

LOCKED  
IN TIME



## CHAPTER

# 1

**W**HEN I look in the mirror, the girl I see there is pretty.

I know the statement sounds vain, but I hope it won't be taken that way. When you're seventeen and a half, being pretty comes with the territory. Smooth unlined skin, shiny hair (mine is strawberry blond), trim hips, firm breasts—that's what being young is all about. I know that I'm not going to look this way indefinitely. Twenty-five years from now, if I am lucky, people may refer to me as "interesting looking." That's the best that I can hope for, and it will be good enough.

But, at this special time in life, I'm pretty, and that makes me happy. I certainly didn't feel that way, however, on that day last June when my nightmare summer at Shadow Grove began.

In many places, early June is considered summer, but that is not always the way it is in New England. On that particular morning, as I boarded the plane in Boston, it still seemed

Uke springtime, a fragüe season of cool, sweet mornings and pale lemon sunlight. That was the last I was to see of that sort of weather. When, hours later, I descended the ramp at the airport in Baton Rouge, I felt as if I were walking into a steam bath.

The thick, damp heat roUed up to meet me, and I felt myself wilting on the spot. My hair, newly washed that morning, sagged limply against my neck, and drops of perspiration broke out on my upper lip. My face began to prickle the way it used to back when I was younger and preparing for an outbreak of acne. Before I got halfway down the steps, my sophisticated, high-necked blouse was glued to my skin Uke Saran Wrap.

Descending the ramp to the runway, I fèU into step with the rest of the passengers who were streaming toward the terminal building. I did not see my father in the Uneup of people waiting at the gate. Stepping through the door into the blessed air conditioning, I glanced worriedly about me. As angry as I was with him, it had never once occurred to me that he would not be there to meet me. Was it possible that he could have forgotten I was coming?

Before I had a chance to pursue that thought any further, Dad's strong hands grasped my shoulders. An instant later, I was spun around to face him and puUed tight against his chest in a crushing bear hug. The famUiar scent of his aftershave fiUed my nostrils, and a sandpaper cheek ground hard against my forehead.

"Dad!" I exclaimed. "Oh, Daddy!"

I had meant to hold back — to act aloof and chtily — to let him know without doubt how absolutely furious I was. Instead, my arms flew up to encircle his neck.

"Daddy!" I cried, as though I were five years old again

and just home from kindergarten, bursting into his office to reassure myself that he had not vanished during my absence. "Oh, Daddy! I'm so glad to see you!"

"Nore, baby!" He released me from the hug and thrust me back at arm's length for a prolonged inspection. "God, you're so grown up! What have you done to yourself? This can't aU have happened since last Christmas!"

"It didn't," I told him.

There was a moment of silence.

Then Dad said quietly, "I'm sorry, honey. I guess I wasn't noticing much of anything back last winter. I promise you, though, things are going to be different now." He changed the subject abruptly. "How was the flight? Are you hungry? Would you Uke to get something to eat before we head home? We've got an hour and a half's drive ahead of us, so if you're feeling empty, now's the time to do something about it"

The flight was fine, and they served lunch on the plane." My eyes flicked nervously past him. "Did anybody come with you?"

"No, I came by myself," Dad said. "Lisette and the kids are dying to meet you, but Lis thought it would be best if you and I had some time alone together first. She knows that we've got a lot of catching up to do." He put his arm around my shoulders. "How many suitcases did you bring?"

"Only two," I said. "I had my winter tilings stored at the school"

"That was sensible," Dad said approvingly. "You're not going to need them here, and that's for sure. From what people teU me, by this time next month it's going to be hotter than Hades."

We coUected the suitcases at the luggage claim, and I

waited with them at the pickup area in front of the terminal building while my father went to the parking lot to get the car. AUn sounds and sights and smeUs barraged my senses. A dark-skinned man had parked his pushcart in the center of the sidewalk and was setting a waferlike candy made of nuts and brown sugar. A woman in a flowing orange dress glided past me, carrying a basket of pale, waxen blossoms which I could not identify by name. I caught fragments of conversations held by voices with soft, strange accents that made the words sound almost Uke music. A couple next to me were speaking in French, and from somewhere behind me, a child's voice chattered excitedly in Spanish. Even the air smeUed different, heavy and musky, rich with muted odors that I did not recognize.

The car that was inching its way toward me in the slow-moving Une of traffic was famUiar, however — far too famüiar. It was the same tan station wagon that had once brought me home from Girl Scout meetings, from ballet lessons, from the skating rink, from the houses of middle school classmates. It was a car that belonged, not here in Louisiana, but back in GuUderland, New York, where I had spent the first fifteen years of my Ufe.

The slanting, afternoon sunlight glinted off the windshield and rendered it opaque. My heart filled in the face that I longed to see behind it. The sweet mouth sntiled. Clear, blue eyes squinted half closed against the sun. Unkempt brown curls, lightly threaded with sUver, bounced against soft cheeks. I drew a ragged breath and averted my gaze.

The car kept moving forward and soon puUed up beside me. It was, of course, my father, and not my mother, who sat behind the wheel.

"Sorry to be so long, non," he said apologetically. "The parking lot attendant gave me his whole life story while he counted out change. That's how it is in the Southland; the word 'hurry' isn't part of the vocabulary."

