipped into my negligee, picked up the lamp and moved through my sitting room to the closed door. I listened for a moment before opening it and the sounds came again. More annoyed than curious, I stepped into the corridor. It was a long, rather narrow hallway, expanding into a wide and spacious gallery which looked down into the reception hall. I heard the same noise and moved to the stairway. It never occurred to me to summon Arthur or Tempa, for I still felt no apprehension.

I knew, of course, that the light from my lamp would alert whoever was down there, so I made no secret of my approach. I was halfway down the steps when I heard quick steps slithering across the floor, followed by the sound of a door opening. I paused, and for the first time a trickle of fear caused me to grip the stairway railing to steady myself. I listened, hoping to hear the sound of the door closing, believing it might be either Tempa or Arthur who had, perhaps, been awakened as I was, and had come down to investigate. But when all continued to be quiet, I resumed my descent and when I reached the hall, I held my lamp high, so as to dispel shadows and allow me a better view. There was no sign of anyone, so I moved on into the huge drawing room, traversing its length, listening and observing. Again, I met with disappointment, or was it relief? I reentered the hall, and crossed it to the family parlor, the small dining room, then the large formal one and on through the pantry into the kitchen. It was there I felt a cool breeze and, once again holding my lamp high with my arm extended, I noted that the door to the basement was ajar.

I felt a slight trace of relief, again believing my first premise, that Arthur or Tempa had been awakened by the same sounds, had come down to investigate and were now prowling the cellar. Without the slightest hesitation, I went to the door, opened it wide and regarded the steep, narrow steps whose existence I'd completely forgotten, though I knew instantly they had to be traversed with care.

I remembered the large cellar with earthen floor, stored

with furniture, barrels and boxes. It was a spooky place even by day. By night, the thought of going down there was thoroughly abhorrent. Yet who could be conducting a search other than Tempa or Arthur? Nevertheless, thinking caution the better part of valor, I decided to let my presence be known.

"Who is down there?" I called out. When there was no reply, I added, "Please answer me."

There still was no reply and I felt my first twinges of worry and fear. Not enough to overcome my determination to make the descent, for the thought occurred to me that it might well have been that Tempa or Arthur might have fallen and was lying there severely injured, unable to reply.

I started my descent, moving cautiously, keeping the lamp high so that the shadows receded well away from me, though still uneasy about the darkness beyond the extent of the lamplight.

I reached the bottom of the steps and stopped, feeling momentary relief that neither Tempa nor Arthur lay prone at my feet. But my relief was short-lived, for my lamp threw more shadows than light and it was terrifying watching them slip from place to place, or suddenly tower high as if some monstrous specter was about to swoop down on me.

Again, I spoke aloud, saying, "Whoever is down here, please answer me. If it isn't Tempa or Arthur, who is it and what do you want?"

The darkness was pregnant with silence. I took a few tentative steps away from the foot of the stairs. The stillness seemed to mock me and I had a momentary urge to scream for help. I started to tremble and I bent to set the lamp on a low bench. As I arose, I felt a sudden draft. The next moment a blanket or a sack of some kind was brought down over my head to my waist, imprisoning my arms.

In my struggles, the lamp was knocked off the box and crashed to the floor. I hoped it would start a fire, but it apparently went out. I had no more time to think about it, for a knee was now directed cruelly into the small of

my back and an arm went around my neck, choking me and my efforts to scream for help.

I tried to free my arms and reach to claw at whoever held me, but I was helpless. I tried using my feet, but they were shod with soft slippers and any kick I might render would be woefully inadequate to help me break free and would hurt me far more than my attacker.

The arm about my neck tightened and my breath began to leave me. I knew of nothing to do except pretend I had fainted, so I let my legs go out from under me and I sagged helplessly in the grip of my tormenter.

Suddenly I was allowed to fall and I landed in a heap on the floor. I had no idea of what was happening now, and I tried to tear away the grimy, dusty cloth over my head, at the same time managing to scream.

A knee came down on my chest, pinning me to the floor. Two hands sought my throat, encountered my face at first, but slipped down unerringly until the fingers were about my neck and the squeezing began.

Suddenly, I knew I was going to be murdered. For a reason I couldn't have fathomed, even if there had been time to think about it, I was to be killed in cold blood.

I abandoned my pretense of having fainted and I began to fight with all the strength left in me. With my arms still under the sack, I grasped a wrist and tried to free it from my throat, but my strength was inadequate.

Suddenly the choking grip was released, the knee came off my chest. I sat up, struggling to remove the smothering cloth over my head. I felt a cool draft and I knew that someone had opened the cellar hatch to escape from the basement.

I finally got the suffocating material off my head. It had a musty smell and from the coarseness of the material, I realized it was an old blanket, something the would-be murderer had picked up in the cellar. I saw blessed lamp-light too and I called out. Arthur answered, giving quick reassurance and moved briskly down the steps. He set his lamp down and gently helped me to my feet.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked.

"I was awakened by sounds. I heard someone and I . . .

came downstairs. The cellar door was open. I thought you or Tempa had heard the noise too and come down to investigate. I wasn't too frightened when I descended the steps. I had called out to you both and when you didn't answer, I was fearful either of you might have fallen and were unable to reply. But when I got down here and didn't see anyone and called out again, to get no answer but a mocking silence, I became so terrified I couldn't even hold my lamp. I bent over and set it down on a low table. As I started to rise, this blanket was thrown over me and I was brutally seized. Whoever it was knocked me down and tried to choke the life from me. Had you been a moment later, I think I would have been dead."

"Did you catch a glimpse of who it was?"

"No. As you can see," I motioned to the broken pieces of glass, all that remained of my lamp, "In my struggles the lamp was knocked over. All was in darkness. I don't even know if it was a man or a woman, though from the strength of the hands it seems quite likely it was a man."

"Obviously he departed by the hatchway," Arthur said. "I'll help you upstairs and waken Tempa. She must remain with you. I'm going to have a look around."

"Please don't," I begged. "This person has murderous intent. He's also strong and vicious."

Arthur made me no answer, but placed an arm about my waist and assisted me up the stairs. Tempa was just coming into the kitchen. She was still dressed in her garish gypsy costume, but her face looked puffy and sleep-filled.

"What happened, Cassie?" she asked. "I thought I heard you scream."

"You did," I replied. "Someone tried to kill me. There was a prowler in the cellar. I don't know if I surprised him or if he came here with the obvious intent of killing me. At any rate, he tried to choke me to death."

"Did you see who it was?" she asked, her question identical to Arthur's.

I moved my head slowly from side to side, as I made my way over to a chair. "I must sit down," I said. "I'm not only shaken. My arms and my neck hurts."

"Don't leave her alone for a moment, Tempa," Arthur

said. "I'm going back down to investigate. The interloper may have dropped something by which he could be identified."

"I'll guard her," Tempa assured him. "With my life if necessary."

I shuddered at her words. "I pray nothing will happen to you, Tempa. I have great need of you."

"Don't worry about me, child," she replied. "I'm a shrewd woman and cannot be easily fooled. You need a cup of tea. This time I'll put a spot of brandy in it to calm your nerves and relax your sore muscles."

I didn't protest as Tempa set about her task, for the incident had made me sorely shaken. I sipped the tea gratefully, only sorry that she would not join me in having a cup.

She sat down opposite me and I noticed she glanced at the still-open cellar door before she spoke.

"You must go away from this house, Cassie." She spoke softly, as if fearful of being overheard.

"Why?" I regarded her curiously.

"You are in danger here. I swear it."

"From whom, pray tell?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, her voice ominous. "I cannot see the face, but I have had warnings. Warnings which you must heed."

"You mean," I said patiently, "you held a seance, or you had a vision, or some such foolish thing."

"Do not make little of it, child," she said, with a fierceness that frightened me. "I speak the truth. Maybe it is he whom you should fear." She pointed an accusing finger at the cellar door.

"Don't be ridiculous," I scoffed. "I'm no more fearful of Arthur than I am of you."

"He is evil," she said. "I feel it."

"Tempa, in the school I went to, we were taught it was evil to believe you could call back the dead. That, we were told, was the work of the devil."

"I know those women are good," Tempa replied. "Your Mama liked them and they liked her. Did they say evil things about her?"

"Of course not," I exclaimed indignantly. "But I am not going to believe ill of my stepfather, any more than I would believe ill of you."

She shrugged. "There is nothing more I can say. However, I shall guard you well. Drink the tea, child. You need it."

I picked up the cup, forgotten in the argument, and sipped the beverage. Arthur returned from the cellar to report he'd had no success in finding any clues as to who the intruder might have been. He joined us at the table and Tempa poured him a cup of tea. She set the bottle of brandy on the table and he flavored his tea with a dollop of it.

"I'm sorely puzzled as to who would want to murder you," he said, sipping his beverage thoughtfully.

"The only one I can think of," I said, "is Oliver Seaton. Both he and his wife became very angry with me this afternoon, but I can't believe to the extent he would want to take my life."

"What sort of person is Mr. Greenbough?" Arthur asked.

"A hypocrite," Tempa said scathingly.

I smiled tolerantly. "He gave as his reason for not attending Mama's funeral services the fact that he couldn't antagonize the villagers."

Arthur said testily, "Since you're the biggest stockholder in the bank, I should think he'd be more concerned about antagonizing you."

"I am not a big stockholder in the bank," I said. "In fact, Mr. Greenbough said that only if I live frugally, can I continue to remain in this house. There is not a great deal of money left."

"Nonsense, Cassie," Arthur scoffed. "Your Papa left Virginia a fortune."

"Several fortunes," Tempa said. "But Virginia gave most of it away."

"You know about it?" I asked Tempa.

"I know," came the calm reply.

"Didn't Mr. Greenbough know what she did with it?" Arthur asked, still skeptical.

"No," I said. "But maybe Tempa knows."

Tempa gave that imperceptible shrug of her shoulders. "I bid you remember that your Mama was an exceptionally generous woman. A compassionate woman. After she realized she had the gift of prophecy, she spent a great deal of time in meditation. Whenever she visioned misfortune or a catastrophe of great proportions, she would warn the individuals involved—sometimes, even the countries involved. Most of the time, her warnings went unheeded. Sometimes, they were even ridiculed. She felt no bitterness. However, whenever great hardships were visited upon peoples—such as earthquakes or violent storms—she gave generously of her inheritance until most of it was gone."

Arthur nodded thoughtfully. "It sounds like her. Though it was a foolish gesture, particularly when she'd warned them and she had the future of a daughter to think about."

"There is enough left for me to live on," I said.

"It must have been quite a shock for you, my dear," Arthur said, his manner sympathetic.

"A surprise, perhaps," I said. "But not a shock. The shock came downstairs a few moments ago. Perhaps it was a villager who thinks there is a fortune hidden in the house and came to find it. I surprised him in the act and in his fear of discovery, he was going to murder me."

"It could well be," Arthur said. "It could very well be that they think Virginia acquired more wealth through her gift of prophecy. They may believe it's in the house."

"In that case, I think we should spread the word around the village that I am far from an heiress. That Mama left me with just enough to live on. Perhaps it will make people feel more kindly toward her when they learn what she did with her money."

Tempa and Arthur exchanged embarrassed glances.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You may as well tell her," Tempa said. "She will know it soon enough."

"What will I know?" I asked boldly. "I told you I wanted no secrets."

"My dear," Arthur said, his manner gentle, "the night Virginia died, I was standing outside this house, my eyes

on the window of the room in which your Mama lay, breathing her last. I saw Tempa come to the window and look out. I knew then that Virginia had breathed her last. I started to turn to go back to the inn when suddenly there was a—manifestation, I believe you would call it.”

“What sort of manifestation?” I asked. “A specter?”

“No, nothing like that,” he replied. “It was just beyond the house. A very bright light in the sky. Everyone in the village saw it. They had no more idea of its meaning than we, but it was a very strong light and it lasted for three or four minutes. It was eerie and frightening.”

“You saw it, Tempa?” I asked.

She nodded slowly. “I was standing at the window.”

“Perhaps it was a meteor flashing through the sky,” I ventured.

“It was too low for that,” Arthur said.

“There was turmoil in the village when I returned. Everyone was on the street, milling about. They said it. . . .”

He paused, regarded the liquid in his cup thoughtfully.

I knew he was reluctant to finish, but I had to know.

“Go on,” I urged. “Whatever they said, you must tell me.”

“Somehow they knew your mother had died,” he went on. “And they said the light was inspired by the forces of hell which had come to claim her soul.”

“How horrible,” I exclaimed in anguish. “How perfectly horrible for them to voice such words.”

“I agree, my dear,” he said. “But you may as well know how intense the feeling in the village is against your mother—and now you.”

I nodded agreement. “Nonetheless, I shall not flee this house or this village. I will not leave this spot until I have proven Mama’s goodness and learned the identity of the one who tried to murder me. Good night.”

I arose, picked up one of the lighted lamps and left the kitchen. Tempa made as if to follow, but I held up a restraining hand. Anger had replaced my fear. But once upstairs, I locked my door and left the lamp, though turned low, burning at my bedside. Despite my encounter with a killer, sleep quickly claimed me, due, no doubt, to my outraged muscles and my nervous fatigue.

FIVE

I arose to brilliant sunlight, which seemed to dispel the terror of what I'd experienced the night before. The tinkle of the bells on Tempa's anklet struck a melodious note as she moved about the table serving breakfast to Arthur and me.

"I'm glad to see you look as if you managed a night's sleep," he said.

"I did," I replied. "I don't know whether to attribute it to the brandy or my outraged nerves."

"It was a shocking experience," he replied. "I believe we should journey to the village and inform the constable of the attempt on your life."

"It would do little good," Tempa said with her characteristic frankness.

"Why not?" I asked.

She shrugged. "He would say you wished to arouse sympathy for yourself."

"I have bruises on my arms as proof of my struggles," I argued. "Certainly I wouldn't do that to myself."

"It's known to have been done," Arthur observed, his features thoughtful.

I sighed in desperation. "Why did Mama keep this from me?"

"To spare you," Arthur said. "Isn't your anguish great enough now?"

"Almost more than I can bear," I said. "I don't know how to cope with it. Not just the attack on my life, but the antagonism of the villagers which was directed toward Mama and now me."

"I believe the only wise course would be for you to go away," Arthur said. "In time, this power you are believed to have inherited from Virginia may well be forgotten by everyone in this area."

Tempa went to the sideboard, poured herself a cup of coffee and joined us at the table. "That is good advice," she said. "Just because someone failed in his attempt to murder you doesn't mean he won't try again."

"But why should anyone want to murder me?" I cried out.

"Perhaps because they think you are accursed," she said. "They want the village free of your presence."

"Did anyone try to murder Mama?" I asked.

Her head moved solemnly from side to side. "Except when she was with you during vacations and holidays, she was practically a recluse, restricting her movements to walks about the grounds."

"Was it fear that caused her to do that?" I asked, desperately trying to find an answer to the nightmare I'd returned to.

"She feared no one," Tempa said. "But much scorn and ridicule was heaped upon her when she first made her prophecies. Once they were proven true, people didn't want to be around her, for they feared her power. She could look into the eyes of a person and tell if he or she was going to die."

"Did she do that?" I asked in horror.

"Never," Tempa said. "But she would not lie or give an evasive answer to any question which was asked her. She would turn away. Since everyone knew her reputation for honesty, they knew that the answer she would not give could not be anything other than unfavorable."

"Then I guess a journey to the village would be useless," I said.

Arthur nodded. "Since you have chosen to allow me to remain here, I would like to take it upon myself to be responsible for your safety. After all, my dear, I am still your stepfather."

"Mama never divorced you then."

"The very word was anathema to her," he said. "I didn't know it until I offered to give her her freedom."

"Did you want a divorce?" I asked.

"I didn't even want a separation," he said. "I still loved Virginia, even after she sent me away. But she never forgave what I did, nor do I blame her. However, I can, in some small measure, redeem myself by looking after you."

"It seems ridiculous since I am a grown woman," I said.

"In view of what almost happened last night," he replied, "I think it quite sensible. However, I believe I'll journey to the village myself and stop off at the tavern. They

remembered me when I returned. I'm going to gossip a little, pass the word around that you are far from an heiress."

"For what purpose?" I asked.

"I believe the attempt on your life last night was made because someone in the village was seeking hidden wealth in the house."

"Surely Mama wouldn't withdraw large sums of money from the bank to hide in the house," I exclaimed, my tone one of disbelief. "That would be inviting disaster."

"I thoroughly agree," he replied. "Tempa, did anyone know of the sums Virginia gave to victims of disasters?"

"No one," Tempa replied. "She didn't do it for publicity. She insisted her donations be anonymous."

"You see?" Arthur addressed me. "Mr. Greenbough didn't know what she did with the money. There could be wide speculation as to what happened to it."

"What you say makes a great deal of sense," I admitted. "I am at a loss as to what to do, but one thing I know I won't do is leave this house. I'll not be frightened away."

My nerves were further jarred by someone using the heavy iron door knocker with considerable force. Tempa answered it and I heard her harsh voice rise in anger. I arose quickly and went into the hall, followed by Arthur.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A farmer from the village," she replied, trying to force the door shut.

But he was not to be deterred. He forced it open and stepped into the hall.

"Miss Taylor," he addressed me, "my name's Zachary Willard. I got some news for you and some business with you."

"If that is true," I replied quietly, "there was no need for you to force your way in here."

He motioned with his cap toward Tempa who now stood, holding the door wide, her eyes flaming with anger. "The gypsy wouldn't let me in. Said you wouldn't see me."

"What is it you wish of me?" I asked sternly, not at all taken with his boldness.

"Priscilla Larkin's boy died, just as you predicted," he said.

"I predicted no such thing," I replied. "And I'll thank you to leave this house immediately."

"Got a question to ask afore I go," he said, his manner almost defiant.

"Then ask it," I said. Arthur had moved over to the man, but I held up a restraining hand.

"I got me a fair price offer for my farm . . . sixty acres, only I ain't sure I oughta sell. Maybe the buyer knows somethin' I don't and my land is goin' to get more valuable and I oughta hold onto it."

"I know nothing of your land or the buyer."

"You can tell me if I can sell. Your Mama could, only she thought she was too high and mighty for the villagers. Never showed her face 'ceptin' when she left to see you. Kept you clear of here all right, not wantin' you to know she was a witch. If she was, you must be. But I ain't afraid of you in daylight."

"Please leave this house immediately," I gasped.

"Immediately," Arthur repeated with emphasis, grasping the arm of the man and leading him, still protesting, to the door. He forced him through it and Tempa slammed it shut, placing her back against it as if he might force it open. He shouted imprecations for at least five minutes during which time the three of us stood there in absolute silence. Finally we heard his footsteps move across the porch, along the pebbled drive, followed by the sound of a horse and wagon as Zachary Willard made his reluctant departure.

Arthur was the first to speak. "Well, my dear, now you know the task of attempting to convince the villagers you do not have the gift your mother had is well nigh impossible."

I nodded, too miserable to speak. I went upstairs and entered my suite, moving on into my bedroom. There I made up my bed and moved about the room, dusting and moving furniture from one spot to another, yet having no awareness of what I was doing. My emotions were a mixture of fear and despair. Fear that I might possess this

gift my mother had and despair that if I did, I'd never win the friendship, not only of villagers, but of anyone. I was doomed to live the same life of loneliness Mama had.

I had no awareness of the passage of time, but suddenly I was brought out of my despondent reverie by the sound of voices. I went to my window which overlooked the drive. A buckboard had pulled up and two men were unloading my trunks. My spirits lifted at sight of them, for the unpacking would take much of my time, and would keep my mind off my immediate problems.

Arthur tapped on my sitting room door. I opened it and gave him money to pay the men and have them bring the trunks upstairs. I added that I would like Tempa's assistance in my chore, but he informed me he hadn't seen her in a couple of hours and had no idea of her whereabouts. It really didn't matter, for I was quite capable of doing the unpacking myself, but there was certainly an abundance of it, accumulated in my years of absence from this house.

I unlocked the trunks and went to work. Each trunk was crammed with clothes and it took me a long time to complete the task. As I worked, I wondered from time to time why Tempa didn't join me, for purposes of curiosity if nothing else.