He got out of the car and went around to open the back. The latch was stuck, and he had to rattle it hard to get the tailgate down. For some perverse reason, that fact pleased me. The latch that had never worked easily for my mother would have had no business accommodating my father now. The memory of Mother, her arms piled with groceries, pounding the latch with her wristbone and struggling to keep from swearing, would have made me smile if the accompanying sense of loss had not been so painful.

I got into the car on the passenger's side. Dad eventually did get the back open and loaded in my suitcases. Then he shoved the door closed and came forward to climb into the driver's seat.

"So —off we go!" he said.

The jovial note in his voice was so at odds with my own emotions that I couldn't begin to respond to it. The drive would take us an hour and a half, he had told me. In just ninety minutes I would be meeting the woman who had taken my mother's place in my father's life.

We started off on the city freeway, but before many miles had been covered, Dad turned the car onto an exit ramp that led to a two-lane highway. This road was bracketed by shrubs and pine woods, and the sky beyond them gleamed with the odd iridescent sheen of sunlight being fed through a prism. Gazing out through the window beside me, I found myself experiencing the eerie sensation that nothing I was seeing was real. Veils of Spanish moss hung like gray crepe from the arching branches of oak trees, and clouds of large,

black birds rose from nowhere with high-pitched cries and then sank down again into the foliage. Ahead of us, the asphalt shimmered as though spotted by puddles, but by the time we reached them, they had vanished and reappeared farther up the road.

For a long time we drove without speaking.

It was Dad who finally broke the silence.

"**I know** how surprised you must have been to get my letter. Shocked, even." When I did not respond, he continued, "I owe you an apology, Nore. I should have written sooner. The truth is, though, that there wasn't any 'sooner.' It all happened so fast."

"I guess it must have." I made no attempt to hide my bitterness. "One day you're a grieving widower, and the next, you're a bridegroom. That's fast, all right."

"I fell in love," Dad said simply.

"Mother hasn't even been gone a year yet!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Pain rose, sudden and fierce, in his voice. "The day your mother died was the most terrible of my life. I went through the next half year like a zombie. That's why I insisted that you go off to boarding school; I didn't want you to have to share a home with somebody in my condition. I couldn't eat without vomiting. I couldn't sleep for the nightmares. I couldn't write! That novel I was working on — I even had a movie contract — I can't remember what I did with the manuscript. I might even have burned it. I was out of my head with grief and behaving like a crazy man."

"If you couldn't work, what were you doing in Louisiana?" I demanded. "You wrote me that you were coming here on a business trip."

"That's true," Dad said. "*Travel and Leisure* wanted a

story on the Mardi Gras. That assignment was my agent's doing, not mine. He was hoping that the pressure of a deadline might get me working again. I let him talk me into it. I thought he might be right. If I could get away from that empty house — from the memories — then maybe . . ."

He let the sentence trail off.

"That's where you met Lisette? At Mardi Gras?"

Dad nodded. "It was at a ball at the Convention Center. I'll never forget how she looked the first time I saw her. She was dressed all in white, in an old-fashioned gown with a hoopskirt. There was lace at her throat, and she wore camellias in her hair. I caught sight of her across the dance floor, and I just stood there, staring like a schoolboy. She had to be the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life."

I could not let that statement pass unchallenged.

"More beautiful than Mother?"

"That's not fair," Dad said shortly.

"But, you *said* it!"

"Your mother was dear and lovely. She had an inner beauty. It made me happy just to look at her sweet face."

"But she wasn't movie-star-glamorous, like your Lisette is!"

"No, she wasn't." The silence that followed seemed to last forever. Then, Dad said quietly, "Don't do this to me, Nore. Don't try to ruin it. Can't you just be happy that I've finally come alive again? Your mother would have been." He paused. "Well, *wouldn't* she? Be honest."

As much as I hated to, I had to answer, "Yes."

"This is another chapter of life for me," Dad continued. "It's no disloyalty to your mother or to our good marriage. It's the same for Lisette, a second chance at happiness. She's

a wonderful woman and hasn't had it easy. A widow, raising two kids on next to no money — that's rough."

"What are her children like?" I asked, curious despite myself. "You hardly mentioned them in your letter."

"Gabe, the boy, is about your age. He's a bright, attractive kid. I think you'll like him. Josie's at that awkward stage, just going into her teens. She's going to be a beauty one day, you can tell, but it'll take a few years."

"What do they call you?"

If he had told me, "Dad," I think I would have burst into tears, but, to my relief, he didn't.

"They call me 'Chuck,' just like everybody else does. And they're keeping their own last name, 'Berge.' Of course, you'll call Lisette by her given name — no 'Mom'-type thing. She won't be trying to take your mother's place, Nore. I don't expect you to be her daughter, but I do hope you'll be her friend. Will you try?"

He was backing me to the wall. I had no choice.

I drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

"I'll try," I said reluctantly. "I can't promise anything more than that, but I'll try."

With that exchange behind us, there seemed suddenly to be nothing left to talk about. We continued to drive for another half hour or so, making sporadic attempts at casual conversation. During that time, the terrain that slid past the car windows underwent a number of changes. The woodlands gave way to fields and then to marshland. Our road adhered to the bank of a narrow, brown river, which Dad said was a tributary of the Mississippi. Occasionally, he would draw my attention to some feature of the scenery — "That's a heron. See, out in the water, that big white bird?" or "Look over there on that tree; that's a wild orchid," or

That may look like bamboo, but it's actually sugarcane."

Ahead of us, the sun was rapidly sliding lower in the sky. I leaned my head back against the seat and blinked into the glare, trying to get my thoughts in order, but finding that almost impossible. The effects of the heat and humidity, piled on top of a sleepless night of nervous anticipation, were catching up with me.

I was just beginning to doze a little, when my father said, "Here we are. This is the entrance to Shadow Grove."

"It is?" My eyes snapped open, and I glanced in bewilderment from one side of the road to the other. "But, we're out in the middle of nowhere!"

To our left there was nothing to be seen but the marshes and the river behind them. On our right, the road was bordered by a wrought-iron fence, half concealed by an overgrowth of high, flowering bushes. No house was in evidence, although some fifty yards ahead of us the line of the fence was broken by an open gate.

"The old plantation homes were always in the rural areas," Dad said. "Many, like Shadow Grove, date back to before the Civil War. This estate was originally owned by the prosperous DuBois family, and they presented it to their daughter as a wedding gift when she married a man named Berge back in the late seventies. That was an era when cotton and sugarcane were the lifeblood of Louisiana. Industry in the cities came later."

We pulled through the gate into the drive beyond it. There, I found myself confronted by one of the most spectacular sights I had ever seen. On either side of the driveway, there stood a line of huge oak trees, their giant branches intertwining to form a massive canopy of vibrant green. Through the spaces between the leaves, the late after-

noon sunlight fell in golden splashes, painting intricate patterns on the driveway below. At the far end of this incredible corridor, there stood what appeared to be a mansion, but, framed as it was by the immense trees, it was impossible to determine its true size. Although its proportions implied the magnitude of a great cathedral, it was so dwarfed by the towering oaks that it gave the illusion of being no larger than a child's miniature model.

As we moved slowly up the driveway, it began to assume its proper place as the focal point of the scene before us. The closer we drew, the more impressive the structure became. It stood three stories high, if you chose to count the ground-floor level as a story. The wide-porch main floor stood above this and was supported by brick pillars and edged on both sides by a parade of graceful white columns. A balcony extended the length of the highest level, and above that there rose a steeply pitched roof.

"It's like something out of *Gone With the Wind!*" I exclaimed in amazement.

"Yes, it is," Dad agreed. "Or, rather, it used to be. You can't tell from here, but the years and the weather have taken their toll. We're in the process now of getting the place reroofed, and I'm afraid we may have to completely rebuild the porches and balconies."

We continued on up the leaf-shaded driveway, and Dad brought the car to a stop in front of the house. On the porch, a woman stood waiting.

Our eyes met and held, white Lisette and I took stock of each other.

My father's description had not done this woman justice. She was more than beautiful. Small and slightly built, she had the fragile perfection of a princess from a fairy tale. Her

heavily lashed, dark eyes accentuated the delicately chiseled features of her face. Glossy, black hair, swept high and held in place by golden combs, gave her a look of elegance that belied her small stature. Most startling of all was her complexion. The creamy skin was totally free of lines or blemishes and had a look of such taut and youthful freshness that it did not seem possible that it could belong to a woman with teenage children.

*This is Lisette*, I thought incredulously. *This is my father's wife.*

"Be her friend," Dad had begged me. "Would you try?"

Now, as I sat, staring up at my stepmother, I suddenly realized that this choice was not going to be mine to make. Despite the childlike loveliness of her face and figure, the tiny woman on the porch above me radiated strength. It would be Lisette, not I, who would be making the decisions here at Shadow Grove.

And, as for friendship —

I stared into those luminous eyes, and a chill shot through me. What I saw there was not the promise of friendship, but of something strange and sinister.

The shocking word that flashed through my mind was "death."

## CHAPTER

## -4 9 \*~

WHICH, of course, was ridiculous. In the next instant, whatever small thing it was that had triggered such a reaction on my part — a trick of the light, perhaps, or my own overactive imagination — had righted itself, and the beautiful eyes held nothing but warmth and welcome.

Lisette, smiling and gracious, came hurrying down the steps to greet me. She was wearing a peach-colored dress with a full, swirling skirt, and her slim, white arms were as creamy and smooth as her face.

"Eleanor!" she exclaimed in a voice that had the same rich, musical quality as those I had overheard while waiting for Dad to bring the car from the airport parking lot. "Eleanor, dear, welcome to Shadow Grove! I can't tell you how happy we are to have you with us!"

"Thank you," I said a bit stiffly. "It's nice to be here. It was my mother, though, who was Eleanor. I go by Nore."

"Of course," Lisette said apologetically. That shows how

excited I am; I'm not even thinking straight! Your father has talked so much about both you and your wonderful mother that her name comes popping out as naturally as yours does."

By this time, Dad had gotten out of the car and was coming around to open the door on my side. This was something I had never known him to do before.

Lisette, however, seemed to take the courtesy for granted, and kept chatting, tightly and easily, as Dad took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Your father says you've never spent time in the South before. I hope you'll learn to love it here as much as we do. There's some strange magic about this bayou country. Those of us who were born here may move other places, but we always seem to come back again."