Finally, my closets became so full that I had to put the overflow of garments elsewhere. I decided, for the time being, to hang my dresses in Mama's closet, so I gathered up an armful and went to her suite. Her closet was easily able to accommodate the garments and I was just about to leave the room when my attention was drawn to a very large painting that seemed to be askew. It was set in an oblong frame and it was a street scene of Paris. It was higher than my head, though not very wide. I grasped it by both sides to straighten it, but I discovered it wouldn't move. Intrigued, I studied the portrait only to detect it was actually a canvas-covered door and the ornate frame, part of the door itself. I don't suppose I'd ever have been clever enough to learn of its existence had it not been for the fact that it wasn't completely closed. Slowly, almost fearfully, I pulled it open. I could see nothing but blackness inside and my heart began to pound fearfully. Instinct

told me this was, obviously, a secret room, yet what could Mama have used it for?

None of the sunlight which poured through the windows of Mama's bedroom penetrated the one whose existence I'd just become aware of, so I lit a lamp which stood on a table alongside the secret door, holding it high as I passed through the opening.

The room was sparsely furnished. The ceiling and walls were covered with a heavy black material which fell in soft, full draperies. The rug, luxurious and thick to muffle any footfall, was also black as were the few chairs and single table in the room. I moved further into the room and lifted my lamp to let its rays encompass the entire space, but I almost dropped it for I was stunned by what I saw. At the extreme end of the room was a dais upon which was a throne-like chair. It was presently occupied by Tempa. The room was startling to the extreme, but so was her costume which was a duplicate of the black garment I'd observed in Mama's closet. Tempa's head was so covered by the hood her face was all but obscured by it.

I was repelled, not only by the room, but by her, yet I forced myself to move over to where she sat.

"Come no closer," she commanded. "Set the lamp on the table before you."

"What is this?" I asked, attempting, by my voice, to reveal my annoyance with her. But my words were high and shrill, revealing my fear of this strange woman who seemed to wish to befriend me, yet who was indulging in the sort of thing I abhorred and she was well aware of it. I swallowed slowly and tried again. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," she said quietly. "Do not fear me."

"I'm not afraid of you," I lied. "But I detest this sort of thing and you know it."

"Set the lamp on the table before you drop it."

I did so because, for the first time, I realized I was visibly shaking. With the lamp resting on the medium-high table, the room was fairly well illuminated, enabling me to see a table alongside the throne-like chair and on it a cut-glass decanter with matching goblet.

"What is the purpose of this room?" I asked.

"It is a seance room," she replied. "Your mother provided it for me."

"So you do conduct seances with the dead," I said coldly. "You are a medium."

"I already told you I am. I could not help you with your trunks. It seemed as if your Mama called me here. It was as if she told me you would come here."

"It was purely an accident," I said casually. "I needed more room for my clothes."

"It was no accident," she replied with a smile that chilled me to the marrow. "Your mother directed you here."

"And you left the door slightly ajar so I would discover it."

"I thought it was completely closed," she said. "But even if it had been, you'd have found it anyway. Your Mama so wished it."

"Tempa, I have no patience for this sort of thing," I said testily. "I want you out of this room immediately. I'm going to have it sealed up. What is in that carafe?"

"Something for me. Virginia favored a glass of sherry whenever she came here."

"I shouldn't wonder," I said. "One would need something to buoy up one's courage in this dismal room."

"Your Mama wasn't frightened here," Tempa said. "She looked forward to our seances."

"Did she wear that costume which matches yours and is hanging in the closet?" I asked.

"I am wearing the only costume. Your Mama allowed me to keep it in her closet," Tempa said. "Don't weary me with further questions, child. Close the door tightly, then come back and sit down. I believe I have a message for you which wishes to come through—unless you are too afraid to sit here with me."

I detected a slightly mocking tone when she made her last statement and I suppose that was what decided me.

"Long before she died," Tempa said, "we arranged this room as one to help a medium make contact. There is nothing here to disturb the mind when the lights are out. Everything is blackness. She believed in the return of the

dead, as I always have. At first she was skeptical, but I convinced her. As she was born with the gift of prophecy, so was I with the power to reach the dead."

I said, "I'm aware that seances are quite popular, but it has been my impression that they are all done by trickery. I have never met anyone who sincerely believes he or she contacted anyone from the world of the dead."

"Do you wish me to prove it then?"

"Can you bring back my mother?"

"I cannot promise. It may be too soon after her passing. Some day I will contact her. I can reach others, however. Do you wish me to demonstrate this?"

"Nothing else will ever make me believe it," I said, though I wished I'd never come into this weird room, or taken up Tempa's challenge.

"Please close the door tightly. It will lock and it cannot be seen from the other side."

I obeyed her and sat down in one of the chairs directly before the dais. On a table, within reach, was the lamp, its wick turned up for maximum light.

From her place above me, Tempa said, "I shall not attempt any firm contacts. I only wish to demonstrate to you, this afternoon, the presence of ghosts in this room when I call them here. Remain in your chair. Don't move and do not be afraid. No harm will come to you."

She poured a green-tinted liquid from the decanter, drank it in one swallow. She closed her eyes, grew quiet for some minutes before she gave a low moan, as if in great anguish. As she did so, I noticed that the room was not as brightly lighted as before and I tore my eyes away from Tempa to look at the lamp.

I sat in frozen fear as I watched the lamp flame grow smaller and smaller until it just seemed to wink out, yet the room was not in total darkness. A faint light from nowhere provided a shadowy, gray view of Tempa.

Suddenly the table beside my chair rose up and tilted until it stood on one leg. Then it crashed down on all four. This was a very heavy table. I would have had difficulty lifting even one side of it, but when I heard the legs of it drag across the carpet and then cease, I reached out, fan-

ning the air with my arms until I encountered the table. It was level, and about two feet off the floor.

Despite Tempa's order not to move, I slipped down to my hands and knees to make certain, mostly by sense of feel, that the table really did float in the air.

My hands encountered all four legs and all were well off the floor. I arose and felt for some sort of wire by which the table might have been lifted. There was nothing. The table came down with another crash and I quickly resumed my seat. I was amazed that the lamp had not toppled over and crashed.

There was a faint knock close by me. I paid little heed. The next one seemed delivered with enough strength to punch a hole in the wall. There were more knocks, I heard the table actually clattering across the thick carpet. Then I saw a faint swirling substance. It was directly above Tempa's head. There was no definite shape to it. I was reminded of a swamp on a summer night when the gases rise up with the mist and twist into eerie shapes. That's exactly what this looked like.

It hovered there, gently swirling. There wasn't a sound in the room now. My heart was pounding furiously and I was, at that moment, terrified. I sat erect on my chair. My jaws had tightened until the muscles were sore.

"Who . . . are . . . you?" I asked in a wheezy sort of voice.

The swirling form or whatever it was vanished in a twinkling—so fast I began to doubt it had ever been there. I'd had enough. I searched in my pocket for a match, but found none. There was a faint glow from the table, causing my eyes to widen in surprise. The lamp had actually lit itself and its flame grew brighter and brighter.

Tempa moaned softly, stirred, and after a few moments arose from the throne-like chair, stepped off the dais and came close to me. She slipped the hood from her head and actually smiled.

"It was not too terrifying, was it?"

"What . . . was that . . . thing above your head?" I asked.

"I don't know. My eyes are tightly closed. I have little knowledge of what goes on. Did I speak?"

"No . . . not a word."

"I doubted I could reach anyone. There are times when I cannot even fall into a trance."

I shuddered. "Yet you said you had a message for me."

"I have, but there were opposing forces. The friendly one couldn't get through," she said. "Cassie, I believe your Mama wishes to contact you. Will you sit in a seance with me again?"

"Yes," I said, now far more curious than fearful since I'd not been harmed.

"You still do not believe." She smiled tolerantly. "Not many do, and most of these only imagine they believe, while actually they do not. Others are too afraid to tell the truth."

"Does Arthur know about this room?"

"No, and I beg of you do not tell him. If we include him in a seance, I shall hold it in the downstairs parlor."

"As you wish, Tempa."

"Cassie, should I contact the spirit of your mother, do you have a question to ask her?"

"Why?"

"Because the spirits that frighten us so are far more afraid than we. If a spirit is called upon to answer a question that disturbs her, she will go away."

"I do not think Mama will be disturbed if I ask her whether I possess the power of prophecy which they say she had."

Tempa smiled. "My dear child, it is not necessary to ask that, though you may if you so wish."

"Why isn't it necessary?"

"Because you have it, my dear. It may not have made itself apparent to you yet, but it soon will. Don't fear it. Welcome it, Cassie, for you are among the very, very few fortunate ones."

As we left the black room, I looked back, remembering the strange bluish-white substance that swirled above Tempa's head. I shivered and I was glad when she closed the concealed door. I left the suite immediately, but Tempa moved to Mama's closet, to remove the hooded garment and hang it there until she had need of it again.

SIX

We delayed supper half an hour waiting for Arthur. Obviously he'd gone to the village, as he'd told me he'd intended, to pass the word around that I was not the heiress everyone thought. What good it would do I knew not. I hoped he would not inform the constable of the attempt on my life. In view of the open hostility of the village toward me, he might think I'd made up the story with the obvious intent of inciting sympathy for myself.

I praised Tempa for her cooking. Her hot breads were superb, as were her desserts. As I'd been taught at school that only topics harmonious and informative should be discussed at mealtime, I asked her to tell me of her life with her people. Seeming as anxious as I to forget the episode of the seance, she launched into her subject with great enthusiasm. I was fascinated to learn firsthand of the superstitions, religious beliefs, and intense loyalties of her people and I agreed wholeheartedly that it was not an easy life, though it was, during their moments of leisure, one of gaiety and also daring, for she wasn't the least hesitant to tell me of how adept they were at petty thievery. I gathered the idea that stealing was a challenge to them, whether it was articles they'd taken from homes to which they'd been given admittance, or the theft of barn fowl from the hardworking farmers, though she did add that the group she traveled with never stole from a landowner who allowed them to stay on his property while they were in a village. However, she admitted frankly that they were few in number, for the gypsies had a reputation for stealing and no one wanted them around.

We were enjoying our Indian pudding, hot and savory, when I happened to look up and see, behind her, a strange glow of a weird grayish color. In an astonishingly short space of time—not more than a second or two—it had assumed a definite form. It was Tempa, with her eyes closed and her face rigid in death. Then it was gone as mysteriously as it had appeared. At the same time, something seemed to be pounding at me, as if imploring me to

listen, when I could not hear. It took the form, finally, of what seemed to be the chattering of a dozen women at a sewing bee. Then that stopped also and I was aware of Tempa regarding me curiously.

"What is it, child?" she asked. "You've gone pale. Are you ill?"

"Oh, no," I said, attempting a calmness I was far from feeling. "It's just that, try as I might, I can't stop thinking of this awesome power Mama had and also the power you seem to have. I must confess it does unnerve me."

"It's been a shock for you, having to learn all this so quickly," she agreed. "You're young and you've led a sheltered life for all your growing years. That's why your Mama kept you in school. She feared you would turn against her once you knew how people shunned her unless they wished to know something that would benefit them in some way. Your Mama would never oblige them. She used her gift only to help others in distress, to avert disaster, if possible. If not, at least to warn those who would be in danger. That is what you must do, Cassie, for one day the power to predict will come to you. It is a grave responsibility. Your Mama handled it wisely. That is what you must learn to do."

"How . . . will I know when it happens?" I asked. "When the power comes?"

"Through a vision, perhaps, or unaccountable voices. Maybe both. Or it might be something that comes instinctively and you may never completely understand it. How it comes is of little importance. What you do with it is."

I felt like a traitor sitting here listening to Tempa explain what, in large part, I already knew. The days of this good woman sitting opposite me were numbered, for I'd seen her face in death, sufficiently clear to recognize it. There'd been voices too . . . garbled because, perhaps, I wasn't ready to hear them, or I'd closed my ears to them. Had I listened, I might now know exactly when she would die.

It was a horrifying thing to contemplate. I hated and feared the feeling, the power, for I felt certain the gift had now been passed on to me. I finished my dessert and

drank my coffee only with difficulty. And, despite myself, a gloomy silence seemed to settle over me.

I helped Tempa clear the table and do the dishes. We had just finished our chore when Arthur returned from the village. He desired no sustenance, stating he had eaten at the inn. He informed me he had passed the word around that Mama had disposed of most of her fortune and I might not be able to maintain the large house. I didn't ask him the reaction of the villagers. There was no need to. I could tell from his manner, they'd not changed in their attitude toward me.

I went upstairs to my room, for I was considerably unnerved and I didn't wish Arthur to notice. Even as I brushed my hair, my hand holding the brush shook severely, for I was filled with a foreboding I couldn't understand. I settled myself in bed and attempted to read, but the printed words had no meaning, so I set the book aside. The only lamp burning was the one at my bedside. I made certain the well was filled to last the night and then I turned the flame low, leaving just enough light to dispel any menacing shadows.

The moment I closed my eyes and sought sleep, the little noises began. I knew perfectly well these noises seemed to make their entrance every night when the house grew quiet, yet they served to frighten me. Presently, as they robbed me of my sleep, they seemed to change, or a new sound was introduced. A floor will creak in the dead of night, but faintly, not like the sounds I now heard. I was certain there was someone downstairs again.

I tried to force myself to lie there very quietly and do nothing, but I chided myself with the idea that such behavior was cowardly. I did, however, concede that it would be foolish of me to go downstairs alone, so I arose, left my suite and tiptoed to Arthur's room. If I knocked, I might alarm the prowler, so I turned the knob quietly and opened the door. Arthur was in bed, propped up with pillows, reading a book. Only one lamp was lit, furnishing not enough light to extend below the door to warn me he was not yet asleep.

"Downstairs," I whispered. "There's someone. I heard sounds again."

He nodded and signaled me to wait in the hall. In a few moments, he appeared clad in a robe and carrying a pistol. He handed me his lamp and we moved soundlessly along the corridor. When we reached the gallery, we stood in absolute silence to listen. There was no further sound.

Arthur led the way down the stairs, moving cautiously. We toured the downstairs rooms without result. No door had been forced, no window broken or opened. He inspected the basement, but I had no heart for that expedition. I lit another lamp and remained upstairs until he returned to report nothing out of order.

"But I did hear something," I told him. "Much more than just the creaks of wood in the dead of night."

"I'm afraid the little normal sounds were exaggerated," he said gently. "Go back to bed, Cassie. I'll remain awake until morning. If you hear anyone moving about, it will be me."

"I'm grateful for your concern and your help," I told him. "I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here, for certainly Tempa and I couldn't cope with whoever is attempting to frighten me—or even worse."

"I'm the one to be grateful you'll allow me to look after your safety," he replied. "Go back to bed, Cassie, and have no fear. Don't come into the hall unless you hear the pistol go off and not even then, until I assure you it's safe. Now run along. Your fear has wearied you."

"It has indeed," I said. We were speaking in normal tones in the upstairs corridor just outside my door and in the silence of the great house, our voices seemed magnified many times, making me wonder why we hadn't wakened Tempa. Was she a heavy sleeper, or could it be she was not as loyal as I thought? Was it she who was attempting to frighten me? Was the vision I had Mama's way of trying to warn me against this conductor of seances? And had Tempa engaged in that act this afternoon for the sole purpose of trying to frighten me so that I'd leave this house? Yet what could be her purpose? I had no answer,

and fatigue was too strong upon me to wrestle with the problem.

Once again, in half lamplight, I composed myself for sleep. It wasn't quick in coming. I lay there for what seemed like hours, though of course it wasn't. Now and then, I heard Arthur either downstairs or moving softly along the corridor outside my door: But because I knew it was he, the sounds were far more comforting than alarming. Then, apparently I drifted off to sleep and I was awakened with the knowledge I'd heard my name being called. Oh so gently at first. Just a whisper of sound, without form. But it came again and again, until it grew plainer and there was no mistaking it.

"Cassandra," the voice half whispered and half wailed. "Cassandra . . . Cassandra. . . ."

I gritted my teeth, pressed my hands against my ears. The only person who had ever called me Cassandra was Mama and it did seem like her voice, muted as if by untold distances, but suddenly plain enough. Even with my ears covered, there was no shutting out the voice calling my name.

I sat upright, stifling my terror for a moment. "Who is it?" I asked aloud.

"Cassandra . . . Cassandra . . . Cassandra. . . ."

That was the only reply I received. A few moments of this thoroughly disorganized me and I sprang out of bed in a sweat of apprehension. I didn't even take time to pick up the lamp, but sped to the door, opened it and rushed to Tempa's room. I supposed the door would be locked so I pounded on it with both fists, now and then looking over my shoulder as if I expected a shrieking, swirling form to descend upon me.

Tempa finally opened the door. At the same time, Arthur came rushing up the stairs. He held a lamp, so the darkness was at least shattered. Tempa had certainly been fast asleep for her hair was awry, her eyes heavy laden, her face puffy.

"What is it, child?" she asked.

"Cassie, what happened?" Arthur demanded.

I found comfort in Tempa's arms. "I don't know. There

was a voice . . . it called my name over and over. I can't say where it came from . . . everywhere, I think. Over and over . . . I feel as if I'm going mad. Just the voice saying, 'Cassandra, Cassandra, Cassandra.'"

I felt a tremor go through Tempa's body. She pushed me away almost violently. "Your Mama! She called you Cassandra. No one else ever did. It was your Mama."

"Yes," I said. "It sounded like her. I think it was Mama, but it couldn't be. I must have dreamed it. At least, that's what I'd like to believe."

"Could you bear up under a seance now? At this very moment?"

"I . . . don't know. . . ."

"There is nothing to be afraid of. The spirits I contact are friendly and harmless. I believe there is some compelling reason why Virginia wants to reach you."

"Arthur," I asked, "what do you think?"

"I don't believe in ghosts, that's what I think. But if it's what you want, I'll sit with you."

"I'll be all right. I promise," I said. "Perhaps it is a good idea even though I'm not a firm believer either, though I must say I'm swaying toward the belief in ghosts."

"We shall conduct it in the family parlor," Tempa said. "Give me just a moment to arrange my hair and splash cold water on my face to awaken me. I shall be right down."

Arthur accompanied me to the door of my room so I might slip my feet into slippers. The negligee I wore was sufficient to withstand any drafts, for the evening was balmy. Arthur lighted our way with the lamp.

"If I thought Tempa could conjure up a ghost, I wouldn't let you go through with this, Cassie. You've had about enough. However, I'm sure that woman is a fake. If she is, we'd best prove it now. I'll stay close by you. Have you ever thought she may have completely deceived your mother?"

"I thought of it," I said musingly. "But Mama was not gullible. You couldn't deceive her."

"That's where you're wrong," he replied. "She never once suspected me. My deceit was uncovered by one of

my so-called clients when he came here seeking further advice on his investments.”

“True,” I said. “But Tempa came here shortly after Mama first put me in school. I’m sure that in their constant companionship Mama would have uncovered any imposture on Tempa’s part. Besides, what could she hope to gain by exercising such guile? I have no money and I rather have a feeling that when Mr. Greenbough presents me with an accounting, I shall find that I’ll have to sell this house. Perhaps it will be as well, for it has been given an evil reputation.”

“What will you do, my dear?” Arthur asked somberly. “Certainly you’ve not been educated to go out in the world and seek employment. What could you possibly do?”

“Heaven only knows,” I said, frowning. “Perhaps I could be a governess. I have a thorough knowledge of the social graces and I’ve learned to speak French quite fluently.”

“I find the thought of it quite appalling,” he said. “I don’t understand what Virginia was thinking of to dissipate that tremendous fortune left her by your father. She should have thought of you. It wasn’t right of her to do that.”

“I disagree,” I said quietly. “I believe I know why Mama did it. She was greatly burdened by what was referred to as her ‘gift,’ though I think the ability to see into the future, to dispel the shadows of tomorrow, is a fearsome thing. The thought of possessing such a gift fills me with a choking disquiet.”

“Have you had any signs?” he asked.

“None that I wish to discuss,” I replied curtly.

“Please don’t be angry, Cassie,” he said, sensing my displeasure. “I want to help you in any way possible, but I’m at quite a loss as to how to do so.”

“I fear it’s a problem only I can work out.” I led the way into the family parlor where we awaited Tempa’s arrival.

Arthur set the lamp on a table. I sat on the regency sofa close by and he joined me. The tinkle of the bells on Tempa’s anklet announced her coming. A moment later,

she entered, carrying a lamp in one hand, the carafe and goblet in the other. She had removed her nightclothes and was now garbed in the eerie costume she'd worn in the seance room today. She set the lamp on the table, poured some liquid from the carafe into the goblet and took a chair opposite us. She sipped whatever the beverage was for a few moments, her eyes never once leaving us. The silence of three individuals seemed foolish and I found myself growing uneasy. Arthur regarded me with a look of concern, but I allowed a smile to touch my lips in the hope he would be reassured.

"I shall require complete darkness," Tempa said, finally speaking.

Arthur relieved her of the goblet and gave me a look of resignation as he extinguished the lamps first in the reception hall and then in the parlor. While he did so, I looked about the room, admiring it as I always had, even as a child. The breakfront bookcase against one wall had papier-mâché panels in the solid doors, each one depicting a peacock in its bright plumage. There were chests and tables, all well covered with bric-a-brac. The white fireplace looked as if it had never been used, though I knew in winter it was continually kept going. The walls were hung with so many pictures it was difficult to see the pattern of the paper. Two feet below the ceiling was a high shelf around all four walls, wide enough to display the priceless plates and vases collected over the many decades my family had lived here. It was a bright, comfortable, pleasant room, one meant to dispel fear, but I wondered what we would experience in the next few minutes.

As Arthur resumed his seat after placing the last lighted lamp on the table beside him, I braced myself for what was to come. He seemed relaxed as he blew out the flame. He had stated he believed none of this and he acted as if he didn't. I, on the other hand, had also indicated I didn't believe either, but I wasn't relaxed at this moment.

"You must clear your minds of all thought. You must also remain motionless and silent, for I must have no distraction."

I don't know if Arthur was taking this seriously, but I

knew I was. I scarcely dared to breathe. The silence in the room seemed to grow so that we were able to hear Tempa breathing. Next, we heard movements as if she were shifting about in the chair. It was followed by a groan and we could hear her gasping for breath. An extremely low, bass voice came from the darkness where she was seated. Certainly it was not her voice. I couldn't understand what was being said, for everything was garbled. Then that stopped and I was startled to hear, briefly, the lilting tones of a little girl. This was abruptly cut off and a calm, unemotional voice emerged from the dark. I'd heard it many, many times.

I cried out, involuntarily, "Mama!"

Arthur, beside me, gave a snort of disbelief. The voice went on, speaking quite audibly now.

"Cassandra, leave this house. You are in mortal danger. All about you is evil. Go away . . . go away . . . go away . . ."

Arthur muttered an imprecation and struck a match, obviously in an attempt to see what was going on. The flame sputtered out immediately. He tried again and the same thing happened. He used six or eight matches and none would light.

"I don't know what's happening here." He stood up and spoke loudly. "This is some sort of a trick and I warn you, whoever is responsible will feel my anger. . . ." He stopped short. There was a crash nearby and he gave a cry of pain. Then there were more crashes, a dozen of them at least. Someone was hurling things. I placed my arms before my face in a protecting gesture, but nothing came my way. It seemed as if whoever was performing the acts of violence was taking out his anger on Arthur.

Finally, he gave a moan of anguish. "Stop it! Stop it! I'm convinced! I have no more doubts . . . stop it, please. . . ."

The room was plunged into a sudden intense silence which lasted several moments, enabling him to get to his feet. Not until then did I realize he must have fallen. He scraped another match. This time it flared up. He applied

it to the lamp wick and the room was filled with yellow light. I stared about me in awe.

Tempa sat with her head down, her chin resting against her chest. Arthur was wiping blood from his face where he'd been cut several times. All around him lay the pieces of dishes and vases taken from the shelf at least seven feet from the floor. Each piece had been hurled at him, and from his appearance, many had hit the intended target.

I hurried to his side and helped him into a chair. He looked up at me with eyes gone shiny bright in fear. He tried to speak, but he was unable to.

Tempa seemed to be still in her trance. It was Arthur who required help. I lit another lamp and hastened to the kitchen, where I filled a basin with hot water, provided myself with towels and returned to the room. I knelt beside the chair in which he was still seated and I gently sponged away the blood. An area near his jawline was beginning to swell, there was a marked contusion beside his right eye.

"What . . . happened?" he asked. "How were those objects thrown at me?"

I pointed to the shelf near the ceiling. There were vacant spaces where the vases and plates used to be. "Someone—or something—picked up those pieces and then threw them at you. I can't account for it. None of us could reach that high."

"Did you annoy the spirits?" Tempa spoke for the first time. She'd come completely out of her trance. "Did you belittle them?"

"I said I believed what was happening was a trick," Arthur said.

"And they punished you for it," Tempa reasoned. "What else happened? Did I speak with any clarity or sense?"

"Yes," I said. "The voice was Mama's. She told me to go away, that I was in danger and there was evil all about me."

"What evil?" Arthur asked nervously, as if he expected a ghost to answer him with more missiles. "I'm here, Tempa is here. Neither of us is evil, neither of us wishes any harm to come to you, Cassie. I can't account for being

the target for all that bric-a-brac, but I still do not believe in ghosts."

"I do," I said unsteadily. "I no longer doubt."

Tempa seemed weak and spent as she arose, but she came forward and stood before me. "Will you heed the warning this time, Cassie? Will I pack a bag for you and hitch up the carriage? You can be out of here in half an hour."

"No," I said. "I have no intentions of leaving. I will heed the warning to the extent that I shall be very careful, but I will not go away."

Arthur was about to make some comment, but instead he looked over his shoulder at the window. I transferred my gaze in the same direction. The window seemed to reflect dull red light.

Arthur moved over to the window. "There's a fire in the village. A big one, I think. I'd better go see if I can help."

"The three of us will go after we dress," I said. "Tempa, you'd better change into something else. That garment will only add to the villagers' fear of us—and of you."

We sped upstairs, almost forgetful of the eerie events of the last few moments. The fire was an earthly thing, something we recognized and understood and though it gave an ominous glow in the sky, it took our minds off what we'd just been through.

Arthur had certainly moved with amazing speed. He'd managed to dress and go to the stable to hitch up the horses to the carriage. We'd just stepped out on the porch when he came around the side of the house and drew up. He helped us into the vehicle and urged the horses to their maximum speed. We went hurtling toward the village over the uneven, rutted dirt road.

We reached the foot of Main Street, where the fire burned furiously. It was Oliver and Amanda Seaton's general store. Flames leaped out of the shattered windows and engulfed the whole roof and one side. The volunteer fire department had arrived, but there was little could be done except try to see that the flames didn't spread.

We climbed down from the carriage and walked closer

to join the crowd. Everyone in the village had apparently been awakened, and they stood about watching the building and its contents be consumed by the flames. A few had joined an ineffectual bucket brigade.

"There she is!" someone shouted. I didn't know who was meant until Oliver Seaton and his wife came rushing toward us. The villagers turned their attention away from the fire to this more interesting encounter.

Amanda shouted at the top of her voice as she pointed a finger at me. "She told us we were going to be burned out. She told us—me and Oliver. She said there'd be a fire. And she claims she can't predict the future. She should have told me outright and maybe I'd have taken some precautions, but she just made it all very vague so I didn't understand any of it. I hold her responsible."

"For what?" I asked. "I told you if you didn't move that barrel of kerosene away from the stove, you might have a fire. That was no prediction. It was just friendly advice. Anyone could see a fire could result from such carelessness."

"It was a prediction," Amanda insisted. "We're ruined. All we had is in those ashes—and you could have prevented it by issuing a warning. You haven't heard the last of this. . . ."

"Now just a moment, Mrs. Seaton," a man's voice cautioned. "Don't make any accusations you can't prove. Miss Taylor wasn't even here when it started."

"I didn't say she lit it," Oliver broke in excitedly. "Who are you? Oh . . . it's the new lawyer. I'm glad you're here. I hire you right now to take action against Cassie Taylor. Time she and her kind were driven out of this town. She and her ma brought us nothing but misery."

"You can't retain me," the newcomer said. In the glow of the fire I saw him for the first time. A young, rangy man with broad shoulders and a fine figure. From what I could see, his features were handsome enough. As he was hatless, I noted that he was dark-haired and it was thick and unruly. He had a strong, commanding-looking face and a voice that matched it.

"Why not?" Oliver demanded.

"Because I'm already working for Miss Taylor," he replied. "That's my reason for being in town."

"You know him?" Tempa hissed in my ear.

"He is a complete stranger," I assured her, though never taking my eyes off him.

"I wondered if you'd hired him to come here," Arthur said. "I know he only arrived in the village yesterday."

"How did you learn that?" I asked.

"I saw him in the tavern at the inn today," he replied. "I invited him to join me in a drink, but he refused, stating he had just had one."

"I'm certainly grateful he spoke up now," I said in an undertone. "The mood of the crowd is far from friendly. Do you know his name?"

"Peter Clayton," Arthur replied. "I think, my dear, you'd better shift your eyes back to the fire. Your interest in him already appears to be more than casual."

I did as Arthur bade, though scoffing at his suggestion. "I didn't mean to appear brazen, but I believe I am so amazed to meet someone here who treats me in friendly fashion, I couldn't conceal my surprise. I assure you that's all it is. Please don't read anything more than that into it."

He smiled in amusement. "Be grateful the fire has given everyone's face a reddish cast. Otherwise, I believe your blush would be readily observable."

"You're being ridiculous," I said primly, but I knew he wasn't. I was greatly impressed by this gentleman who was so thoroughly masculine and had captivated me by his defiance of this crowd. I wondered if I could afford the services of an attorney. I hoped so, for it could well be I'd have need of him.

SEVEN

We stood about for another half-hour, watching helplessly as the sides and roof of the building caved in and turned to embers. I was at my wit's end. I didn't feel that I had any more made a prediction of this disaster than I had in regard to the death of Mrs. Larkin's son. In the case of the Seatons' store, it was Amanda Seaton who had stated she supposed I would burn the store down after I called out to Oliver Seaton that he was cheating me on the weight of the flour and sugar. I well remembered replying that if she didn't move the barrel of kerosene from the proximity of the stove, there would be a fire. That, in my opinion, did not constitute a prediction, but how I wished there had been at least one other customer in the store to have overheard the conversation so that the veracity of my story would be confirmed.

In the meantime, Mr. Clayton had lost no time. He had moved far enough away from me so I'd not overhear what went on and he was surrounded by a large group of people. I noticed he seemed to be doing most of the talking, but if he was trying to convince them of my innocence, I feared he was wasting his time. Their minds were made up as to my guilt and nothing he could say would change them. They considered me as culpable of that fire as if I'd touched a torch to it.

Finally he approached me. In the dull red glow of the remaining fire, I had a better look at him. He was, indeed, handsome, with strong features giving evidence of solid character. I'd liked him from the moment he'd first spoken to me. Regarding him again, I liked him even more. In him, I knew I would not only have an attorney-at-law, but also a friend and certainly I had need of one.

"Miss Taylor," he said respectfully, "I've been trying to convince these people that they're mistaken, but it appears very difficult to do. Especially just now with the building still on fire and everyone giving free rein to their emotions. I've asked the people to assemble in Town Hall immediately, so that you may have an opportunity to tell them

the truth about this. I maintain you deserve the chance and I'll champion you with every word you speak because I don't believe a word of this fiddle-faddle about predicting the future."

"Thank you," I said. I turned to Arthur who stood beside me and asked his opinion.

"I'm in firm agreement," Arthur said. "You go with Mr. Clayton. I'll get the carriage and tie the horses to the hitchrack at the rear of the building so that if it's necessary, we can get away quickly. The mood of the crowd is far from friendly."

I nodded agreement, grateful for his foresight. When the fire had subsided and all that remained were dying embers, all who wished to attend—and almost everyone did—were assembled in the Town Hall. I was on the platform with Attorney Clayton and Arthur, who had rejoined us and stood staunchly by my side. Tempa had disappeared. I was perturbed by it until Arthur reassured me, stating she'd likely walked home, feeling her presence would only add to the hostility directed toward me.

Lawyer Clayton quieted the chattering audience. "It's very unusual," he began, "to hold a meeting at this unseemly time of the night, but the situation is as abnormal as the hour. There are those among you who claim Miss Tayler is a seeress. Even if this is so, she should not be held responsible for what happens when her predictions come true. Personally, I don't believe in it, but so long as there are those among you who do, I feel she is entitled to tell her side of it."

No one objected, so I somewhat nervously stepped to the middle of the stage. I said, "Like Lawyer Clayton, I too do not believe in the idea of anyone being able to see into the future. It is said my mother had that ability. If she did, I had no knowledge of it. Now I'm accused of inheriting this ability from her. It is said that I looked upon the dying son of Mrs. Larkin and I told her the boy would not live. That is untrue. The poor woman was very distraught and may well have thought that by bursting into tears and rushing from the house I had condemned the boy to a quick death. However, my reason for doing so was that at

sight of his poor wasted body, I burst into tears of sorrow and pity. One had no need to be a soothsayer to know the child was not long for this world."

I paused, wondering if anyone was about to challenge me, but all I heard was the shifting of feet and a few coughs.

"In the case of the terrible holocaust we've just witnessed," I continued, "Mrs. Seaton, becoming angered during my visit to her store, stated she supposed I'd burn their store down."

Lawyer Clayton moved up beside me. "Just why did she become angered?"

"She's lying," Amanda shouted. She was standing at the very front of the crowd and she pointed an accusing finger at me. "I had no cause to get mad at her. Neither did Oliver."

"You thought you had," I replied quietly.

"Please state why," Lawyer Clayton urged.

"Very well," I replied. "I'd asked for three pounds of flour and two of sugar. I received two pounds of flour and one of sugar. I challenged Mr. Seaton."

"That she did," Oliver shouted. "She even had her back to me so why was she accusin' me of cheatin' when she wasn't even lookin' unless she has eyes in the back of her head or she's bewitched?"

"Maybe because she knew you had a reputation for it," came a hooting voice from the rear.

"Do you have a reputation for short-weighting the customers?" Lawyer Clayton asked, his eyes regarding Oliver sternly.

"Never have trouble with anyone but the gypsy woman," Oliver retorted. "She got eyes in the back of her head too. Tries to scare us."

"He's referring to Tempa Dardanov," I told Lawyer Clayton. "She lives with me. She was a companion to my mother for years."

"Sure was," Amanda sneered. "The two of them terrorized everyone in the village."

"That's not true," I said, wishing Tempa had remained to speak in her behalf and that of Mama.

"Why ain't she here then?" Amanda asked. "She sneaked off, that's why. I saw her go. Tries to scare everyone. A regular heathen with them bangles jinglin' and them bells she wears on her ankle and walkin' around on her dirty bare feet."

"Miss Dardanov is a very clean woman." My voice was stern, but I was fast wearying of this. I glanced at Lawyer Clayton and my eyes beseeched him to get it over with.

But he was not to be dissuaded. "Did you tell Mr. and Mrs. Seaton their store would burn down?"

I sighed, knowing I must go on. "I told them one did not need to be a prophet to know that if they didn't move the barrel of kerosene from its place beside the stove, the fumes would be absorbed by the wooden barrels set alongside the stove and a fire would result."

"There! You see?" Amanda exclaimed triumphantly.

"That's no prediction," Lawyer Clayton reasoned. "That's just plain common sense. Did you move the barrel of kerosene away?"

"Been there ever since the store opened," Amanda retorted. "Never had a fire before. That woman made that fire. She didn't even have to be there."

"Believe it or not," I replied, "what I gave you was a friendly warning. Try as you might, you can construe nothing more than that into what I said to you."

"What about that big light in the sky the night your ma died?" someone shouted.

"I don't know," I replied honestly. "I was not here."

"But you know about it," Amanda retorted, still defiant.

"Yes," I replied. "My stepfather told me."

"Did the gypsy tell you?" the same voice from the rear called out.

"She did," I admitted.

"You tryin' to say ever'thin' you tell us is the truth?" Oliver Seaton demanded.

"Are you saying it isn't?" Lawyer Clayton asked.

A lanky man, of near middle age, stepped forward. He raised a hand for attention and Lawyer Clayton nodded.

"Maybe M'iss Taylor's speakin' the truth and maybe she ain't. I think the best way for her to prove she ain't a

seeress is to let her make a prediction. If it comes true, then we know she's been lyin'. If it don't, we know she ain't."

There was a buzz of conversation through the room, followed by loud calls of agreement. During it, Mr. Clayton turned to me.

"I know as well as you, this is a lot of nonsense," he said. "However, I think the wise thing for you to do would be to pacify them."

"But how?" I exclaimed in desperation. "What can I predict? I hear no voices inside me telling me what to say."

"Predict something about as ridiculous as you can think of," he suggested.

I had to, for there were loud cries now filling the hall, some taunting, some daring me to do so and some shouting derision that I was fearful, lest it come true. The mood of the crowd was growing ugly. I knew I must act immediately.

I raised my hands for silence and glanced at Arthur who had moved up to stand on my other side. He was deathly pale and his eyes seemed to be imploring me not to do this. Yet I had to and I tried to reassure him with my eyes. "I will make a prediction about my stepfather. I prophesy that he will, in the next twenty-four hours, become wringing wet. As if he had fallen into a lake or a river—and if I recall correctly—there isn't an open body of water hereabouts for twenty or thirty miles. I do not include rain in this prophecy."

"Nor the deliberate dousing of Mr. Taylor with a pail of water," Peter Clayton added. "I think that's about all for this evening, folks. I'm sure you will permit Miss Taylor to return home now and it is my hope that none of you will be prejudiced against her. Good night."

He led me off the stage and through a side door. I was pleased that Arthur had had the foresight to bring our carriage here. Mr. Clayton helped me up while Arthur climbed in alongside me and picked up the reins.

"I shall be forever in your debt, sir," I said, addressing Lawyer Clayton. "I dare not think of what might have happened had you not been here to take up my cause."

A smile, probably of embarrassment at my gratitude, touched his lips. "May I assume you have engaged my services?"

"You may," I replied. "And may I ask how long you've been in the village?"

"I arrived yesterday," he said.

"For the purpose of setting up a practice?" I asked.

"I was curious to see what kind of place it was," he said. "It's certainly not dull here. It might well be an excellent place for me to make a start."

"Now that you've accepted me as a client," I said, "I doubt it will. I think it would be wise for you to go elsewhere."

"For the present, I shall remain here to serve you," he said. "May I pay you a visit tomorrow?"

"You may," I replied, suddenly managing a smile. "It pleases me to know that someone in this village will make a friendly visit to the house. But then, it isn't really a social call, but rather a lawyer coming to confer with his client."

"Might it not be both?" he asked.

"If you wish it to be," I replied.

"I fervently wish that," he said.

"Thank you, sir," I replied, feeling a warm glow of gratitude. "And now I bid you good night."

He stepped back as Arthur urged the horses into action, but I seemed to know his eyes never left the carriage until it disappeared around the bend at the end of the street and we started our trek back.

"The first decent thing that's happened to you since your return," Arthur commented, once we'd got beyond the edge of town. "A good thing he took up your cause or we might have found ourselves in deep trouble."

"I agree. I only wonder why Tempa abandoned us."

"You can't really say she did that. It may well be she thought she'd do you more harm than good and in that I agree."

"But why?" I asked, rather impatiently I fear.

"That's an easy one to answer. I feel she's anything but a good influence on you."

"She's a very good woman," I said heatedly. "She has only my welfare at heart."

"Are you trying to tell me you feel it's good for a young girl like you to be subjected to a seance such as the one we witnessed tonight?"

"I'm nineteen—an adult female," I retorted.

"Who was raised in a convent, with nothing but good influences," he stated, "to come home to a house that seems to be in the grip of something horribly evil."

"You're referring to the china and glassware which was thrown at you tonight," I said and for the moment, though I don't know why, the memory of it was amusing.

"That and the fact you were almost murdered in the cellar, or have you forgotten?"

"Hardly." The thought of it made me shudder. "But I'll not think ill of Tempa any more than I'd think ill of you."

"Thank you, my dear," Arthur said, sounding surprised. "I'm deeply touched and I scarcely feel worthy of your loyalty."

I regarded him curiously. In the darkness, it was difficult to see his features and to know, from his expression, what he was thinking. Yet I couldn't help but wonder whether, if he'd remained with Mama, her life would have been different.