As Dad unloaded the suitcases, Lisette linked her arm through mine and drew me up the porch steps and through the open doorway into the entrance hall. Beyond this was the living room, or — as I would learn to call it — the "parlor," a long, narrow room with floor-to-ceiling windows that opened out upon a courtyard. The room's walls were plastered white, and these, along with the extremely high ceiling and the direct exposure to the out-of-doors, gave it a feeling of airy spaciousness. The furniture was composed entirely of antiques — graceful high-backed chairs and inlaid tables, a glass case containing an assortment of old-fashioned firearms, and ornate, gold-rimmed mirrors. On one wall, over an upright piano, there hung an oil painting of a bearded man in an old-fashioned frock coat, and at the far end of the room, flanked by dark wood end tables, there stood a sofa upholstered in rose-colored velvet.

A young man was seated there, reading. As Lisette and I

came into the room, he laid his book aside and sprang hastily to his feet.

"This is my son, Gabriel," said Lisette. "Gabe, dear, this is Chuck's daughter, Nore."

"Hi, Nore! It's nice to meet you." Gabe flashed me a friendly smile and extended his hand. Small-boned and compactly built, he stood only an inch or so taller than I. This was more than compensated for, however, by a face that could have graced an album cover. The high, fine cheekbones, sensuous mouth, and dark brown eyes made any rock star I'd ever seen look like leftover nothing.

"It's nice to meet you, too," I said, trying to sound casual as I took the proffered hand.

"Lis," Dad said from the doorway, "where should I take these bags? Have you decided yet which room you want to give Nore?"

"I thought she might like the rose room," said Lisette. "That's a corner room, Nore, so you'll get a nice flow of air. These lovely old relics of houses weren't designed for modern air conditioning, but they were built high enough from the ground so they do catch the breezes."

My initial reaction to Shadow Grove as a replica of Scarlet O'Hara's Tara was renewed and reinforced as Dad, Lisette and I mounted the winding stairway to the upper level of the house. The staircase itself was built of Louisiana cypress, my father informed me, sounding as proud of the fact as if he had hewn the trees himself, and the banister was of a rich, dark mahogany of such fine grain that it slid beneath the palm of my hand like satin. The long row of bedrooms was located on a central hallway, but each room had as well a large, louvered door that opened onto the balcony. The rose room — which, evidently, drew its name from the pat-

tern of tiny rosebuds on the wallpaper — had two such doors, one to the north, facing out upon the driveway, and one to the east, where an array of colorful flower beds bordered a brick path that led down to what appeared to be a tiny pond.

"Leave the jalousies open, and you'll be surprised at how cool you'll stay at night," Lisette told me. "You'd better pull the screens, though, or you'll be eaten alive by mosquitoes. Those pink towels on the bureau are yours. You and my daughter, Josie, who has the bedroom next to this one, will be sharing the bath across the hall. Your father and I have the master bedroom at the center of the house, and Gabe's room is on the far west end."

"Where would you like me to set these suitcases?" my father asked me.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Just anywhere."

"I imagine you'd like to get freshened up and rest before dinner," said Lisette. "We won't be eating until seven or so, so you'll have time to take a nap or get unpacked or do anything else you'd like. I've put some empty hangers in the closet for you. If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

"Thank you," I said. "It seems as though you've thought of everything."

"If I haven't, be sure and tell me," Lisette said warmly. "I want you to be happy here, Nore. Shadow Grove is *your* home now, just as it's ours. I hope that you'll learn to love it as dearly as we do."

Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. The brush of her lips was as soft as the wings of a butterfly.

For one brief moment, I breathed in the scent of gardenias.

Then Lisette drew back, smiling, and reached for my father's hand.

"Nore must be tired after her long trip, Chuck. Let's give her a tittle time to herself."

"That's a good idea." Dad smiled too. I could teU that he was pleased that our meeting had gone so smoothly. "You come on down when you're ready, baby. By then, maybe, Josie wffi be back from wherever it is she's wandered off to, and you'U get to meet the third member of your new fam-Uy."

They left the room, stffi holding hands, and I stood, listening to the receding sound of their footsteps as they echoed down the haU. Suddenly, they stopped. There was the sound of a door being opened and then softly closed. Then, there was sience.

I went over to the doorway and stared out into the empty haU. Instead of going downstairs, Dad and Lisette had evidently entered their bedroom.

*Their* bedroom. The thought of my father's sharing a room with someone other than my mother was so foreign to me that it was almost inconceivable. What were they doing now? I wondered. Kissing? Whispering love words? Were they standing on the far side of that closed door, locked in each other's arms?

It was a question, I knew, that I had no business pondering. I must learn to accept the fact that my father was now remarried. As he, himself, had pointed out to me, another chapter of his life was beginning, and he was obviously head-over-heels in love with his beautiful new wife.

Shoving the vision of the embracing couple out of my mind, I pushed my own door closed and turned my attention to the suitcases that Dad had set on the floor at the end

of the four-poster bed. For the next quarter-hour or so, I kept myself busy hanging dresses in the closet and loading piles of shorts, T-shirts and underwear into drawers of the bureau. I carried my toothbrush and other toiletries across the hallway to the bathroom, where I found the medicine cabinet jammed to overflowing with more bottles and jars of blusher, foundation and eye shadow than a fashion model could have put to use in a lifetime. Josie must be a precocious thirteen-year-old, I thought with amusement, as I shuffled things about to try to create a space in which to set my own lone tube of mascara.