"Don't be too hard on Tempa whatever you think of her," I said. "Try to remember she was all Mama had to make her days less lonely. I was with her only during vacations and holidays. She never brought me back here. I never even wondered about it because my days were so full when we were together. Now, of course, I know why she kept me away from these parts."

"I did her a grievous wrong," he said. "Perhaps I'm doing her an even greater one by believing she had this gift of seeing into the future. I'd like to believe she didn't, despite the predictions she made years ago—predictions I profited greatly on—and despite what I went through tonight."

"I wonder what caused the violence directed at you during the seance," I said, frowning.

"I could say it was a trick," he replied with an attempt at humor. "But I have no wish to be the recipient of further violence."

"I agree," I said. "We've had enough of the unearthly—if such it is—for one night. For the rest of my life, for that matter."

"I only hope, my dear," Arthur said, "and I speak in all sincerity, that you do not give the Seatons money to start a new store. You'd get no thanks for it and only increase their belief that you were responsible for their great loss."

"I don't believe I'm in any financial position to do so," I said. "Nor would I if I could. Though I pity them. Not only for the loss of their store, but because they're so filled with hate."

"And obsessed with the idea that you are bewitched."

I made no reply, for suddenly I recalled the eerie, fearsome image of Tempa as she might be in death. As earnestly as I tried to dismiss it from my mind, I could not. I wasn't even sure what it meant except that her face in repose indicated she would soon die. It also meant that I could look into the future. Certainly not of all people, but perhaps, in time, that would come. I dreaded the thought and was pleased when we turned into the drive, for as we started the ascent to the house, I observed Tempa had lamps placed in some of the windows to light our way. Seeing them, my irritation toward her for having deserted me in my hour of need vanished. Arthur was probably right. She'd have done me more harm than good and she was fully aware of it.

Once inside though, she seemed quite reserved and asked no questions of what had transpired. Arthur had gone around to the stable to unharness the horses. I was so exhausted by my ordeal I knew not even spectral voices or visions would disturb my slumber and I excused myself, taking a lamp from the console table to light my way. She raised a hand, as if to restrain me, once I started up the stairs.

"What is it?" I asked, pausing on the second stair.

"You are tired, child," she said.

"Weary unto death," I replied.

"Go to your rooms then," she said. "What I have to say can wait."

I thanked her with my eyes and continued on up the stairs, grateful for the sanctuary of my suite. Despite the events of the day, my mind was a blank as I went through my tasks, preparing myself for my evening's repose. And I did sleep, undisturbed and soundly, not waking until midmorning.

I breakfasted alone and was taking a final sip of coffee when I heard the sound of an approaching carriage. Believing it to be Lawyer Clayton, I arose hastily and moved directly to the front door before the sound of the knocker, reverberating through the house, would summon Tempa from the kitchen. I suppose it was unladylike and unseemly, but I gave it no more than a passing thought, for I was most anxious to see this young man again. I knew I wanted to further the acquaintance and I was also eager to learn if anything further had transpired in the village.

But when I opened the door to extend a greeting, the gentleman climbing down from a carriage obviously rented from a livery stable, was a complete stranger. A man of about forty, I judged. Though his features were sharp, they were pleasant and he was dressed in fine clothes. He moved with an athletic stride as he walked to the porch, onto it and approached me, at which point he removed his bowler and bowed low.

"Miss Cassandra Taylor, I presume," he said.

"I am she," I replied. "May I ask whom I am addressing?"

"My name is Earl Fallon. I have come, first of all, to offer my condolence at your mother's passing. As much of a blow as it was to you, be assured her death has left a void in the world of today that will not be easily filled."

I was so stunned at his words I could only stare in amazement. He apparently knew the reason for it and his smile was sympathetic.

"May I have a few minutes of your time, Miss Taylor?" he said. "I have urgent words with you."

"Certainly," I said, stepping back, "and forgive me for

appearing rude. It's just that I'm so stunned to have someone from the village come to pay their respects."

"Oh, but I'm not from the village." He spoke as he entered and followed me into the small family parlor.

"I fear I'm more puzzled than ever," I said, taking a chair and motioning him to one opposite me. "Am I assuming too much when I say I believed from your words you knew Mama and were a friend of hers?"

"I fear you are, Miss Taylor," he said, setting his bowler on the table and hooking his cane onto the arm of the chair. "I knew your mother only through the wonderful reputation she bore for goodness."

"I'm gratified you think of her in that respect," I said.

"How could anyone think otherwise of her?"

"I gather you haven't talked to anyone in the village," I said, my smile cynical.

"I breakfasted at the inn," he said. "However, I came here directly from the neighboring town. Springville, to be exact."

I nodded. "You live there then."

His head moved negatively. "I come from New York City. This was a completely unpremeditated visit, yet something forced me to come. Perhaps the extensive coverage the papers in that large city gave to your mother and her predictions. Yet surely you're not trying to tell me she was anything but revered in this village I just passed through on my way here."

"She was both feared and hated," I said quietly.

"Perhaps they believed that a woman of her wealth should have spent her time doing good among the poor of this area, rather than secluding herself in order that she might, through vision or dreams, see the future and warn humanity of the dangers surrounding them."

"Mama was not a woman of great wealth," I replied quietly, "because she dispensed it among the many victims of catastrophes she predicted would happen."

He frowned. "There was nothing of that in the paper. I'm referring to her generosity."

"Mama never let anyone know. Only a long-time housekeeper and companion was aware of her innate goodness."

He was silent for a long moment, as if thinking over and absorbing my words. "That comes as quite a shock," he said finally. "I felt it was her wealth which enabled her to spend all her time in solitude. I hope her generosity will prove no hardship on you. After all, you're young and it would be a pity to have to leave this beautiful home, surrounded by every luxury."

"I'm a comparative stranger to it," I said, "having, from my sixth birthday, been placed in a convent where I was reared all my growing years."

He nodded approval. "Then you have an excellent foundation on which to face life."

"I hope so," I said. "For I believe I will have to leave this house and seek employment of some sort. Let me add, sir, that the thought does not appall me. Rather, I think it's good, in this modern day, for a young woman to learn what it's like to have to earn one's livelihood."

"I must say you have poise and confidence. They will serve you well. I pray there will be no need for you to accept a position below your station in life. After your mother's reputation, you must do nothing that will demean it."

"I'm not certain I understand," I said.

"What I mean is," his words came slowly and thoughtfully, "you must do something that, even though it does not enhance your mother's reputation, will do nothing to detract from it."

I was still puzzled, but his respect for Mama pleased me. "I don't believe I'm exactly a pauper," I said, "so I don't think I shall have to take too menial a task. I shall probably apply as governess to a family who has need of one."

"You do not think that menial?"

"Not in the least," I said, smiling. "Can you think of something more appropriate?"

"I can," he said, without a moment's hesitation. "Provided you are as gifted as your mother."

I regarded him anew. "What are you really saying, sir?"

His shoulders moved slightly. "Just that I wondered if you might have the gift of foresight."

“And if I should have?”

“You could make a fortune with it,” he said, looking quite pleased with himself.

“And you could help me, I suppose,” I said, for the first time seeing through this gentleman, and more than a little disgusted with myself for my gullibility.

“I could,” he replied. “I’m an entrepreneur. I sell my services to important people who may profit from my management of their affairs.”

“And what could I do that you would want to manage me?”

“As I already told you, I paused on my way through the village for breakfast. At the inn I learned that you prophesied a fire in the general store. I passed it. It’s quite a ruin. I also learned you predicted the death of a little boy.”

“I did neither,” I said coldly, “and I swear I speak the truth. If Mama was a seeress and, mind you, I give no credence to it, I did not inherit the ability to foresee the future.”

“No doubt it will come. And should it, you could regain the fortune your mother squandered. You can begin with very high rates and as your prophecies come to fruition, the more you can charge. That’s where I can do you immeasurable good. I know the right people—those with money.”

Both of us were startled by the sound of Arthur’s voice. “I’m sure my daughter has no need of your advice. Nor does she wish you in this house any longer.”

Mr. Fallon eyed him contemplatively. “Who is this gentleman?”

“He referred to me as his daughter, didn’t he?” I asked, for the first time feeling a trace of warmth toward the man who was my stepfather.

“I’ll show you to the door, sir,” Arthur said.

Mr. Fallon opened his mouth as if to dispute this, but apparently thought better of it. He rose and bowed. “I intend to remain in the village for a few days, Miss Taylor. Do think over what I have told you. I’m sure you have this gift. Once people learn of it, they will come to you

from every part of the earth. It will pay you well. I will choose the wheat from the chaff, so to speak."

"Please leave my home, Mr. Fallon," I said indignantly. "I'd never have allowed you entry had I known the true intent of your visit here. Good day."

He picked up his cane and bowler hat, bowed respectfully again and followed Arthur to the door. I moved to the doorway and watched Mr. Fallon as he gave Arthur a glance of absolute contempt. He barely got through the door before Arthur slammed it shut.

EIGHT

"Popinjay," Arthur growled, turning to me. "A trickster, a rogue. In short, a dishonest person looking to use you to make money for himself."

"I'm disgusted I could have been taken in by him," I said.

"My dear," Arthur said comfortingly, "you're an honest, sincere person. Your mother had the same endearing qualities. You accept people at face value, not always a wise thing to do. You're at a further disadvantage because of the sequestered life you've led since you were placed in the convent school. You think only good of people."

My sigh was one of discouragement. "If only I knew how to convince the villagers I have no power to predict."

"I fear the news has gone beyond the limits of the village," he replied. "No doubt you are being given widespread publicity because of the fire at the store and the death of Mrs. Larkin's son."

"But I did not make those predictions," I argued.

"I believe you, my dear," he said kindly. "But I'm just one person. In neither case do you have a witness to refute what others say."

"Do you believe the newspapers in the large cities have printed the story in regard to the fire?" I asked worriedly.

"I daresay they have. Which means people will soon start beating a path to your door entreating you to prophesy, at the same time offering you unbelievable sums of money."

I shook my head sadly, at a loss of what to do, feeling utter defeat flow through me. I sat down in a tall-backed chair which sat next to the console table, rested my elbow on it and covered my face with my hand.

"My dear," Arthur rested a hand lightly on my shoulder, "try not to become discouraged. There must be an answer to this. It may be you should depart this house."

"Never," I replied, without looking up.

"I'm going to the village to learn the latest gossip in regard to you," he said, moving away from me. "I shall return as quickly as possible."

I nodded, still not looking up. I heard him depart the house by the way of the kitchen. It was the tinkle of bells announcing Tempa's approach which roused me from my stupor.

"Why do you allow yourself to be tortured in such fashion?" she asked.

I dropped my hand from my face and regarded her. "What can I do, Tempa?" I cried out in anguish. "What can I do?"

"Exactly what your stepfather said," she replied coldly. "Leave this house. You will know nothing but unhappiness here,"

"I cannot," I cried out. "I will not."

"Then I will leave," she replied indifferently. "There is nothing here for me but death."

I rose to face her. "Why do you say that? Why are you regarding me so hostilely? Do you think I would commit violence upon your person?"

"No, Cassie, I do not," she said, and I was troubled by the weariness with which she spoke. "But someone will. I have had a premonition. Not a prediction. I don't have the power. But lately, during my seances, it seems as if I am growing closer, day by day, to those I come in contact with. I feel no fear, no dread, so don't look so anguished or sorrowful."

"Let us have a seance now," I begged. "Perhaps we can find out who would harm you."

She shrugged. "It's a matter of no importance."

"It's a matter of great importance," I retorted. "You're making me angry, Tempa. You're making me feel very guilty without knowing why."

"Cassandra," she said, "will you look into my eyes for a few minutes and concentrate your thoughts on me? As a test of whether or not you have the power? It will take but a few moments. . . ."

"No," I cried out, remembering the fearful image I saw above her head. "No, I will not test those powers. I hate them and I dread them. I don't want to know I have them even if I do."

"It is not a power you can control," she said trium-

phantly. "I know why you will not try to see what is in my future. You . . . have . . . already . . . seen."

She threw back her head and laughed mockingly as she started to run up the stairs. Whether it was her laughter or the constant tinkle of the bells on her anklet that caused me such aggravation I know not, but the next instant, I was pursuing her. I reached out, grasped her wrist, in an attempt to stop her. I had no idea why I was doing this, but it seemed as if I had no control over my outrageous behavior.

She screamed an imprecation to let her go, but I held on relentlessly, pulling and tugging at her, and we struggled on the stairs. Finally, she shrugged me off with such force, I lost my balance and fell. Fearing I might be injured, she spun swiftly around, her full, ruffled skirts billowing. From somewhere beneath them, a golden object flew out into space to drop onto one of the stairs and bounce down a few more, finally resting on the rug. From where I sprawled on the steps, I could see it was a man's pocket watch. My eyes widened in consternation and I immediately scrambled to my feet and descended the steps quickly to retrieve the watch.

From her perch above me, Tempa's features were a mixture of anger and defiance. I picked up the watch. It was gold and, from the slimness of it, very expensive. A gasp of astonishment escaped me as I noted the initials *E.F.* engraved on one side.

"Where did you get this?" I demanded.

"Where do you think?" she asked boldly.

"I have no idea," I said. "The initials are those of Mr. Earl Fallon, the gentleman who just departed these premises."

"A fraud," she shouted, leaning over the bannister. "Worse than any gypsy. Tempa stole it from him. Now what are you going to do?"

"Return it," I said. "When did you steal this?"

"Last night," she said, her manner still defiant. "Do you wish to know where and who he was with?"

"You would probably lie to me," I said, my manner cold.

"Oh yes, Tempa is a liar," she mocked. "No one is a liar but Tempa because Tempa is a gypsy and gypsies are no good. They are thieves, murderers, but Mr. Fallon is good. I tried to steal the watch of the person he was with, but I lost him in the crowd."

"Did you steal from Mama?" I asked.

"Never," she exclaimed fiercely. "Virginia tried to make a lady out of Tempa. Tempa tried to be a lady. Tempa learned to talk nice so the little girl Cassandra would not be ashamed to have a gypsy in the house when she came home, but it is no good. Tempa is better a gypsy, is better to talk like a gypsy. Gypsies are thieves and liars."

"Oh, Tempa," I exclaimed, "don't be angry with me. I want to be your friend. You've been very kind to me and I appreciate it. But I cannot condone stealing. It's wrong and you know it."

"Tempa knew that man was no good last night," she hissed. "She saw him in the village. He was talking with another man. Tempa could not see the other man. So she stole the watch of the man who came here. She tried to steal the watch of the other man, thinking perhaps he would have his initials on it also, but she could not. It is fashionable to have the initials on the watch, is it not? Even for ladies?"

I nodded. "I know I have hurt you grievously. I know you wish only to help me. But stealing isn't helping me. It will harm me greatly and you even more, for it will bring the constable down on you."

She uttered a weary sigh and lowered herself onto a step. "That is why Tempa leaves the village last night. Tempa has stolen the watch and is afraid to stay for fear he will discover the watch is gone and the gypsy will be blamed."

I smiled, despite myself. "It was the gypsy who did steal it, you know. And since you know the proper way to speak, I do wish you would stop talking in this fashion."

"It is gypsy talk," she said wearily. "Tempa will go back to her people. With Virginia, Tempa was important. With Cassie, Tempa is wasting her time, for Cassie will not believe anything Tempa has to say."

"Could you describe the gentleman standing with Mr. Fallon?" I asked.

"No," she replied without hesitation, "except that he was tall. But I would know his voice. It was deep and manly."

"Did you hear what they were talking about?" I asked, feeling a slight embarrassment that I would ask such a question, for it would only encourage further eavesdropping by Tempa.

"They talk about you," she said. "That the villagers say you are a witch. That your Mama have great powers. That she lived with a gypsy woman and now you live with her."

"Are you certain the man who came here today is the one from whom you stole the watch?"

"He is the same," she said. "That's is why Tempa stayed in the dining room. She saw him when he got out of the carriage. She listend to everything and heard him lie to you."

"What did he lie about?"

"He said he was staying at Springville. That may well be, but he was in the village last night. He knew about the fire before this morning."

"I dislike your eavesdropping on my conversations with guests who come here," I said quietly. "However, I know you meant no harm. Or were you fearful he had come to question me about the theft of his watch?"

Tempa smiled wisely. "He must know his watch is missing, but he does not know Tempa steal it. Tempa learns to be light-fingered long ago, when she is still little girl."

"Nevertheless, please don't eavesdrop on my conversations with anyone from now on," I said sternly. "And no more stealing."

She shrugged indifferently. "Your stepfather listened also."

"Did he know you were listening?"

"Not at first," she replied. "Then he turn around and see Tempa. He is annoyed that Tempa sees him, but he can say nothing, for he is listening too."

We were both so engrossed in our conversation that we'd not heard a carriage ride up. It was the sound of the door knocker which made us jump.

Tempa sped down the steps. "I will answer."

When she opened it, her eyes widened in astonishment. "What do you want?" she asked, her manner antagonistic.

"I have business with Miss Cassandra Taylor," came Peter Clayton's reply.

"She is not in," Tempa said, starting to close the door.

"Tempa, please." I moved quickly to prevent her from doing so. "Let Mr. Clayton enter."

She did so, reluctantly, then slammed the door shut and retreated swiftly to the kitchen to the tinkle of the anklet bells.

"That is Tempa Dardanov," I said, my smile apologetic. "We were just having a little disagreement."

My hand, clasped around the watch, slipped into my skirt pocket. I had no desire for Lawyer Clayton to see it, and I had no idea of how I could get it back to Mr. Fallon without further repercussions. I wished no future dealings with the man. If Tempa had stolen it from him in the village last night, he'd certainly not return to see if he'd dropped it here.

I led my guest into the family parlor, bade him be seated and went to the kitchen. Tempa's features were wreathed in fury.

"I engaged that gentleman to be my attorney," I said. "He saved me from the mob in the village."

"Tempa recognized his voice," she said, still using the third person in referring to herself. "He is the man who was talking to the one whose watch Tempa stole."

"Oh no," I whispered, feeling sudden weakness overcome me.

"Oh yes," she said nodding. "He is the one. Beware, Cassie. You cannot trust anyone."

"I trust you," I told her.

"You should," she said. "But you do not, so Tempa is going back to her people."

"You must not leave me," I said, my voice a plea. "I beg of you."

"Tempa will think about it," she said. "Do you wish her to serve tea and sandwiches?"

"I will appreciate it," I said. "And little cakes, if you have any. They're so light and delicious."

I was pleased to see her features brighten slightly at my praise. She arose and moved briskly to the stove, setting the kettle on the front to boil the water.

I returned to the parlor, wary now that I had been warned by Tempa that Lawyer Clayton and Mr. Fallon were no doubt acquainted. I wondered what Lawyer Clayton's little game was. I felt sick inside that he could have fooled me so completely, and I knew I must exercise great cleverness so he'd not know I was aware of his duplicity.

"I asked Tempa to prepare a slight repast for us," I said, motioning him back to the chair he'd vacated at my entrance.

"I'll relish it," he said. "I've not eaten today."

"Is it a habit with you to abstain from food?"

"No," he said, smiling thoughtfully. "I spent the morning going about town, getting acquainted with the townspeople."

"To learn everything you could about me," I said, smiling politely.

"On the contrary, Miss Taylor," he replied. "I'm far more curious to learn the stories—fables, if you will—regarding your mother."

"Why?" I knew my manner was turning cold, but I'd received no training as an actress and could ill conceal my antagonism.

"Please don't be angry," he said, quick to note my change of attitude. "You mustn't be too intolerant of the villagers. After all, you were but six when you left here and I doubt you returned more than once or twice."

"Suppose I let you do the talking," I said, thinking of how Mr. Fallon had deceived me.

"I wish only to advise you," he replied and certainly he sounded sincere. "But you must help me."

"In what way?" I asked, my manner overly polite.

"Tell me everything about you and your mother. It may take some time, but I'm a good listener."

"There is little to tell," I said.

"Please," he entreated with an earnestness I could not resist.