Returning to the rose room, I unpacked my hairdryer and curling iron, a cassette player with an assortment of tapes, and my camera. Finally, when everything else had been taken care of, I removed from the side pocket of the second suitcase a small, framed photograph of my mother.

I had taken the snapshot myself, and it showed Mother, dressed in a plaid shirt and blue jeans, standing in the front yard of our home in Gunderland. We had just returned from a bike ride, and her hair was a mass of windblown curls. She was facing the camera, laughing, and in the background, propped against the house, there stood a bicycle. It was the same red ten-speed that she was to be riding three days later when a prominent local businessman, rushing back to his office after a three-martini lunch, ran a stop sign.

Cupping the photograph in my hands, I sat down on the edge of the bed to study the beloved face. No, my mother had not been a glamour queen by anybody's standards, and, most certainly, she could not have competed in looks with Lisette. Mother had been, for one thing, a good twelve years older. My parents had been in their mid-thirties when I was born, and this picture showed a woman with laugh lines at

the corners of her eyes and worry lines on her forehead and a few extra pounds on her hips and around her waist. She was simply *herself*—"Eleanor Robbins, housewife and mother"—after years of being "Eleanor Robbins, computer programmer." Although she had been good at her job, she had never been a career woman. The day that Dad's eighth novel, *Life in the Fast Lane*, had sold to Hollywood, Mother had happily retired from the work force to become a full-time homemaker.

"You're going to be bored stiff," her career-minded friends had warned her. "What on earth will you find to do with yourself a day?"

"All the things I've never had time to do," Mother had told them. "I've got enough projects lined up to keep me busy for the rest of my life."

The word "boredom" didn't exist for Mother. How excited she had been at the thought of all the adventures that lay in store for her! How unfair it was that "the rest of her life," which she had been so eagerly looking forward to, had consisted of only three short years!

Blinking against the familiar sting of unshed tears, I leaned back upon the pillows and closed my eyes. The face in the photograph continued to smile at me from the inside of my closed eyelids.

*Unfair!* my mind screamed in silent protest. *Unfair!*

After so many years of struggle to make ends meet, my parents had finally seen their dream become reality. *Life in the Fast Lane* had become the pivot of a prime-time television series, and, overnight, Dad's income had leapt well into the six-figure bracket. The saying "Success breeds success" had proved to be true in my father's case. Once the name "Charles Robbins" had become recognized, Dad's ear

novels had suddenly been rediscovered. They were hailed as "tively reads" by those very reviewers who had previously ignored them, and paperback houses had fought to outbid each other for publication rights.

It was the classic happy ending to the "rags to riches" story, except that Mother, who should have been enjoying it with us, was gone. It would be Lisette, not Eleanor Robbins, who would be sharing the second half of my father's life with him, and although he had not revealed the fact in his letter, I was beginning to suspect that this life would be spent at Shadow Grove.

"I'd like for us all to spend the summer together," Dad had written. "It will give us a chance to become a united family. Lisette owns a house here that has been sitting unoccupied. I want to devote this summer to putting it back into shape again."

At the time I read it, I had interpreted that statement to mean that Dad was planning to get the house fixed up for sale. Now, however, I had to believe otherwise. Lisette had been so adamant about the fact that Shadow Grove was home to her that I couldn't imagine her consenting to move to Gunderland.

Why, then, I wondered, had she and her children ever left here? As attached as they were to Shadow Grove, why had they moved away? Wouldn't it have been more natural for Lisette, as a single parent, to have wanted to raise her son and daughter in this home that they all seemed to love so dearly?

After the pressures of the day, the clammy heat was affecting me like a sedative. One moment I was lucid and thinking rationally, and the next I had slipped across the line into dreaming. Cloud wisps blew through my groggy



mind Uke whirling shreds of cotton, and a canopy of oak leaves closed in above me.

A hand touched my cheek, and when, in the dream, my eyes flew open, it was to find my mother standing by my bedside.

I was not surprised. I had such dreams quite often.

"Mother," I said, "what are you doing here? You're supposed to be *dead!*"

"Not to you," the familiar voice said matter-of-factly. "I'm not dead to *you*, Nore. Now listen, because I have something important to tell you. I want you to repack your things and leave Shadow Grove immediately."

"Leave Shadow Grove?" I exclaimed. "But, I've only just got here! Dad wants me to spend the summer. In September, I'll be going back to school in New England."

"By September, it will be too late," my mother told me. "You and your father are both in terrible danger. You must talk to Dad, you must tell him — *Nore, are you listening?*"

But, I wasn't any longer. Caught in the tides of sleep, I was drifting away from her, and the shreds of blowing cotton were becoming a snowstorm. The branches of the oak trees were dipping lower and lower, and their leaves were sending shadows flickering across the fading image of Mother's face.

It did not occur to me then to take this dream-warning seriously. It was not as though this were the first time I'd seen my mother when I was sleeping. Such grief visions spattered my nights with regularity.

I'm a reasonable person; I don't believe in ghosts.

What I have learned to believe in is something far more frightening.

## CHAPTER

### -4 3 •-

**W**HEN I awoke, the air had grown somewhat cooler and the room was soft with the gentle hues of twilight. The sun had stid below the treeline, and the tigt that slipped in through the open louvers of the two French doors was muted and diffused.

I knew instinctively that it was almost seven, the time Lissette had set for dinner. I don't have many talents, but one that I do possess is an acute awareness of time. I can somehow sense what time it is, almost to the minute, and I can wake myself up at a predetermined hour without setting an alarm clock.