And so I found myself relating to him, in detail, the

events of my life. About Arthur—the little I knew of him. About Mama—and the little I knew of her, but the happiness I felt whenever I was with her. It was only as I revealed the story of my growing years that I realized the stark loneliness of them. He questioned me about my return here and I told him the Mother Superior at the convent had received a telegraph stating that Mama had died. The thought suddenly came to me that I might still be in school if she hadn't. I knew now why she had insisted I continue my studies of languages at the school. She dreaded my return and was using every excuse imaginable to prevent it. I was saddened that she lived with the daily fear I would one day reject her and I voiced this to Mr. Clayton.

"I can understand how you feel," he replied sympathetically. "Just don't condemn her for it. She was doing her utmost to shield you. Her motive was good, though perhaps she exercised poor judgment, for the shock of what you've been through as a result of having supposedly inherited this so-called gift is very great for you."

"Do you disbelieve Mama could see into the future?" I asked.

"I've read about her," he said. "The papers are filled with the story of her death and her many prophecies—all of which came true."

"Have the papers mentioned me?" I asked.

"They mentioned she had a daughter named Cassandra whom she kept hidden from the public," he replied, his manner still kind. "But now I fear, after the fire, you will be sought out not only by the public but by newspapermen who will come here from all over the country—perhaps even the world."

I shuddered at the thought. "I have no gift," I stated simply.

"Then you have nothing to fear," he replied. "They'll find it out soon enough. Unless, of course, you intend to go in for that sort of thing."

I smiled politely as I said, "What makes you think I had anything like that in mind?"

"Did you?" he asked soberly.

"No," I replied firmly. "And I never will."

"You could become very rich by doing so," he said.

"How do you know I am not wealthy as it is?" I countered.

"I already talked with Mr. Greenbough," he said, sounding not the least embarrassed.

"Do you mean he revealed the fact that Mama dispensed her wealth in some mysterious fashion?" I asked, taking no pains to conceal my annoyance.

"Don't condemn the man. After all, you did hire me as your attorney and, as I said, I must learn all I can about you in order to serve your best interests."

"Is that your sole reason for making inquiries about me?" I demanded.

"I have no other." His manner was casual, though he regarded me curiously.

"Mr. Fallon has," I said.

"I know," he replied. "I passed him on my way here. He seemed rather unhappy."

"I hope he is," I replied sternly. "He identified himself as an entrepreneur. Do you know him?"

"We met in the village last night," came the astonishing reply.

"Well, at least that's the truth."

My surprise at his honesty seemed to amuse him. "Why should I lie to you?"

"I don't know," I said with a sigh. "But Mr. Fallon lied."

"Why not tell me about it?"

"I may as well," I said resignedly. Then, as Tempa entered, carrying a large tray, I added, "After you have eaten."

"Please tell me while we're eating," he urged.

I got the idea that Tempa had been indulging in more eavesdropping, for her hostile manner was no longer in evidence. Instead, she served us graciously and withdrew to, I suppose, listen beyond the confines of the room. I told myself it didn't matter, that Mama had entrusted me to her care and she was looking after me in the only way

she knew how. If only she hadn't stolen Mr. Fallon's watch.

I revealed the purpose of Mr. Fallon's visit and his resultant dismissal from the house by Arthur who was at this moment, no doubt, in the village, attempting to learn the latest gossip in regard to me and also to purchase a New York City newspaper which would arrive on the train. I was most anxious to know if the story in regard to the fire was yet known to the public.

"I presume the story has made the newspapers," Mr. Clayton said. "I'm pleased to know you won't allow yourself to be exploited by the man whom I believe to be a mountebank."

"He told me his first contact with the villagers was this morning," I said.

"He was watching the fire last night," Mr. Clayton said. "And he seemed quite curious about you."

"I doubt he will be curious any longer," I said caustically. "My stepfather sent him packing."

"Good for him," Mr. Clayton said. He was silent while he devoured another sandwich. I could well believe he hadn't eaten and only wished I'd asked Tempa to bring something more substantial.

"Why don't you go away somewhere until the publicity regarding your mother's passing and the fire in the village—which the villagers are still insisting you predicted—dies out?"

"No," I said. "I must, in some way, convince these people—and all the world if necessary—I have no way of foretelling the future. And I must do it now. Otherwise, I'll never be able to lead a normal life."

He nodded. "I shan't argue that point. Though I don't see how you can possibly convince them."

"I made a silly prediction last night regarding my stepfather," I said, giggling.

Mr. Clayton laughed as he accepted a small cake. "It was silly all right, but that's what we wanted. Something very ridiculous and something that couldn't possibly come true."

The tinkle of Tempa's anklet bells announced her move-

ments in the hall. The next moment she was in the room, her eyes widening in amazement.

"Your stepfather just rode up," she said.

"What's so unusual about that?" I asked, annoyed at the interruption.

"Nothing," she admitted. "But he's drenched. Someone must have poured water on him. Maybe the villagers are now angry with him."

I realized Tempa didn't know about my prediction and so her puzzlement at our looks of dejection was understandable.

"I predicted Arthur would get soaking wet last night, Tempa," I said. "I predicted it at Town Hall. Someone called out for a prediction. Mr. Clayton bade me do so and to make it as ridiculous as possible. Apparently I didn't make it ridiculous enough."

"Do you suppose one of the villagers might have doused your stepfather?" Mr. Clayton asked.

"Or Mr. Fallon?" I asked. "To make it seem I had the gift of prophecy?"

"I don't recall seeing him at the Town Hall," Mr. Clayton said, frowning thoughtfully. "But he could have been."

"Or he could have heard about it," I added thoughtfully.

We heard the door open and close and I called out to Arthur. He walked gingerly into the room, his shoes squishing and thorough disgust etching his features. He was a sorry sight, for his clothes were plastered against him and his hat, which he held in his hand, still dripped water.

"What happened?" Lawyer Clayton asked, rising.

Arthur looked both bewildered and disgusted. "I'll tell you the truth which you'll probably find hard to believe. I went to the depot to see if the New York City newspapers had come in. They had and I bought one, going to a quiet spot where I could read it in solitude. It happened to be right below the platform on which is erected the large water pipe for the locomotives. I don't know how it came about, but the water pressure must have opened the pipe somehow. It gushed out directly on me. I was drenched to the skin. Still am."

I sighed. "Arthur . . . the prophecy I made last night has come true."

He nodded. "I think I'm walking proof of that. So does the whole village. I couldn't hide this, you know. Please excuse me now. I'll get out of these wet clothes."

I turned to Peter Clayton. "Even though I believe it was just a coincidence, I doubt anyone else will."

Lawyer Clayton nodded agreement. "I must return to the village immediately to see the effect this has had on the villagers."

"I'm sure I know," I said, accompanying him to the door. "I'm thoroughly discouraged."

"Will you please go away?" he asked urgently.

"No," I replied quietly. "I am going to see this through, regardless of the outcome."

"And if you don't succeed in convincing them you are a seeress, will you then go away?"

"There'd hardly be any point to it. I'm probably doomed to the same life of loneliness as Mama was."

"But she made predictions that came true."

"Didn't I?" I countered.

"I wouldn't say so."

"You would," I said slowly, "if I were to tell you everything."

"Then I beg of you, do so," he pleaded. "Only in that way can I really help you."

"Give me a little more time to think about it," I said.

He seemed about to argue, then suddenly acquiesced. "Very well. But remember, to delay might mean danger for you."

"In what way, sir?" I asked, wondering if he knew about the attempt on my life. Though he seemed completely trustworthy, and he'd succeeded in gaining my confidence, I couldn't forget he was in the company of Mr. Fallon last night and certainly, the latter individual had come here with the express purpose of exploiting my gift—if such I had—for purposes of gain.

"I'm not sure," he said, frowning. "But I intend to find out."

NINE

That evening at supper, Arthur and I discussed his dousing. He assured me he'd never given a thought to the prediction I'd made at Town Hall the previous evening.

"How did the villagers learn that my so-called prophecy was fulfilled?" I asked.

"I'd hitched the horse to the rack before the tavern, intending to stop in on my return and quaff a stein of beer," he replied. "Needless to say, I did no such thing, but it's quite a walk from the depot and besides, by the time I reached my horse, a goodly crowd was following me. Oh, the story's got around all right. A pity I didn't ride directly to the depot."

I silently agreed, but the damage was done and regrets and recriminations would be foolish. "I'm anxious to learn if there was anything in the New York City newspaper about my prophecy regarding the fire."

"My dear," he said, smiling apologetically, "I never even got a chance to read it. It got doused along with me. In fact, the water came down with such force that it knocked the paper out of my hand and I lost all thought of it in my predicament."

"It's understandable," I said. "And perhaps as well. What I don't know won't worry me."

"You're being sensible," he said. "May I ask the purpose of Lawyer Clayton's call?"

"Certainly," I replied. "He wished to learn all he could about Mama and me."

"I suppose that's understandable," Arthur said, though rather unconvincingly, I thought.

"Don't you trust Mr. Clayton?" I asked, suddenly fearful I'd done the wrong thing in confiding in him.

"He seems trustworthy enough," Arthur said. "But I'm a little disturbed about his visit following so soon after that scalliwag Fallon."

"I don't suppose you learned anything of him in the village," I said.

"I wasn't there long enough, my dear," he said. "Be-

sides, I'll make no secret of the fact that I eavesdropped on you both this morning. He stated he was staying in Springville."

"He also stated he'd stopped in our village for the first time this morning," I replied. "That was a lie."

"How did you find that out?" Arthur asked in surprise.

I could have bitten my tongue for blurting the information out, but since I had, I stated Mr. Clayton had so informed me, even though I'd learned it first from Tempa.

"Mr. Fallon was watching the Seaton store burn down," I related. "At the same time he engaged in conversation with Mr. Clayton."

"In regard to you, I suppose."

I nodded. "He wanted to know if I possessed the gift of prophecy also."

"I hope you'll have nothing more to do with Fallon."

"Be assured, I shan't."

"I'm glad to know not even the thought of living in luxury would tempt you as it would most young women," he observed.

I smiled. "You sound surprised."

"Not at all, my dear," he said, rising. "Please excuse me. I believe I shall retire, for my experience has wearied me."

"It's understandable," I replied. "I'll help Tempa with the dishes."

I also had a few questions to ask her regarding the watch which still occupied a place in my dress pocket. She was already washing the dishes and I picked up a towel and started to dry them.

"What made you steal Mr. Fallon's watch?" I asked, keeping my voice low, for I knew my stepfather would be infuriated if he knew she'd committed the act of theft. "You never saw him before in your life. Or did you?"

"Something urged me to do it," she said, with that expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"But why Mr. Fallon?"

"I don't know. But I knew I had to steal his watch."

"No one else's? Just his?"

"I'd have stolen Mr. Clayton's too," she said calmly. "But I didn't get the chance. He drifted into the crowd."

The rogue moved further into the darkness so he'd not be seen. He's evil. He wishes to use you as your stepfather used your Mama."

"If only I knew how to get that watch back," I said worriedly.

"I could put it back in his pocket," Tempa said.

"Good gracious, no," I exclaimed. "I don't want you to go near the village again. At least, not until I get rid of this watch."

"How do you intend to do it?" she asked, looking amused.

"I don't know, but I'll think of something." I hung up the towel and moved slowly from the room. I was deep in thought as I moved through the reception hall and into the small parlor. Without realizing it, I'd taken the watch from my pocket and was regarding it thoughtfully when Arthur spoke. I jumped, for I had no idea of his presence, but he had been seated in a high-back, winged chair and was practically invisible.

"What is that?" he asked curiously.

My hand closed around the object, but I knew he had seen it. I clasped it to my bosom as if I cherished it dearly and indulged in an act of complete hypocrisy.

"It was Papa's," I lied. "I found it in Mama's suite."

I felt wild color flush my face, for lying was anathema to me, yet I didn't dare let him know Tempa had stolen it, for he had already stated he felt she was not a good influence for me to have around. Should he repeat that, I could give him no argument. But he made no further comment and I moved casually from the room and, picking up a lamp from the console table in the hall, I made my way upstairs.

My sleep that night was tranquil and the next two days were equally as serene. I was beginning to entertain a hope that the peace and quiet would never be shattered. True, I still had in my possession the watch stolen from Mr. Fallon and I still was at a loss as to how to return it to him without his knowing from where it came.

Mr. Clayton visited me on both afternoons and our friendship warmed and ripened. We spent the time walk-

ing about the grounds, for the days were beautiful and the flowers were in full bloom, making our walks through the garden thoroughly rewarding.

He'd informed me he'd learned a great deal about Mr. Fallon. That he was, as he said, an entrepreneur, a promoter of unusual people. He'd telegraphed the New York police. There was no police record. However, they had had complaints about him, but never could develop any concrete evidence against him, mostly because the people whom he had bilked out of considerable sums of money were either reluctant or had refused pointblank to make any statement incriminating him.

"I'm glad Arthur was here to order him from the house," I said.

"Speaking of Arthur," Peter—for we were on a first-name basis now—said, "What do you know of him?"

"Nothing, really," I said. "But Mama had predicted the day and hour of her death and he returned two days before that time."

"Were he and your mother reconciled?"

"No. He didn't wish to upset her."

"That's what he told you?"

I nodded. "I have no reason to doubt him. Mama was a woman of very high ideals. He felt she would never forgive him for what he'd done. I doubt she ever did, for Tempa never even knew of his existence until he came to the house, though he did not make his presence known until after my arrival."

"Just what did he do to turn your mother from him?"

I told Peter everything Arthur had told me, and it seemed quite believable.

"Did you ever ask your father what he did through the years?" Peter persisted in his questioning. "How he made a living?"

"I never thought of it, perhaps because I'd forgotten his existence until he came back here. I feel that took a great deal of courage on his part."

"Why?"

"Because when Mama ordered him from the house, she told him it was well for him to go, for if he remained

here, he would meet a violent death. He is remaining here to watch over me."

"If that story is true," Peter said, "he shows remarkable courage."

It was on the second afternoon, as we were walking beneath a rose arbor, that Peter, without the slightest warning, gathered me in his arms and kissed me tenderly. I forgot my momentary surprise in the breathless thrill of his arms about me and his lips touching mine.

"I love you, Cassie," he said. "You've completely captured my heart."

My heart pounded madly at his nearness and I knew how wonderful it would be to have him at my side for the rest of my days, but dare I? And I voiced my fear to him.

He kissed my brow and said, "Throw out those dark, brooding thoughts and let your heart be young. I've heard no gossip in regard to you these last two days. The people are going about their business. The Seatons are already planning on building another store. Let me take you into the village tonight and we will dine at the tavern. You've been a recluse all your life, just as your mother before you. It is time you started to live and I mean to teach you how."

"I wonder if I dare," I said, yet feeling delightfully giddy at the thought.

"Certainly you dare," Peter said, his smile joyous. "You will dare anything with me. I'll take you back to the house and you may get your bonnet and we'll set forth."

"Oh, please let me dress up," I exclaimed. "It will be quite an occasion. Suddenly, I feel as if everything is going to be all right. That I'm a normal young woman. Perhaps that's because I've fallen in love with you. If I'm bewitched, you're responsible. You've made me feel as if I could fly."

"Will you marry me, my darling?" he asked, sweeping me up in his arms and carrying me to the house.

"Peter," I exclaimed in mock dismay, "let me down. Arthur and Tempa will see us and think me quite reckless."

"Let them. And put your arms around my neck," he replied. "You're young, beautiful, enchanting, humorous

and everything wonderful a young lady of nineteen summers should be.”

He paused just long enough to kiss my brow, my cheeks and the bridge of my nose. Then, still holding me, he ran to the house, both of us laughing uproariously all the way.

I selected a dress of white silk, with heliotrope pin-point spots, the double skirt edged with numerous rows of heliotrope baby ribbon. The sleeves were large puffs to the elbow, thence close-fitting to the wrists. It was very smart and I'd never worn it. On my head I placed a straw toque with white roses. I touched my ear lobes with cologne and picked up my white silk gloves. I gave myself a final survey in the mirror and returned downstairs. Tempa and Arthur were standing in the reception hall with Peter, and each of them beamed in approval. I felt fully rewarded and in a warm glow of happiness I embraced Tempa and touched my cheek to Arthur's.

TEN

I hadn't so enjoyed a meal in many months. I knew the food wasn't exceptional, but I was with Peter, and for the first time since my return I felt young and lighthearted and happy. I know I chattered like a schoolgirl about foolish little incidents in my life, but he was tolerant and listened with rapt interest. His love for me was clearly evident in the way his eyes adored me, and I felt warm and protected. Yet I should have known it could not last. I should have known better than to have allowed myself these few hours of happiness. If I doubted it before, I knew now for a certainty I was accursed—doomed, like Mama, to foresee future events.

I paused in the middle of a sentence, feeling an utter compulsion to glance at a man at an adjoining table who was in the act of pointing me out to his wife and daughter. Their rude stares caused me no uneasiness, but suddenly lying on the floor beside his table, I saw a boy of about nine, his body twisted and torn, his innocent face contorted in death. The image vanished and I shook my head briskly as if that might help rid me of the horror of what I'd seen and its meaning.

"What is it?" Peter asked, his voice suddenly worried.

I said, "Do you know the man sitting nearby? The two ladies with him must be his wife and daughter."

Peter looked around. "I heard the waiter address him as Mr. Rutledge."

"I've never seen him before. I know absolutely nothing about him, but I know he has a son about nine years old."

"Go on," Peter said with an air of wonder.

"The boy is going to die. In a field, bruised and torn, perhaps trampled. I don't know how he will be killed, but he will be. I saw him—in a vision, already dead."

Peter took a very long breath. "Do you wish to inform Mr. Rutledge of this?"

"No—he wouldn't believe me."

"But a boy is about to die. . . ."

"Nothing I can say or do can stop it from happening."

That's the worst part of this so-called gift, which is no such thing. What good is it to predict a death when you cannot prevent it?"

"You're sure about it?"

"Quite sure."

"It could be that you've been thinking and worrying too much about the power."

"It happened before," I said. "Tempa is going to die. I saw her in death. I can't stop that either. What am I to do? I can't prevent these deaths."

Peter spoke quietly. "If you say there is nothing that can be done, then we shall say nothing and hope you will be proven wrong."

"If this boy dies . . . if Tempa dies . . . will you then believe I possess the gift of prophecy?"

"I'll have no other recourse," he said. "It won't make any difference in my love and affection for you. If such things are true, they're no fault of yours. Now try to forget this. Smile at me." He reached across the table and covered my trembling hand with his.

"I cannot."

"Try . . . talk about something cheerful. Look only at me."

I shuddered. "I'm afraid to look at anyone. Especially you."

"Good," he said promptly.

"Why do you say that? Suppose I see. . . ."

"If you worry about me, you love me," he said with a broad grin.

"Oh, my darling," I beseeched him, "if you truly love me, take me out of here."

"I'll do anything to get that anguished look off your face," he said.

He paid the check and we left the restaurant, passing close by the father, mother and sister of a boy I'd never seen in my life, but whom I knew was going to die soon. They'd forgotten about me and were evidently enjoying their evening out. I was glad, for their moments of happiness would be short-lived.

We walked slowly around the village green, passing the

ruins of the Seaton store. After we'd walked the circle and returned to where the carriage was tied, I felt much more at ease. Just being with Peter calmed me. He let the horse saunter along, being in no hurry to get back. Neither was I.

We were passing along a dark street when the door to a cottage opened and light streamed out to illuminate a portly man carrying a small black bag. He waved to someone inside and then hurried down the path to the gate, which he opened.

I said, "Stop, Peter! In heaven's name, stop quickly."

He pulled up the startled horse. "What is it?" he asked.

"That man—he's a doctor."

"Maybe he is. What of it?"

"He has just delivered a baby—a healthy baby—but there is a twin yet to be born. The mother will be in danger if he leaves. Peter, tell him to go back. . . ."

"I can't do that," he remonstrated.

"Then I will," I said, and without further delay, I jumped down from the carriage and managed to reach the doctor's buggy before it began to move. "Please," I said, "go back, Doctor. There's another child to be born. The mother is having twins. . . ."

"Are you mad?" he demanded irately.

"She will die if you don't help her. Please, oh please, believe me. . . ."

He peered closer at me. "So it's Virginia Taylor's daughter. Now see here, young lady, I never believed your mother could do the things alleged to her and I think you're speaking a lot of nonsense."