My muscles were so stiff that it was evident I'd slept without moving. The photograph of my mother was sttil clutched in my hands.

*You and your father are in terrible danger!*

"It was a dream, just another dream," I reassured myself.

The woman in the picture seemed to be sniffing in agreement.

"How sffiy the two of us are!" she might have been saying. "The next time I come into your dreams, IU say something more sensible."

Getting up from the bed, I placed the framed photograph carefuUy on the bureau top and went across to the bathroom to get washed up for dinner. The face that gazed back at me from the mirror over the sink was flushed and puffy-eyed from an overdose of sleep. I doused it with cold water, dabbed some Upstick on my mouth, and dragged a comb through my tangle of pillow-matted hair. Then, on impulse, I got my mascara out of the medicine cabinet and appUed it to both my upper and lower lashes. I told myself that I wanted to look nice so that Dad would be proud of me, but I have to admit I had another reason as well. If his mother was an example of what women in Louisiana looked Uke, Gabe Berge would be used to some pretty exotic girls.

Back in my bedroom, I peeled off my damp blouse and travel-rumpled cords and dropped them into one of my newly emptied suitcases. Then, I went over to the closet and got out the frilUest piece of clothing I possessed, a sleeveless, yeUow sundress with a full, ruffled skirt. I'm the type of person who runs to pants and puUovers, and I'd never felt comfortable about that impulsive purchase. Now, though, cinching hi the belt and swaying my hips a tittle to cause the soft material to swirl out away from my legs, I felt pleased with my mental picture of how I must look. If femininity was the byword for ladies at Shadow Grove, I'd show the Berges I could hold my own with the best of them.

Downstairs, I found Dad, Lisette and Gabe seated in the parlor, sipping amber liquid from delicate, long-stemmed --.glasses.

Dad looked up with a smite when he saw me in the doorway.

"What did I tell you, Lis?" he said with satisfaction. "Here she is on the dot of seven, and she's not even wearing a watch."

"Not a moment late nor a moment early. That's really incredible!" Lisette smiled also. "Your father's been telling us about this gift of yours, Nore. I thought one of us had better go up and wake you, but he told me that you have your own built-in alarm clock."

"It's too bad that Josie doesn't have one," Gabe commented dryly. "Then maybe she'd turn up for things when she's supposed to."

"You're right about that. It would certainly make life easier." Lisette continued to smile with her lips, but not with her eyes. "Josie's not home yet, Nore, so dinner will be later than I intended. While we're waiting, can I offer you a glass of sherry?"

"No, thank you," I said, surprised at the invitation. Our family had never been into the cocktail-hour bit.

"A Coke, then?" Lisette was asking, when there came the sound of the front door being thrown open and slammed shut again.

"She's here," said Gabe. "You can relax now, Maman. The wanderer's returned."

"Josie?" There was a strident edge to Lisette's voice. "Josie, come in here this instant! Do you have any idea how late it is?"

"Sorry, Maman. I lost track of time."

The girl who appeared in the doorway was small and dark, with Lisette's high cheekbones and luminous brown eyes. One day, perhaps, her beauty would match her mother's, but at this point nothing about her had come into

proportion. Her nose was too long, her mouth too wide, her chest stiffly flat and bony, and she had the overall gawky look of a knobby-kneed colt.

Her appearance brought back painful memories of my own transition from childhood to adolescence. I breathed a sigh of relief that this stage of life now lay behind me.

"You have a watch, Jo," said Lisette. "Why aren't you wearing it?"

"I forgot to put it on after my shower last night." The girl turned her attention to me. "You're Chuck's daughter, right? You're Nore?"

"Yes, I'm Nore," I said. "It's nice to meet you, Josie."

"Where have you been?" Lisette demanded. "You've been gone for hours!"

"I went for a walk," Josie told her. "Where else would I go, for gosh sakes? It's not like there's anyplace around here where people can have fun. There's no shopping center, no movie, no video arcade. Living out here at Shadow Grove is like being locked into a big moldy old cage."

"That's enough, Jo," Lisette said shortly. "Go get cleaned up. Then come back down and join us in the dining room. If it weren't for the fact that it's Nore's first evening here, you would be skipping dinner."

Josie glared at her mother and muttered some comment under her breath that I did not catch.

Gabe evidently did, however.

"Don't push your luck, kid," he said softly. "You know how Maman feels about your taking off on your own like that. She worries all the time that something will happen to you."

"Well, that's stupid," Josie shot back belligerently. "By now, you both should know that I can take care of myself."

"Jo!" Lisette said warningly.

"Okay! Okay! I'm going!" Glowering, Josie turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Her departure was followed by an uncomfortable silence.

It was Lisette who finally broke it.

"I'm sure that everyone's starving," she said. There's no good reason why we should wait any long for dinner. Chuck — Nore — I do apologize for my daughter's behavior. I'm afraid she's going through that rebellious stage that you always hear about."

"It hits all kids that age," said Dad, trying to make light of the situation. "When Nore was thirteen, she thought the whole world was against her, especially her parents. Then, just when her mother and I were about ready to ship her off to an orphanage, she came over the hump and turned into a delightful young adult." He rose to his feet and offered his wife his arm. "If the food is ready, / certainly am. Let's go get some dinner."