I said, "I have the same visions my mother had. I didn't know it until a short time ago. Most of these visions I can do nothing about, but this one I can. It will take but a moment of your time. . . ."

"It's still nonsense," he declared smugly. "What are you trying to do, impress people? So you can make money out of this humbug and deceit? You should be ashamed of yourself. . . ."

Peter was at my side. "Doctor," he said quietly, "you have been forewarned. If what Miss Taylor says is true and you take no action—not even to check it—you'll be

guilty of gross negligence. I'm an attorney. I know what I'm talking about."

"I believe this is just something to bring to everyone's attention the fact that Miss Taylor possesses occult powers," the doctor argued. "I don't believe in them. Don't tell me you do."

"All you need do," Peter urged, "is go back . . . make certain. . . ."

The doctor let go of the reins. "All right, but let me assure you if this isn't so, I'll make certain everyone in the village knows about it."

"Doctor," I said fervently, "I hope to heaven I'm wrong so you can tell everyone. I don't want this power . . . I hate it."

He nodded. "At any rate, you sound sincere. Come along—we'll see who is right."

Peter and I followed him back to the house where the surprised husband let us in. The doctor introduced us as friends of his, then stated he wished to examine the new mother to be sure she was perfectly all right. He disappeared into a bedroom. Mr. Grady, the new father, led us into the parlor, gave Peter a cigar and proclaimed how happy he was to have a daughter.

After a few minutes the doctor returned, closing the door behind him softly. "Jonathan," he addressed the new father, "I've a surprise for you. There's another one on the way . . . a twin. The baby will be born very soon."

I had remained standing, but at this news I sat down slowly in a state of near collapse. That momentary, even fragmentary vision I'd had the moment I saw the doctor had come true. I knew now my visions, the voices that seemed to originate inside my head, were truthful. What they depicted or described would happen. I no longer had any doubt about it.

"We'll wait," Peter suggested. "Just to be absolutely certain."

"If you wish," I said. "Peter, do you believe now?"

"I'm beginning to," he admitted, attempting levity. "I don't know that I like it. When we're married, you'll know what I'm doing before I do it. Though it will have its

advantages too—you'll be able to tell when I've started for home so you can have supper ready. . . ."

"Please don't joke about it," I begged. "I'm quivering with apprehension. Every time I look at someone . . . I'm afraid of what I'll see."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was only trying to cheer you. I know how frightened you are."

An hour went by, with Mr. Grady nervously pacing the floor. There was a pounding on the outside door and the father hurried past us. He admitted a man in overalls, obviously a farmhand.

"Is Dr. Gaylord here?" he asked excitedly. "His wife said he might be."

"I'll fetch him," Mr. Grady said, and went to the bedroom where he tapped on the door. Dr. Gaylord emerged, gave me a troubled glance and asked the visitor what he wanted.

"It's the Rutledge farm, Doc. The Rutledge boy . . . he got hisself tromped by a crazy bull. Don't know when it happened, but they just found him."

"How bad is he?"

"Reckon he's dead, Doc, but o' course I ain't sure. . . ."

"I'll be out there as soon as I can. Leave here in the next fifteen minutes . . . can't be in two places. . . ."

"Doctor," I said, "there's no need to hurry. The boy is dead."

Dr. Gaylord took a long breath. "Miss Taylor, if you say so, I believe he is."

The farmhand rushed away, the new father continued his walking and Peter's hand sought mine and held it tightly. At last the doctor emerged, rolling down his sleeve. He was smiling and my aching heart stopped its pounding.

"Another girl," he announced. "Healthy as can be. Now I must get out to the Rutledge place."

"Doctor," I said, "may I see the twins?"

"Why, yes, I guess you certainly deserve that. You know, there are cases like this, but so rare a doctor almost never meets one. Thank heaven you came along. Go ahead, look in on them."

I walked into the room. Mrs. Grady, wan and tired,

managed to give me a smile. She was trying to say something so I bent to hear her better.

"Dr. Gaylord told me what happened, Miss Taylor. Thank you. I feared your Mama and you before, but I won't now."

"May I look at the babies?" I asked.

She nodded and I knew what she meant. Mr. Grady beamed with pride as he stood beside the crib, in which both squalling, vital-looking babies squirmed. I looked down at them. A tiny voice was speaking in my ear.

"They will name one Beth and the other Belle. Beth will marry a famous man and enjoy wealth. Belle will have seven children and be even happier than her sister. There is long life for both."

My smile was one of resignation as I walked back to the bed.

"What will you name them?" I asked.

"The first one . . . Beth," Mrs. Grady said. "The second one was so unexpected. . . ."

"Belle—for my older sister," Mr. Grady suggested eagerly.

"Belle it will be," Mrs. Grady agreed.

I said, "Beth will marry a man of fame and wealth. Belle will have seven children and be even happier than Beth. They will live long lives."

Mrs. Grady smiled. "Thank you, Miss Taylor. Please come by again. You've done so much for us."

"Thank you," I said. "I will."

Peter and I left. We sat in the carriage for several minutes while I told him of the voice I'd heard, naming the babies and foretelling their future.

"Cassie, my dearest," he said, "there is also great good in this gift. You may not be able to save a life of one who is slated for death, but you did well with the baby and the mother."

"I'm grateful," I replied somberly. "But the gift is still a burden. Please take me home."

He picked up the reins and the carriage began moving again. We didn't speak until he pulled up before the house.

I refused to look at him as I told him what I wished of him.

"This is good-by. I can't marry you. After tonight, I no longer doubt I am a seeress. By tomorrow everyone in the village will be sure of it, too. Please go."

"I'm coming back," he declared. "I have to come back. Even if you never marry me, I must protect you to the best of my ability and I shall do so. Good night, Cassie. Remember that everything you predict is not painful."

I lay awake long after I retired, my heart aching with the realization that I was doomed to a future of loneliness. When sleep at last claimed me, it was a restless one, for I kept waking, each time listening for strange, eerie sounds, for voices that whispered secret messages to me, my eyes attempting to pierce the darkness, wondering if another tragic vision would reveal itself.

I arose early, still fatigued, but knowing if I remained in bed, I'd toss restlessly. I met Arthur in the corridor on his way to the dining room. He was dressed in a Norfolk jacket with matching knickerbockers. He told me he was going to hunt rabbits and invited me to accompany him. I shuddered and rejected the invitation quickly and firmly.

It wasn't until we were at the table he noticed my uneasiness. He eyed me inquisitively as he asked, "Wasn't last night as enjoyable as you'd anticipated?"

"Peter was a most gracious escort," I replied. "But the evening ended on a note that has assured me I have the gift—if such it can be called—which Mama had."

"Do you wish to tell me about it?"

"It certainly is no secret by now," I replied, relating, in detail, the events of the night before. Tempa, hovering in the background, listened intently.

When I finished, he said, "Well, at least you have Peter now. He'll shield you from any unpleasantness."

"I told him last night I had no desire to see him again," I said, my smile bitter. "How could I wish such a life as mine on him?"

"You need him," Tempa said fiercely. "You must go to him, marry him. You must not live alone like your Mama. She could not live with this gift anymore. It was too bur-

densome. She died before her time, just as I am to die before mine."

"Tempa, I implore you not to speak that way," I cried.

"I must." Her voice rose with emotion. "Marry him. You love him, do you not?"

"With all my heart."

"Then, perhaps," she argued, "with him, the voices will not speak, the visions will not come."

"I dare not," I said. "No argument will sway me. He is everything good and wonderful. I cannot destroy him. I know, in time, this gift will destroy me, as it did Mama. He must remain away from me. You must go also, Tempa. And you, Arthur."

"It is too late for me," Tempa said, her voice a monotone.

"I'll not leave you," Arthur said. "You were almost murdered in this house. I daresay you didn't tell Peter that."

"No," I said. "There's been no further attempt on my life."

"Nor will there be," Arthur said. "I'll see to it."

"You know what Mama predicted if you stayed here," I said.

"I didn't stay," he said forcefully. "I came back."

"What she foretold may still come true," I said.

"Nonsense," he said. "Just as nonsensical as you telling Peter you didn't wish to see him again. I'll put a stop to that." He turned to Tempa. "I'm hunting rabbits. We'll have them for stew tonight."

She made a face, for it was no secret she disliked cleaning them. Arthur took his shotgun from the hall closet, donned his soft tweed helmet and left the house.

"I'll help you, Tempa," I said, starting to gather up the breakfast dishes.

"No," she said, making a gesture with her arms for me to leave. "I want no one around me."

"We need each other," I said, my voice a plea. "You're frightened, just as I am."

She shook her head slowly. "I need no one anymore, for no one can help me."

She placed the dishes on a tray and retreated through the pantry into the kitchen. I stood there, wondering if I should insist on being with her, for her mood was very depressed. But I knew her strong nature would not permit me any intrusion on her privacy when she did not wish it.

I went upstairs, wondering how I would pass my day. Then, simultaneously, I remembered two things. The twin girls born last evening, and an upstairs room in my home, filled with clothes and toys from my childhood. Mama once told me she had packed them carefully. I found them quite intact. I doubted now that they'd ever be of any use to me.

I quickly filled several boxes. There were baby clothes and also little-girl dresses, shoes, stockings and ribbons, all in good condition.

I carried the several boxes downstairs and told Tempa what I was going to do with them, begging her to accompany me. She was adamant in her refusal, but insisted on hitching up the carriage and carrying the boxes out to the stable.

Occasionally I heard the distant roar of Arthur's shotgun as he thinned out the rabbit population. I headed for the village and pulled up before the house where I'd spent so much of the previous evening.

Mr. Grady admitted me and carried in the boxes. Mrs. Grady was extremely grateful. The babies looked less red, but they squalled even louder. How I wished they were mine, and that I had a home, even as modest as this, with Peter as my husband.

"A gentleman came to visit this morning," Mrs. Grady said. "He asked many questions about what happened. He said his name was Earl Fallon."

"What did he ask about me?"

"He wanted to know all about how you predicted there was to be a second baby and he asked about the death of that poor Rutledge boy, but I knew little about that. He made our daughters a very substantial gift of gold eagles and said if we thought of anything else, he was staying at the inn."

"I know him," I said.

"Did I do wrong, Miss Taylor?" Mrs. Grady asked worriedly.

"Certainly not," I reassured her. "Now I must be on my way, but I'll return soon for I have toys and more clothing. The babies look wonderful and so do you."

"Thanks to you," she said. "You saved my life and that of one of the twins."

I smiled my appreciation and bade her farewell. I was deeply troubled by the knowledge that Mr. Fallon had come here from Springville, obviously in an attempt to still persuade me to sell the powers I now knew I possessed. The thought upset me greatly—not that I'd be tempted, but that he believed he could, in time, wear down my resistance.

I let the horse have his head, for my mind was sorely troubled by this new development. I approached the railroad tracks, making no effort to stop and look, for I knew that on this particular day, the train didn't come through until seven in the evening. Therefore, when I looked to my left and saw a train coming at me very fast and not far enough for me to escape being run down, I screamed and whipped the horse frantically. The train's stack poured out smoke, steam hissed from both sides of it and the headlight was on bright.

Then it occurred to me that there'd been no sound. This train moved without creating any noise and it didn't even make a sound as it left the track and went plunging into the earth while some of its cars tumbled off the track like toys. All of this without a sound.

My terror reached a point where I felt faint, and then the vision disappeared. There was no wreck, no train—nothing. I pulled up on the reins and sat there, all but stupefied.

I peered down the track. The real train wasn't due for hours yet. I looked in the other direction. This time I saw something. It looked like a sack fallen from a train. But it began to move slowly, painfully. It was a man. I couldn't identify him, though he somehow looked familiar. He wore a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers and he stumbled forward only to fall again, and as he fell, he vanished. I

screamed, though there was no one about to hear me. I turned the carriage around and drove it to the small railroad depot where the stationmaster sold tickets and prepared barrels and boxes for the single train to pick up. He was a man well past middle-age who had rheumy-looking eyes and a drooping, stained mustache.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

He peered at me. "It's the young witch woman whose ma was also a witch."

It wasn't complimentary, but it was enough that he would know I wasn't talking through madness. "There is going to be a train wreck tonight," I said. "You must do something to prevent it. Someone is going to be killed."

"Train wreck?" He slapped his thigh and roared with laughter. "Ma'am, ain't never been no wreck on this line. Know why? 'Cause there's only one track and only one engine. Takes two engines to make a wreck. No matter what you say, there can't be a wreck."

I departed, for I knew further argument would be useless. I was just climbing into the carriage when I felt an object strike against my thigh. It was Mr. Fallon's watch and I took it from my pocket. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship and, suddenly curious, I opened the back. I was stunned by the inscription on the inside. It read:

To Earl, in appreciation of a most profitable partnership. Arthur

The shock of this revelation on top of the frightening vision I'd just beheld was too much. The Arthur could be none other than my stepfather. I slumped weakly on the seat, wondering what I should do, thinking back on all that had happened.

Was it Arthur who had tried to murder me? Quite possibly, I reasoned, since he thought me an heiress when he returned and, with me disposed of, he would inherit the fortune he believed to be mine, for legally he was still my stepfather. But once he found out there was none, he and Mr. Fallon hit upon the idea of capitalizing on me through Mama's reputation. Now that Mr. Fallon knew that I really

possessed the gift—and so did Arthur, for at breakfast I'd revealed everything that had happened last evening—I would know no peace. I needed help and I had no one to turn to except Peter.

I turned the horse around and went directly to the inn. I was disconsolate when I learned he was out. I was taking my leave when Mr. Fallon entered.

"Ah, Miss Taylor." He removed his hat and bowed elaborately. "I heard the amazing news of your predictions last night. And I've just heard of your latest in regard to the train wreck."

"But I told no one," I replied.

"You told the stationmaster," he replied with a smile. "He thinks it quite a joke. I'm inclined to believe you."

"You're wasting your time, Mr. Fallon," I said. "But I'm glad I met you. I wish to return something which belongs to you." I removed the watch from my pocket and handed it to him.

If he was surprised, he gave no sign. "How gracious of you. I presume I dropped it when I visited you."

"I'm sure you know better than that," I replied, my smile as enigmatic as his. Good day, Mr. Fallon."

Though I held my head high as I left the inn, I felt utterly defeated. I knew I must return home immediately, for Tempa was at the mercy of Arthur, just as I had been since the moment of his arrival. I urged the horse into a fast gallop and still the ride seemed endless. I was still tense as I turned into the drive, but I relaxed a little when I saw Arthur clear the forest area at the side of the property, gun under his arm and a brace of rabbits in his hand. He raised the rabbits in a salute to me and my heart suddenly stopped, for this was the man I'd seen in that vision. I was more confused than ever and I wondered if I had interpreted the vision correctly.

He set the rabbits and gun on the porch, helped me down and took charge of the animals. "I wish to talk with you as soon as I stable the horse."

"I wish to talk with you too, Arthur. In the parlor."

I had no idea of what I was going to say, though I knew I would insist that he leave this house before the

day ended. I would be a fool to allow him to stay. I could not hope to cope with both him and Mr. Fallon. I'd not even be a match for one of them. I'd been a thorough and complete fool.

The door was unlocked and when I entered the house it seemed forlorn and utterly empty of life. I heard no sound, though I reasoned Tempa was in the kitchen about now, preparing supper. I paced the parlor floor restlessly, wondering what delayed Arthur. Something seemed terribly wrong. It was not a pleasant sensation.

Finally he entered the house through the kitchen. "I wrapped the rabbits in paper and put them in the icebox. Cassie, I thought you said you wanted nothing more to do with Peter."

"That's not exactly true," I said wearily. "I sent him away last night because I would not be good for him."

"I don't agree," Arthur said. "And apparently he isn't taking your sending him away as final. I saw him in the woods today, though not to talk to. He seemed troubled."

"I stopped at the inn to talk with him," I said.

"Then you changed your mind," Arthur said, actually seeming pleased. "I'm glad."

"I did not change my mind," I replied sternly. "I had another vision and it terrified me. I saw a train being wrecked. I tried to warn the stationmaster, but he only laughed at me."

"One could scarcely blame him," Arthur said chuckling. "I advise you not to tell anyone, lest you lose your reputation as a prophet. You know it's just a one-track railroad and has but one locomotive. Didn't Peter agree with you?"

"He wasn't there," I replied, moving restlessly about the room as I spoke. "But Mr. Fallon was. He didn't laugh at my prediction. He'd already heard of it at the depot."

For the first time, Arthur sobered. "You mean to say you're going to allow him to manage you?"

"Not him," I replied firmly, "or you."

"What do you mean by that?" Arthur, in act of settling himself in the wing-back chair, straightened.

"Tempa stole Mr. Fallon's watch the night the Seaton store burned down," I said, my voice gone cold. "She rec-

ognized him when he came here the next day. She warned me against him."

"You mean she produced the watch she stole?" he asked.

"No," I replied wearily. "She dropped it. I returned it to him this afternoon. He was entering the inn as I was leaving it. He pretended he might have lost it the morning he came here."

"Is that all?" he asked, suddenly paling.

"No," I replied, "but I'm going to call Tempa. I'd like her to be present to hear what I have to say next."

I moved briskly into the hall and called out to her. In the quiet of the house, she should have had no difficulty in hearing me, yet she didn't answer. I called again, raising my voice and moving to the foot of the stairs. It might well be she was in her room. After the fourth or fifth time I called her name, a shudder of fear went through me. I turned to see Arthur regarding me. His features were tense, as if he too sensed something wrong.

"Do you know where she is?" I asked coldly.

"No," he replied.

Without questioning him further, I raced up the stairs and ran to her door. I turned the knob, expecting it to be locked, but it was not. Her room was empty. I thought of the secret room adjoining Mama's bedroom.

I drew a long breath. "I fear Tempa is dead. I had a vision of her two days ago in death."

"But where could she be?"

"In Mama's room," I said, already going there. I opened the door, half expecting to find her sprawled out on the floor. There was no one in either room.

"There's a secret room behind that painting," I said, pointing.

Without the slightest hesitation, he approached the frame, let his fingers run lightly down behind it and the hidden door opened. Pale yellow light flickered in that ominous room of black. It was enough to show us Tempa, lying half on and half off the dais. Her eyes were wide, staring.

There was no question but that she was dead.

ELEVEN

Arthur approached her slowly, bent down, and felt for a pulse. The glass which was always on the small table had fallen to the floor. The carafe was missing.

"I'm going to the village," he said. "Come downstairs and wait there. I'll be as quick as I can. I don't want you abroad, Cassie, but I don't want anyone else to get into the house either. So you have to remain. I'll be back in half an hour at best."

I nodded, wondering if he was being honest. "I'll wait downstairs. . . ."

We reached the parlor and I watched in horrified silence as he opened the shotgun he'd left in a corner and jammed two shells into the breech. I didn't exhale until he placed it across a table.

"Use it if you have to. I don't think you'll be disturbed, but just in case. Cassie—trust me. I'm not much. I never was, but this once, please trust me."

My reply was a mere nod, for I knew he had been well aware of what lay behind that oil painting forming one side of the door to the secret room where Tempa now lay dead. He'd forgotten to take care that I wouldn't see him spring the concealed latch that no one would suspect was there. Now I could only pray he would ride to the village and tell the constable what had happened.

I sat down, and as the front door closed behind him, I brought both hands to my face and wept softly for Tempa. The day had slipped away and it was turning dusk so I lit every lamp in the parlor and in the reception hall. The house was deathly quiet. I shivered and wrapped my arms about me as if I suffered a chill. Perhaps I did. Or was it that I sensed death all around me?

I was distraught and nervous. I didn't relish being alone in this big, ancient house with a dead woman sprawled on the floor of a secret room used for purposes to do with the occult. These thoughts so unnerved me that I jumped up and rushed to the front door, moving on out to the porch. I decided I'd wait there. I started pacing back and

forth. I had no sense of time, but all at once I heard a distant train whistle. I paid little heed to it at first but then the meaning of it struck me with the force of a blow.

The train! The one-a-day train was coming in! I'd seen it wrecked. I'd seen a dead man beside the track. A man wearing the identical outfit now worn by my stepfather. And suddenly I knew the meaning of the vision.

He was going to be killed and the train wrecked. He'd had ample time to reach the village and await the train. I raced off the porch and down the road in the direction of the tracks. I was shouting, but there was no one to hear me. I was steeling myself against the crashing sound of the train wreck.

It came! A terrifying sound, and I slowed to finally stop and lean weakly against a tree beside the road. I hated this power. There was nothing I could do to circumvent the tragedies that flashed across my vision or were revealed to me by voices. I knew these things would happen. I could warn people, but it was no use. They'd either pay no attention, or they'd consider me an idiot. True, I had spared the life of that mother and her child. Such predictions I could abide, but not these.

Not the death of Tempa, the train wreck, the death of Arthur, because I knew very well that he now lay dead. I began running again, but I soon tired and reduced my speed to a walk that grew slower and slower. But I finally reached the railroad tracks.

The engine had turned over and so had two of the freight cars. The two passenger coaches had miraculously remained on the track. Steam and smoke arose from the engine. I saw the village hearse drawn up and I wondered how many had been killed.

As I approached, all activity ceased and everyone stood motionless. By the expressions on their faces, staring at me, I knew the fear I engendered, nor did I blame them. I would have been deathly afraid of anyone who predicted a train wreck hours before it happened, and under the impossible circumstances of a one-track, one-locomotive railroad.

It was Peter who came running in my direction. With-

out a word, he took my arm and led me to the crowd gathered close by the locomotive.

The stationmaster poked a finger in my direction. "She said it was goin' to happen an' it did. Anybody's to blame, she is."

"You're excusing yourself," Peter thundered. "She warned you, and you did nothing about it. The responsibility is yours, not hers."

"Is Arthur dead?" I said.

Peter looked grim. "So you knew that would happen too."

I nodded. "Was anyone else killed?"

"All were spared."

The engineer, with a great lump and bruises on his forehead, approached us. "Miss Taylor," he said, "your stepfather is dead, but if it's any comfort to you, he died a hero. He rushed straight up the tracks toward the train, waving his arms and yelling. I didn't see him until too late. He jumped to one side as the train went on through. I had the brakes down as hard as I could get them, but it was no use. Something happened to the track and we went off. One of the cars . . . fell on him. He hadn't quite cleared the area beside the track."

"Thank you," I said. "Peter—Tempa is dead. Arthur was on his way to the village to report it. I . . . must go back . . . and I need help. . . ."

"You've plenty of that now," he said. "Wait while I tell Dr. Gaylord and the constable. Then I'll get a carriage. . . ."

He was back in only a few moments and he helped me into the carriage. He drove the horse hard for all possible speed. It didn't occur to me to tell him speed was of little consequence.

I said, "Don't you see now how right I was to send you away? Three have suffered and died . . . and I could do nothing about it."

"The mother and child were the exception," he said. "Take heart in the knowledge you'll encounter good situations as well as bad ones. Cassie, let me help you endure this. Marry me—at once."

"No," I said. "But I need your help now."

"You have it," he assured me.

We reached the house, along with the doctor, constable and hearse. Peter brought them upstairs after receiving directions from me as to the location of the room. Then he rejoined me and led me into the drawing room. He sat beside me on the settee.

"Cassie, do you know what happened to her?"

"I'm afraid to think of it."

"That's a weird room. What was it used for?"

"Tempa used it to conduct her seances. She said the all-blackness helped bring the spirits back."

"Is that what she was doing when she died?"

"I presume so. She knew she wasn't going to live long. She told me she had a premonition. I knew as well, for I had a vision, but again I could do nothing about it. Neither could she, I'd judge."

His arm was about my shoulders and we sat silently until Dr. Gaylord joined us. "She was obviously poisoned. There was a goblet beside the body. I'll have what's left in it analyzed. Tomorrow, Miss Taylor, you'll have to be in my office. I'm also the medical examiner and I must, by law, ask you some questions."

"I'll be there," I promised.

"Good. Make it ten."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I'll be with her, as her attorney," Peter told him.

The doctor nodded approval. "Do you know what might have been in the glass?"

"No, Doctor," I said. "There was always a carafe on the table, though, along with the goblet. I noticed when my stepfather and I discovered Tempa, it was missing."

The doctor returned to the reception hall and stood there while Tempa's body was brought down. We heard the door open and close and the sounds of them driving away.

"If Tempa was poisoned," Peter said, "you may be in considerable danger."

"No," I said. "If she was, I fear it was Arthur's doing."

"What makes you say that?"

"Tempa stole Mr. Fallon's watch in the village the night

of the fire. She dropped it in my presence. I scolded her, but she was very defiant, saying she had to do it—something made her. I could think of no way of getting it back to him, without implicating her. Today, I went to the village to see Mrs. Grady. She told me that Mr. Fallon had been to see them, had gifted her daughters with gold eagles after questioning them about my prophecies of the night before. She also told me he was staying at the inn. I imagine he implied that if they learned something more about me, they'd be suitably rewarded if they passed on the information. I was on my way home when I saw the vision of the wreck and a man lying dead alongside it."

Peter's arm tightened about my waist as I shuddered at the memory. "You went to the stationmaster to warn him and he laughed at you."

"Yes," I said. "So I went to the inn to implore your help. I wanted to stop that wreck. You were out, but Mr. Fallon came in. He may have been keeping an eye on me, for he informed me he'd just come from the depot and he knew of my prediction of the train wreck. He didn't laugh. He said he believed it."

"He would anyway," Peter reasoned, "since it is his hope you will allow him to represent you in your predictions to private individuals."

"If he thought so before, he knows better now," I said. "I returned his watch. He pretended he'd dropped it here, though he was quite aware I recognized his pretense."

"Why would he know that?"

"On impulse this afternoon, I opened the back of it," I said. "The inscription on the watch revealed it was a gift to him from Arthur."

"So you know they were in this together," Peter said.

"Did you?" I asked in surprise.

"My dearest, that's what brought me up here. A client of mine, a charming lady though a gullible one, told me a handsome gentleman bearing the name of Arthur Taylor wished her to invest in some gold mine stock. The lady happens to be my aunt. I felt the gentleman deserved investigating. I had him followed by a private detective. I received a telegraph from the detective that Taylor was up

here, along with a man named Fallon who went on to the next village. Obviously they worked together. When your mother died and word came regarding your prophecies, I wondered if you would be a party to their chicanery. The fire at the general store and the resultant public antipathy toward you gave me the opportunity of offering my services, thus encouraging your confidence. I hope you'll forgive me."

"I see," I said numbly. "You, too, were playing a game."

"Not for long, for you captured my heart almost at once. Who do you suppose poisoned Tempa?" he asked.

"I fear it was Arthur," I said sadly. "Just as he tried to murder me."

"I didn't know about that!" Peter exclaimed.

"There was only one attempt made on my life," I said. "I thought until this afternoon it was one of the villagers who might have thought Mama had money hidden in the house. I believe it was Arthur who planted such an idea in my head after I told him there was no money. Once he learned that, I think he and Mr. Fallon tried to frighten me into leaving the house. They probably thought I'd be impressed by my gift of prediction. Also, that the idea of becoming wealthy in the process would not be repugnant to me. They were wrong in both instances."

"My dear," Peter said, "please come back to the inn. You shouldn't be in this large house by yourself."

"I want to be nowhere else," I said. "I belong here, just as Mama did. I will die here, just as she did."

"Do you feel a deep affection for this house?"

"No," I replied. "I feel a stranger, but I shall predict as Mama did, though I'll be unable to dispense monies on the victims of catastrophes."

"You're laying out a dismal future for yourself."

"I have no choice," I said. "Now please go, Peter. I'm tired."

"May I come for you tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"Pray do," I said. "I'll have need of you, for I don't know what treatment I'll receive at the hands of the villagers. But at least I'm rid of Mr. Fallon."

“Is there any other way in which I can serve you?”

“Please do what is necessary for Tempa and my step-father. I’ll pay the burial expenses and attend their services.”

“And I’ll be at your side. Good-night, my darling.”

Before I could protest, his lips touched mine and the embrace would have become fervent except I pushed him from me. Though his arms about me were pure rapture, the heartache after he left would be too unbearable. I begged him to go and, though reluctant to obey, he did.

I heard the door open and remain so for long moments, as though he wanted to come back, but it finally closed and I was alone in this house of death and evil predictions and ghosts and whatever else moved in its shadows.

I wondered if there would be any manifestations tonight. If so, would I learn who murdered Tempa? I couldn’t be certain it was Arthur, yet he had seen the watch in my possession and no doubt guessed Tempa had stolen it. Or could it have been she’d observed Arthur and Mr. Fallon in conversation either on the grounds or in the village and, because of that, her life was forfeit?

Most of the downstairs lamps were lit and I picked up one to go into the kitchen, for I realized I’d not eaten since breakfast. I had no desire for food, but I was deeply moved when I opened the icebox to discover Tempa had prepared a ham, three baked chickens, two kinds of salad, two bowls of cold pudding. Knowing she was about to die, she’d given her last moments in providing for me. I partook of some pudding, drank a glass of milk and decided to go upstairs. The door to Mama’s suite was open, having been left that way by my visitors.

I felt it necessary to renew my determination to stay in this house and, therefore, I should fear nothing here. I walked into Mama’s suite. A lamp was still burning in the black room. I deliberately blew it out and then closed the secret door. I made my way to my own rooms and there, I took the precaution of locking my door and lighting all the lamps. I felt reasonably safe here, because I believed the danger to my life was no more.

I had no intention of undressing, for I knew I’d not be

able to sleep. So I simply reclined on the chaise longue in my sitting room and picked up a magazine. I studied the pages without actually seeing their content. My mind was still in too much of a turmoil to absorb the printed words.

Time crept by. When I looked at my watch from time to time, I was amazed that so few minutes had passed since I last looked. Finally my eyes began to droop, and despite my tenseness, I dozed. From time to time I'd awaken with a start of fear, until I looked about and saw that I was alone. The urge to fall soundly asleep came over me about midnight, growing by degrees until I was unable to resist it. I closed my eyes and surrendered to fatigue.

Subconsciously I heard a distant sound—at least it seemed to come from a distance. I awoke quickly, oriented myself and sat erect, listening. Maybe I'd dreamed that sound. Right now the house seemed to possess the same deathly quiet it had just before Arthur and I found Tempa dead.

Then it came again and I knew there'd been no mistake. It was a downstairs door and it had been slammed as hard as possible. Yet no windows were open, no doors ajar to create a draft. Some force other than the elements had caused the door to slam shut.

Another door slammed in the same manner and then a dozen of them closed just as hard and noisily, one after the other. Each time my courage ebbed and my terror increased. All I could think of was the fact that I was alone, completely at the mercy of the forces against me, human or ghostly. I'd been a fool to reject Peter's offer to guard me. I'd been living in a false world of kind and gentle spirits, but whatever rampaged below was anything but that. Door after door slammed with enough force to all but shake the house. Then I heard a crash as something was hurled to the floor. A few moments of silence followed before I heard footsteps and then more doors slammed. These were along the corridor just outside my rooms. Finally the knob of my door was seized and wrenched hard. When it refused to open, whatever was on the other side immediately began to bang against it. The din seemed to

keep growing until it threatened to burst my eardrums—and I could only sit there, transfixed in horror.

The pounding on the door continued for about five minutes without abatement and when it stopped, the silence was almost as bad as the cacophony.

Suddenly a wild shriek of rage rang through the house. I clapped my hands to my lips to keep from answering it with a scream of terror. The shriek shrilled through the house a dozen times and the doors started banging again.

Then, as before, came intense silence. No banging, no door-slamming, no footsteps. Gradually my breathing resumed a normalcy and I summoned enough courage to tiptoe to one of the windows and peer out onto the estate, after extinguishing every lamp in the suite. It was a dark night, no moon, and only a few stars, but as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I was able to make out the shape of the bushes and the trees.

Something moved! It might have been an animal, but I doubted it. Something had emerged from one shadow to merge into another. There was more movement, just a blur that darted for the protection of another bush. I watched for a long time, but there was no further activity. The house itself had remained quiet, but it was the sort I didn't trust not to break out again into that wildness of fury and rage.

I walked on tiptoe to the door, pressed an ear against it. I reached for the key and turned it as gently as possible. When the door was unlocked, I stood there waiting. I had no idea for what, except that it passed through my mind that if a ghost had sought entrance, it could have reached me easily, for neither door nor walls could stop a shade. Therefore, it had to be human. I suddenly remembered Arthur stating he'd seen Peter about. I wondered if he'd been speaking the truth or, knowing Tempa was dead, merely wished to throw suspicion on Peter by placing him near the scene of the crime.

I turned the knob and opened the door a crack. The lamps were still glowing, but dimly.

I instinctively glanced toward Mama's suite. Yellow

lamplight reached out from beneath the door. There'd been no lamp lit in those rooms when I'd left them.

I remembered Arthur's shotgun, which still lay on the table in the parlor. It had been loaded and ready to fire. While I'd never fired a gun in my life, I would fire this one if I could reach it and anything threatened me.

To have tiptoed the length of the corridor and down the stairs to the parlor would have taken a long time, and with each second crammed with rising terror, I'd never make it without screaming. So I threw aside all precautions and went racing to the steps and on down them.

I ran to the parlor. A glance revealed the shotgun was missing and fresh terror shook me. Worse than before, for the obvious reason that I'd been filled with a false sense of security believing the gun was at my disposal, only to find it was not.

I heard footsteps and I tensed. They seemed to come from upstairs. I listened, but the steps ceased. Then I heard the steps again, restlessly pacing.

I picked up a lamp, went up the stairs slowly and on down the corridor to Mama's suite. My next move would require the last ounce of courage I possessed. I tried the knob. The door was locked. Before I was aware of what I did, I began pounding on it with my free hand. I pounded and pounded until my fist was aching from the impacts.

"Whoever you are," I cried out, "open this door at once."

There was no reply for a moment or two and then a voice called out stridently. "Go away, Cassie. Go away from this house. Profit by what happened to me. Go away . . . now, this moment."

"Arthur!" I cried out. "Arthur. . . ."

"You're next, Cassie. Run . . . run . . . run. . . ."

That was when my reason and my bravery broke under the strain of hearing a dead man's voice. I fled from the door, raced down the steps and sobbed hysterically as I struggled clumsily in my fear to get the front door open. Finally the lock slid back, I threw the door wide and instantly the wind blew out my lamp.

I dropped it and ran out into the night, so terror-stricken

I didn't even know which direction I was taking and I didn't care so long as it got me away from the house.

There was a path somewhere, a road as well, both leading away from here. I kept running aimlessly, probably in circles. As I started down the slope, I looked over my shoulder. There was a light in the window of Mama's suite. As I looked, it winked out and that simple, harmless disappearance of light in the window set me to screaming as I ran. I had no doubt but that I'd soon be pursued and very likely overtaken, because I was already tiring rapidly.

I fled as fast as my legs would take me. Now and then, I stumbled against a bush, or all but tripped over some rock or stone. I had never been so terrified in my life.

I was running downhill at full speed. My screams had ceased because I no longer possessed the strength to raise my voice.

A dark form sprang out just before me. I couldn't stop. I saw the form extend its arms and I was too close to veer off. All I could do was crash against the figure and feel the strong arms clasp me tightly. I moaned in terror as I tried to wrest myself free, but it was no use.

"Cassie," a man's voice said. "Cassie, it's me. It's Peter."

My whole body slumped as weariness and relief swept over me to replace the rigid tenseness. I laid my head against his shoulder and promptly fainted.

TWELVE

I regained consciousness as Peter carried me toward the house and something stirred within my memory, but I could not think of what it was until he reached the porch and set me down gently.

"Don't go in there, Peter! Please don't go in! Something . . . I don't know what . . . but terrible, terrible evil awaits us." I paused in sudden remembrance. "Why are you here?"

"I came back," he said quietly. "If you refused to let me guard you inside the house, I intended to stay outside. But I failed you."

"Someone . . . *something* . . . was slamming the doors. Pacing up and down, slamming and slamming the doors and then pounding on my door . . . the one to my suite. Hammering at it. I thought it would break open under all that pounding. Then screams . . . screeches. . . ."

"Man or woman?" he asked.

"I don't know. Shrill, loud. They all but curdled my blood. I heard Arthur's voice warning me to go away—but Arthur is dead!"

He grasped me by both shoulders. "You're going to marry me. I don't care a whit about the fact that you can see into the future. I don't care a fig if the whole world comes trooping to our doorstep to beg you to tell them what they may or may not wish to know. You notice, I hope, that I said *our* doorstep."

"It would be too much for you to endure."

"Not more than both of us could," he said. "Now we're going in. I'm armed. We'll stay together."

He threw the door wide open. Nothing happened. He searched the first floor from one end to the other without result. He then led the way upstairs. There was no light slipping from beneath the door of Mama's suite now. We examined it carefully and inspected the seance room. Together we searched every room on that floor and proceeded to the unused servant's quarters in the attic. From there

we went to the cellar. Nowhere did we find a sign of anyone having been there.

"If he was human, he could have left by the back door after you escaped the house," Peter explained. "Well, at least we know there's no other living person here. Let's go up to the kitchen."

"Did you see anything there to give you alarm?" I asked.

"No," he confessed, "only pangs of hunger drive me. I forgot to have supper."

"I can take care of that," I said. We went to the kitchen where I moved the kettle to the front of the stove, then set the table. I made coffee, sandwiches of the chicken and ham, and set out a bowl of Indian pudding which Tempa made so well.

"Will you please marry me?" he asked, over the rim of his coffee cup.

"I beg of you not to ask me that again."

"I must, because I fear for your safety as well as your sanity if you remain here," he said. "Remember, if Tempa was poisoned, it wasn't placed in that carafe by a ghost."

"I agree. And that brings Arthur to mind. Yet he went rabbit hunting today. Strange, now that I think of it," I said, frowning. "He left the house before I did this morning and I saw him break out of the forest as I rode up late this afternoon. If he wasn't in the house all day, he couldn't very well have poisoned Tempa."

"Of course, we're not sure yet she was poisoned," Peter said remindfully. "Also, it would be easy enough for him to return, pour poison into the carafe and depart the house again. You were gone all day."

"True," I admitted. "But he told me this afternoon—before we discovered Tempa's body—that he saw you prowling about the estate. He said you looked troubled."

"I was," Peter revealed. "I'd made a discovery and I didn't know how I could tell you about it, for fear of alienating you. Before I even had the opportunity, the train was wrecked. When I learned Arthur had tried to warn the engineer and paid with his life, I was more confused than ever."

He reached into his pocket and took out a long legal

envelope. Opening the flap he shook out a five or six inch piece of cloth and some light rope, frayed and apparently burned.

"This is what I was looking for," he said, "and found."

"What is it?"

"Fabric from which hot air balloons are made. The rope is also used in constructing them. They were a spectacular success at the Chicago World's Exposition two years ago. You place a fire in a basket below the balloon. The hot air created by the fire enters the balloon and lifts it high into the air. Some even lift passengers aloft."

"Balloon . . . air . . . ?" I was as puzzled as I knew I looked.

"Have you forgotten the great light in the sky at the moment your mother died?"

"Peter . . . a balloon . . . ! That would be the answer . . . !"

"It is the answer. Someone set the balloon aloft with fire in its basket and also an ample supply of what I believe must have been magnesium powder arranged so that it would not light up until the balloon was high. That could have been done by a slow fuse. Magnesium powder is what photographers use to take pictures in dark places. It's very bright and would have lit up the whole sky above the village."

"Are you saying a human agency was responsible?"

"I never heard of a ghost using balloons."

"Are you telling me whoever committed that hoax with the light in the sky did it to frighten the villagers, make them more superstitious than ever?"

"Yes."

"It was Arthur, my stepfather, wasn't it?"

Peter nodded glumly. "These balloons are made in only one place in Chicago. I've had Arthur followed for some time. He bought one there before he came here."

"He wanted to exploit me, just as he did Mama until she discovered his trickery," I reasoned. "The villagers would have interpreted the light the night she died as supernatural."

"Both he and Fallon—for they worked together—

wanted the villagers to fear you as they had your mother so when you were murdered, they'd feel free of your supposedly evil influence."

"Do you think Arthur killed Tempa? Oh, why do I ask? He must have. Since he knew about the secret room where she was found dead, he must have known she drank some of the liquid in the carafe before going into a trance. Tempa tried to warn me against him, but I grew to trust him. Even to like him." I paused and continued more slowly, "Tonight it was his voice urging me to go away quickly. How could he wish me only evil while he lived and then warn me after he was dead?"