With Dad and Lisette leading the way, we trooped into the dining room, which, like the parlor, had windows that faced out onto the darkening courtyard. An ornate, mahogany china cabinet took up most of the far end of the room, and a crystal chandelier hung suspended from the ceiling over an oval table that was formally set for five.

"Chuck, will you light the candles, please?" Lisette asked my father. "Gabe, dear, come give me a hand, if you will, in bringing things in. No, Nore," — as I started to volunteer my assistance — "tomorrow you can pitch right in with the rest of us, but you deserve one night of being the guest of honor."

So, I took the seat to which she gestured me, and while Dad lit the candles — six tall, white tapers in antique silver holders — Lisette and Gabe trotted back and forth to the kitchen, carrying in bowls of a spicy, tomato-based soup

filled with shrimp and crabmeat, and hot French bread, and a tossed green salad.

"I don't understand why you don't hire some live-in help," said my father, as Lisette placed the bowl of salad in the center of the table and then seated herself in the chair on his right. "For a place this size, we ought to have a full-time cook and housekeeper. You know darned well that back in the old times the estate was swarming with servants."

"They used slave labor back then," said Lisette. Today, household help is terribly expensive. People just don't live in the way they used to."

"We've got the money to spend, hon," my father said gently. "What's the point of my finally having made it big if I can't use the income to make life pleasant for my family?"

"You've spent so much on us already," Lisette protested. "The restoration of Shadow Grove is going to cost a small fortune. Then, on top of that, you've hired a ground maintenance service; you've bought me a washer and dryer; you've had a dishwasher installed; and the other day I heard you promising Josie a swimming pool."

"I want you to have live-in help," Dad repeated stubbornly. "Why are you so set against it, Lis? It can't just be the cost. You know that's not a problem in my present situation."

"I guess maybe I have a thing about privacy," Lisette admitted. The idea of some stranger living right here with us, snooping on everything we say or do — it just makes me uncomfortable somehow. I did hire that Cajun girl, Celina, to come clean on Wednesdays."

"What's 'Cajun'?" I asked, taking advantage of the sudden lull in the conversation. "I've heard the term, but I don't know exactly what it means."

The terms 'Cajun' and 'Creole' both refer to the descendants of the first French settlers of Louisiana," my father told me. The old Creole families consider themselves aristocracy. Their ancestors came here directly from France, while the Cajuns arrived by way of Canada."

There were cultural differences too," Lisette said crisply. "Many of the early Cajuns intermarried with the natives. The strain has been watered down enough by now so the differences aren't so evident, but several generations ago they were a whole foreign element with their own life-style and customs and weird superstitions."

"What sort of superstitions?" I asked with interest.

"Heavens, / don't know." Lisette shrugged her slender shoulders. "It's not a subject that has ever been of much interest to me."

"They might weU have been based on voodoo," suggested my father. "Back in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Napoleon's invasion of Cuba drove many of the French-speaking natives to relocate in New Orleans. They brought their pagan religions with them, and from what I've read, voodooism became somewhat of a vogue here even among the whites."

That's not the case now, thank goodness." Lisette glanced up at the doorway. "WeU — Josie — so you've finally decided to join us!"

"I didn't think you were offering me a choice," said Josie. She crossed to the table and slid unceremoniously into the seat next to her brother. Although she was dressed in the same jeans and T-shirt she had been wearing when she came in from her walk, her hair was now combed and she had put on makeup. A lot of makeup.

"Gumbo again?" She wrinkled her nose with a show of

distaste. "You've hardly served anything else since we got back here this time. Can't we ever have pizza the way we did in Chicago?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," said Lisette. "We're home again now, thank goodness, and I, personally, can't get enough seafood to make up for all of those years we spent away."

"This is great," I said in an effort to compensate for Josie's rudeness. "One of the nice things about going to school in New England is that they serve us fresh seafood. Would you believe that once they even gave us lobster?"

"We lived for a while in Boston," said Gabe. "I lived there."

Dad turned to Lisette in surprise. "You never told me that!"

"You and I had a whirlwind courtship," Lisette reminded him. "There are lots of things I haven't had a chance to tell you."

"We've lived in loads of big cities," Josie said proudly. "New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco — there have been so many of them that the only way I can tell them apart is if something special happened there. I always remember Hartford, for instance, because that's where the Ringling Circus tent caught fire and we almost got trampled to death trying to get out. Then, there was the —"

"That's enough rambling, Jo," Lisette broke in abruptly. "How about talking less and eating more? The rest of us are almost finished with dinner."

"I was just trying to be sociable," Josie said in an injured voice.

"I appreciate that," said Lisette, and I was startled by the edge to her voice. "I would appreciate it more, though, if

you would concentrate on eating instead of chattering. After you've finished, I would like you to clear the table and load the dishwasher. No back talk now!" — as Josie's mouth flew open to protest — This is neither the time nor place for a mother-daughter battle."

Josie seemed about to respond, and then evidently thought better of it. Throwing her mother a black look, she lapsed into submission, which she maintained for the duration of the meal.

When dinner was over, the rest of us moved out into the courtyard and settled into lawn chairs to watch a full moon rise slowly and majestically out of the trees to take its place in the absolute center of the sky. Now that the heat of the day had lessened, the air had a softness to it that was different from anything I had ever felt in the North. The aroma of honeysuckle was all around us, so heavy that I could almost taste the scent of it, and the chanting of cicadas filled the night with so much sound that conversation seemed unnecessary.