"I don't know. There are a lot of things I can't explain. But it's not many hours until dawn and at ten you have to be in Dr. Gaylord's office. Go to bed, Cassie. I'll stay here and guard the house. Just leave me a pot of coffee. After we learn if Tempa was poisoned, perhaps we'll have a few answers to these questions."

I agreed with all he said, went to my rooms and prepared for bed. It was the first time in many nights that I didn't lie awake contemplating the terror to come. I was too tired to review the awful events of the day while searching for a solution to their cause. I simply closed my eyes and let sleep claim me.

In the morning, I felt rested, and after dressing hastily, I came downstairs to find Peter asleep on the settee, but even my quiet movements brought him instantly awake.

"Fine watchdog I am," he said wryly. "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, sir. Time enough for you to freshen up while I make breakfast. You may use Arthur's room. His door is open."

He came downstairs just as I had our morning meal ready, freshly shaven and smelling of bay rum. We ate leisurely, for we were early.

"Dr. Gaylord is holding the hearing in his private office," Peter explained. "If he held it in town hall, it would be packed by now."

"I'm most grateful," I said.

"It will be a routine hearing for now. Later, if they find

out who killed Tempa, there'll be quite a lot of excitement."

My brow furrowed as I placed my knife and fork across the plate and looked directly at Peter. "If I can see Tempa dead, see Arthur dead, warn a doctor to return to his patient, see a train wreck long before it happens . . . then why can't I see what really happened to Tempa?"

"I wish I could answer that."

"I think Arthur was responsible."

"It's possible he could have been, but we have no proof."

"How I wish that everything could be explained so we'd have proof that I am not clairvoyant. I wish to live an uncomplicated life."

"With me, I hope."

"With you—unless I'm doomed to foresee the future."

"We'll discuss that later. Best we get started now. I don't think it will take long, although sometimes you can't tell."

He'd left his carriage in the stable and I stood by while he hitched it to the horse. We rode through the freshness of the morning, the sunlight and sweet air perfumed from the fields. It seemed a morning too beautiful to be spoiled with testimony about death—especially a murder, if such it was.

Fear coursed through me as I saw the street in front of the doctor's office jammed with villagers. When our carriage appeared, they parted to let us through, but no one spoke, no one smiled, and I noted more than one hard glance cast my way. I kept my chin up, for I was determined not to let these people upset me.

The constable was keeping the office clear so when the hearing began, there were only the small jury, the doctor, constable, Peter and I present. I considered myself lucky this was not a criminal trial, with me the defendant because the jurors regarded me with a coldness I could almost feel.

I was sworn, I told my story as straightforwardly as I knew how. Then Dr. Gaylord told what he knew, which was little, for as yet it had not been determined whether or not Tempa's death had been from natural causes or she'd been murdered. I told the doctor that a carafe which

had always sat on the table was missing. He nodded thoughtfully. The jury listened attentively throughout, but naturally rendered no verdict once the doctor stated further tests would have to be made to ascertain if Tempa had been murdered.

Then came the ordeal of passing through that crowd again. Peter placed a protective arm about my waist as we exited the office. "Hold your head high and say nothing."

I did as he bade me, but I knew we were in for a difficult time. I well believed the entire populace of the village was crowded in the area. There were even children and babies held by their mothers. At first there were mutterings and then someone shouted that my kind wasn't wanted around here any more than my mother had been. A woman I didn't even know tried to slap my face and only succeeded in scratching it with her sharp nails. My free arm was seized and I was almost wrenched free of Peter's grasp, but he finally managed to clear the crowd and he helped me into the carriage.

They pressed around it, shouting imprecations at me now. Fists were shaken, feminine voices were shrill and hate-filled. The horse shied away from the milling people, but Peter laid on the whip, moving the horse into action and scattering the crowd.

When we were clear of them and on our way back, I broke down and wept. For once Peter had no consolation to offer. His face was clouded with fury and his lips were pressed tightly together.

When we reached the house, it had never looked bleaker or more uninviting to me. He unlocked the door and we passed into the eerie silence of the place. I sat down in the family parlor, forgetting even to remove my toque. Peter fetched me a glass of water. I found its coolness refreshing.

He sat down opposite me. "Can you see now why it is impossible for you to remain here?"

"No matter where I go, I'll be scorned."

He took an envelope from his pocket and offered it to me. "I noticed this on the floor in the hall when I went

to get you water. Obviously it was slipped under the door while we were in the village. It's addressed to you."

I set down the glass and opened the envelope, swiftly scanning the contents of the page and the signature of the writer.

"It's from Mr. Fallon," I exclaimed. "He's as presumptuous as ever." I read the letter to Peter, shaking my head as I did so at the utter gall of the man.

"My dear Miss Taylor:

"First of all, allow me to express my regrets on the untimely death of your stepfather who was also, as you know, my friend. It was he who induced me to come here with him. True, we arrived before your mother's death, for he assured me she had predicted it and indeed she had.

"I'm leaving the village, for I have no heart to remain here after Arthur's untimely demise. However, if you doubted your gift before, surely, after the train wreck, you must not only believe, but have full confidence in your ability to predict the future. My New York address is at the bottom of the page. Should you wish to use your gift to help others and at the same time reap the profits due you, do not hesitate to contact me. I am completely at your disposal. In any case, I feel you would be most wise to leave the village. The tenor of its inhabitants are hardly favorable to you."

"I would say the fact that he has gone," Peter said, "is proof he knows you have no desire to sell your powers."

"I hope so," I said tonelessly. "You may destroy the letter."

He nodded as he took it, but I noticed he placed it in his pocket. "Fallon made one true statement and that was about the villagers' antagonism toward you. I fear for you in this house. There could be a rabble-rouser in that group who could turn the townspeople against you. They might come here and burn the place down with you in it."

"They could," I admitted, "but I'll not let them drive

me from this house. Leave it, I will, but at my convenience."

"Where will you go?" he asked.

"To New York City," I replied. "Though not to consult with Mr. Fallon."

"Why not come back with me?" Peter asked. "I must return to my practice by tomorrow at the latest. I will consult with Dr. Gaylord before I leave and learn when there will be another inquest into Tempa's death. Be assured, I'll return, but I hate leaving you here alone to only-God-knows-what fate."

"I'll not be fearful," I said.

"I'm returning to the village," he said, "to pack my belongings. However, I'll come back this evening in the hope you'll have a change of mind and have done some packing so you may leave with me tomorrow. I beg of you to do that."

"I'll think about it," I said. "Should you see Mr. Fallon, please tell him I am not interested in his offer and I do not wish him to come here."

"I'll make a point of seeing him."

I accompanied Peter to the porch and watched as his carriage moved down the drive and through the gates, to disappear around the bend. I went back inside and suddenly thought of the shotgun which was nowhere in evidence last night. I opened the closet door and was stunned to see it set in its accustomed rack. I started to reach for it, but my arm stayed in midair. What would I do with it? I knew in my heart I could never shoot an animal much less a human, even if it meant I was saving my own life.

I closed the door and went upstairs, moving restlessly through the rooms. Tempa's was in order and I glanced in her closet to note the beautifully embroidered blouses and skirts she had made. The favorite costume of the Romanians. I wondered if she would be alive had I remained at home yesterday. As quickly, I knew I was powerless to change the destiny of anyone. It was foreordained that she would die.

I moved on to Arthur's room. There was the pungent fragrance of pipe tobacco there. I opened and closed the

drawers of the highboy, noting the elegance of his shirts and undergarments, which were also monogrammed. His handkerchiefs bore his initial and they were of the finest linen. I closed the drawer and was about to turn away when I heard the sound of something fall. It was apparently atop the highboy and I pushed over a footstool and stood on it so I might see. It was a small, dark glass bottle. I picked it up and held it in my hand. It was light and seemed empty, but when I shook it, I could hear liquid splash against its interior.

There was no label on the bottle and as I regarded it, I wondered if its contents contained poison and if some of it had been placed in the carafe. Could this be what killed Tempa—if she had been poisoned? And what had happened to the carafe? It could have been removed from the house and destroyed and it would not have been a difficult thing to do with me out of the house. But there would always be the risk of someone seeing the murderer leaving. I had a feeling it was in this house. If only I could find it.

Without further ado, I started my search, beginning in Arthur's room. Then I went to Tempa's, though I felt it would be a waste of time and it so proved. From there, I searched my suite. I was both careful and thorough, examining closets and the contents of each box large enough to hold such an item. I investigated the drawers of chests and consoles. At midafternoon, I paused long enough to have a light repast. It afforded me time to sit down, for I'd been on my feet, bending and stretching, and my muscles were beginning to feel the results of my efforts. I'd checked every room on the third floor and on the second floor, with the exception of Mama's suite. I washed and dried the few dishes I'd used and returned upstairs. It was late afternoon now and the sun, which had been so bright, was now being obscured by clouds, creating shadows both inside and outside the house.

I went upstairs to Mama's suite and resumed my search. Neither of her rooms revealed a clue. I looked at the painting which concealed the room of darkness and mystery and shuddered at the thought of entering it. A clap of thunder, though in the distance, startled me and foretold

of a threatening storm. But it was Mother Nature who predicted that, not I.

Taking a deep breath, I went to the portrait, slipped my hand behind its frame, found the button to press and the panel opened. It was pitch black inside, and it was fast getting dark outside.

I lit a lamp and moved slowly into the room. I needed no vision now to recall the sight of Tempa lying still in death on the dais, the goblet in her hand. There was another lamp in the room and I lit it to further dispel the shadows. It was a fearsome room, all in black and heavily carpeted so I made no sound as I moved about, wondering where, in this room, one could conceal the carafe.

As quickly, the answer came. Behind the draperies which covered the walls! I started to lift them and shuddered as I saw even the walls painted a jet black. I'd investigated two walls and the area behind the dais without success. The only area left was next to the door. I lifted the draperies and exclaimed in amazement as I saw the carafe, still intact and containing fluid. I picked it up, extinguished one lamp and carried the other. I had need of it, for dark clouds had blotted out all daylight and the reverberations of thunder along with the sharp crackle of lightning made an incessant din.

I brought the carafe to my room and placed it behind the drapery of my bed. I also deposited the little bottle there, for I dared not leave it exposed. Obviously if the contents of the small bottle and the carafe contained poison, Arthur had been the culprit. No doubt he'd intended to dispose of the carafe later, but when I became concerned about Tempa's absence and we discovered her body, he'd had no opportunity. Yet if he was guilty, why did he attempt to warn the engineer to ward off the train wreck? Could it be that he wanted to prevent the accident and make me an object of ridicule in the village and elsewhere? I couldn't rationalize, for I was thoroughly exhausted from my efforts to find the carafe. I even felt mental fatigue, but that pleased me, for I sensed I'd not see visions or hear voices.

I lit lamps throughout the house and wished mightily

that Peter would return. I was anxious for him to know of my discovery. I was pleased I had someone I could trust. If only I dared accept his proposal of marriage, but I would not, for I'd be doing him a grave injustice. He'd been a tower of strength to me, but I'd not lean on him the rest of my life.

I thought of the letter Mr. Fallon wrote and wondered why I'd not seen it when I entered the house. Yet it was highly understandable, for I'd been under a very great strain. I trusted Peter. I had to trust someone or I'd lose my mind. But then, I'd trusted my stepfather too. So far as I knew, he'd betrayed that trust. Was Peter as false?

The door knocker reverberated through the house as if in answer to my question. I went eagerly to answer, knowing it was Peter. He was wearing riding clothes and I noticed traces of dirt on them.

"What happened?" I asked.

"A bolt of lightning frightened the animal I was riding and he threw me," Peter replied, his smile rueful.

"Are you hurt?" I had to press my body against the door to close it, for a wild wind had come up, presaging the coming of the storm. We moved on into the parlor.

"No," he replied. "Just a few bruises. I should have been more alert, but I was trying to think of a good argument to persuade you to leave this house tonight and remain at the inn. In the morning, we'd depart for New York City. I thought we'd use your carriage for your luggage and we'd hitch my animal onto the back of it. I won't need to worry about him."

"It's very dear of you, Peter," I said, already warmed by his mere presence. "But I cannot leave here until the mystery of Tempa's death is cleared up."

"Well," Peter said with a sigh, "I didn't think you would, especially when I tell you I stopped by Dr. Gaylord's office. He told me they learned Tempa was poisoned and have labeled her death murder."

I nodded and sat down wearily on the settee.

"Did you have another premonition?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But I believe I found the poison. A small

bottle in Arthur's room. I also found the carafe. It was hidden behind the draperies in the seance room."

"Where are they?" Peter demanded. "Get them for me. I'll bring them back at once. The quicker we get this over with, the better."

I was startled at the vehemence in his voice. He'd never sounded so dictatorial. Then I remembered he'd been on the premises yesterday afternoon. He could have put the poison in Tempa's carafe and placed the bottle of poison in Arthur's room to point suspicion toward him. Sudden fear edged along my spine as I regarded him, standing before me.

"No, Peter," I said. "I've hidden both the bottle and the carafe. I alone will bring them to Dr. Gaylord tomorrow."

"You might be set upon along the way," he argued.

"Hardly," I reasoned. "If Arthur was the murderer."

"But you don't know for certain," he said and realization dawned on him what I was thinking. "Great Godfrey, you don't suspect me, do you?"

"I don't know," I said wearily. "I'm too tired to think."

"Perhaps you'd better go upstairs and have a seance." His eyes and his voice were bitter as he spoke. "Bring Tempa back from the dead. She'll tell you who murdered her."

"Don't quarrel with me, Peter," I said quietly.

"Oh, my darling." His arms extended as he started to close the distance between us. "Let me take you away from here. This is an unhealthy place, an unearthly one. You're young, beautiful, you have a life ahead of you. Don't be afraid to live it."

"Don't touch me!" I shrieked. "Don't come any closer!"

His amazement at the change in me slowly turned to contempt. "Perhaps you'd better contact Mr. Fallon. I can inform you his luggage was brought to the depot this afternoon and he has departed the inn. Or do you fear him also?"

"He's not bothered me," I said coldly. "Nor has he ever ridiculed me."

"I'm trying to bring you to your senses before it's too late," Peter said. "But I fear it is too late."

"All I wish you to do is get out of this house," I said. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself and I will do so."

"Forgive my intrusion," he said, bowing low. "I was under the impression you cared a little for me. I didn't know I could be guilty of such conceit."

"Good-night, Peter," I said with a repose I was far from feeling.

"Good-night, Cassandra," he said quietly. "May God keep you safe." He turned abruptly and walked swiftly to the hall. The slamming of the door was muffled by a loud clap of thunder.

THIRTEEN

I bolted the door and moved slowly up the stairs, going directly to Mama's room. There I lit a lamp, went into the seance room and stepped onto the dais, sitting down in the throne-like chair.

"Mama . . . Mama," I said aloud. "I'm terribly frightened and so confused. I love Peter and yet I fear him. I sent him away. Give me some sort of sign that I may know the right thing for me to do. . . ."

A soft, warm breeze touched my face, caressing it. A faint light came into being directly before me. There was movement within the light. It began to grow clearer. I saw trees, shrubs. I saw a man crouched down, holding a knife in one hand. I couldn't see his face, but I knew what it meant. . . . He was lying in wait to kill Peter, who had not yet reached that part of the driveway to the village road.

I leaped out of the chair, rushed down the hall to my room. I raised the window and I called out in a voice so loud and clear I couldn't believe it was mine.

"Peter . . . Peter . . . he's going to kill you. Look out, Peter!"

I heard a shout and then a horse whinnied in fright. This was followed by more shouts and the sound of fighting. I raced downstairs and on out the door. I turned on my ankle but I kept running. A bolt of lightning lit up the area where I had seen that menacing picture.

One man was sprawled on the ground. The other stood above him, legs spread, hands balled into fists, braced and ready for more trouble.

He swerved about as I came running toward him. It was Peter. He didn't say a word, just opened his arms and gathered me close. I sobbed openly and unashamedly. He whispered that he would never leave me again. He told me of his love a dozen times over. Minutes passed as we waited until Mr. Fallon began to stir, for it was he who had attempted murder on the person of my beloved.

Peter lifted Mr. Fallon into the carriage he had rented

and we drove to the village. On the way, the storm broke. The rain pelted us, thunder and lightning was incessant and violent, but we had no fear, for it seemed to cleanse the air and wash away the horror of the day. We finally reached the village and the constable placed Mr. Fallon in the little two-cell jail.

I spent that night at the home of Mrs. Grady. The next morning the truth came out. Not that Earl Fallon confessed. We learned everything in a hastily written letter penned by Arthur Taylor, my stepfather. It was in the form of a confession and in it, he begged my forgiveness. He wrote it at the inn, and in the missive he told of his reason for returning to the village with Fallon. It was to do away with me so that as my stepfather he would receive my inheritance. It was Fallon who tried to murder me in the cellar. When Arthur learned I had very little, he and Fallon decided to convince me I'd inherited the gift Mama had, so they might capitalize on it. It was Fallon who set fire to the general store. It was also he who placed the poison in the carafe. He had slipped into the house while Arthur returned from his hunting trip for his dinner, which he insisted on eating in the kitchen, engaging Tempa in conversation. He'd told Fallon that I was in possession of the latter's watch. They suspected how Tempa came into possession of it and they feared she might have seen them together and would sense their complicity. Therefore, Fallon stated she had to die. Arthur refused to place the poison in the carafe, but he dared not refuse Fallon's demand that he help him gain entrance to the house. What Arthur would never know was that Fallon had set the bottle on the highboy in Arthur's room so he would be as suspect and as guilty as Fallon, should murder be suspected.

In the letter, Arthur stated when he saw Tempa's still body and realized the horror of what he'd been a party to, he went to Fallon, stating he was going to make a full confession. Fallon laughed at him, telling him it was too late, that he'd taken steps to have the train wrecked after learning of my prophecy. The end of the letter stated he was leaving immediately to warn the engineer to stop the train

before it reached the part of the track that Fallon had tampered with.

When Fallon was confronted with the letter, he broke down and admitted everything, including the fact that it was he who had shouted to me to leave the house, imitating my stepfather's voice. He still hoped, by doing so, to get me to come to New York City where he would make a lot of money, for he knew by then that I really had the gift.

On the way back to the house, I said, "Floating in my mind I see a lovely edifice in the city. It has a flower garden and playing in it are three children. A boy and two girls. Do you suppose . . . ?" I paused and glanced sideways at him, my glance apprehensive.

"Yes," he said, smiling at me. "I'm sure of it."

I felt an ethereal touch of fingertips brushing my cheek, and I sensed I had seen my last glimpse into the future. Of course, I couldn't be sure, but relief flowed through me.

The house I now live in is the same as the one I had in my last vision and Peter and I have been blessed with two daughters and a son. He has a successful practice in New York City and we've acquired some dear friends who have never once made an allusion to the publicity I had to endure.

As for the house I left, it still stands, lonely and desolate, for no one will purchase it. I understand some of the windows are broken and I suppose the furnishings are growing moldy. I cannot bear to return to it, nor would my dear husband allow me to. I knew no happiness in it and I don't want my children to set foot in the place for fear one of them, or all three, might see a vision. One which could change the course of their whole lives and destroy their chance of having a normal future.

I've seen no more apparitions and each night I breathe a prayer of thanks. I dreaded all of them except the one warning me to compel Dr. Gaylord to return to Mrs. Grady's and await the birth of a twin, and the other, warning me Peter's life was in danger. I still beg his forgiveness

for having doubted his love, even for those few terror-filled moments when he came to take me with him.

Earl Fallon paid the supreme penalty for Tempa's murder. The contents of the carafe and bottle contained the same poison as that found in her stomach. From time to time, the newspapers reprint the story of Virginia Taylor and her gift of predictions and how she put it to good use, dispensing of her fortune while doing so. And when a reporter goes back to that village to interview the people, they give varied stories, some of which cause me great distress. But I'm always sure of a favorable one from Mrs. Grady and the good Dr. Gaylord.

As for Peter, our love grows with the years and I bless the day he came to that Connecticut village to check up on Arthur Taylor and Earl Fallon. I dread thinking of what my future would have been without my beloved.

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