Gabe served us all glasses of anisette, which he informed me was a traditional French after-dinner drink. This time I didn't refuse the cordial, and, leaning back in my chair, I sipped the thick, sweet liquid and stared up into the star-studded sky, feeling more at peace than I had in a long, long time.

Perhaps things would be all right after all, I told myself. Lisette had not turned out to be the "wicked stepmother" that I had anticipated. Josie, for all her perversity, was no worse than many other girls her age, craving independence and resenting parental restriction. And Gabe —

My heart gave an odd little jump as I gazed across at Gabe. The moonlight lay in streaks of silver upon his fore-

head. The rest of his face was lost in shadow, and I could not see his eyes. What was he thinking? I wondered. How did he feel about our sudden entrance into his family? Had it been as hard for him to adjust to the idea as it had been for me? Would he accept me as a sister; and did I *want* him to?

The long, stressful day — the hour's difference in time — the unaccustomed glass of anisette — all were working together to weight my eyeUds. A soft breeze blew up from the river to stroke my face, and the song of the crickets was as soothing as a lullaby.

When Dad said, "Nore, are you awake over there?," I tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn.

"No," I confessed, "not reaUy. I guess I'd better call it a night before I fall completely asleep in my chair."

So, I said my goodnights and went indoors. As I passed the doorway to the kitchen, I glanced inside, thinking I might stop and exchange a word or two with Josie, but the dishwasher was already running and the room was dark.

I continued on upstairs and down the long hall to the room at the corner. As I was opening my bedroom door, I became aware of the sound of a record player in the adjoining room. Josie had evidently decided against any further socializing and had retired to spend the remainder of the evening in her own company.

Poor kid, I thought, as I put on my pajamas and drew the screens across the doors to the balcony. In my opinion, Lisette had overreacted to the situation in the dining room. Josie had only been trying to sound cosmopolitan when she had bragged about aU the places that her family had lived.

Why, I wondered, had they changed residences so often? And why had the places they had lived aU been large cities? If Lisette loved the rural aspects of Shadow Grove, it

seemed peculiar that she would have chosen to keep moving her family from metropolis to metropolis.

The dinner-table conversation had been general and inconsequential. Still, as I settled myself in bed and reached over to flick off the lamp, I could not help but feel that there had been something that I had missed. Something had been said that had *not* been trivial and meaningless. There had been something — something —

The answer came to me as I was slipping into sleep, and the shock of the realization jolted me awake. Josie had commented that she would always remember Hartford, because she had been living there at the time of the Ringling Brothers Circus fire.

I had heard about that fire from my mother, who had grown up in a small town in rural Connecticut. She had told me about it one day when I was sick in bed with chicken pox.

"I had chicken pox too when I was about your age," she had told me sympathetically. "In my case, though, being sick may have saved my life. My parents were planning to take me to the circus to celebrate my eleventh birthday, but I got sick, so the outing had to be called off. That day a terrible fire broke out in the Ringling circus tent, and a hundred and sixty-eight people died in the blaze."

The date of my mother's eleventh birthday was forty years ago.

## CHAPTER

-4 À >~

**G**ENTLE and sweet-breathed as those early summer evenings may have been, the loveliest time of day at Shadow Grove was morning.

My first day there, I awoke very early because of the time difference between Louisiana and the East Coast. Lying in bed, I could see out through both of the screened French doors, each of which framed a great sheet of empty sky. This sky, as seen through the north door, was pale blue and hazy; to the east, it was aglow with the flames of sunrise. I lay stfffi for a time, watching, mesmerized, as the two spatial areas went through minute-by-minute alterations. The north sky grew brighter and clearer; the east sky softened to pink, and then, as shade melted into shade in fluid transition, became the same clear blue as its sister next door.

When the two pictures had synchronized, I sat up in bed. From this higher vantage point, I could see the massive green heads of the oak trees through the door to the north. I

got out of bed and crossed over to the bureau. My mother's face smiled good morning to me from the snapshot. I pulled open the drawer and got out shorts and a T-shirt and carried them with me across the hall to the bathroom.

As I showered and dressed, I reviewed the previous evening. Now, in the clear light of day, Josie's strange statement affected me less strongly. It had, of course, been untrue. Josie was thirteen years old, and it was obviously impossible for her to have been *anywhere* forty years ago. It must simply have been that she had felt left out of the dinner-table conversation and had wanted to make some remark absurd enough to draw attention to herself. It was evident that the child was extremely lonely. The peace and seclusion at Shadow Grove might be appealing to adults, but for a youngster Josie's age, it meant being cut off from any chance for a normal social life. One lone girl, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, without access to friends or leisuretime activities, might easily become resentful and rebellious. When seen from that point of view, Josie's hostility toward her mother became — though no more pleasant to witness — at least, more understandable.

Well, I was here now, I told myself; that might help matters. While I wasn't exactly Josie's contemporary, I came closer to filling that role than anyone else around. Perhaps, I could become her friend as well as her stepsister. If I could, then life might be easier for everyone.

Josie's door was stiffly closed when I came out of the bathroom. I paused at my own bedroom long enough to deposit my pajamas and then continued on down the hall to the stairs. As I descended the staircase, I knew instinctively that none of the others were up and about yet. There was an absolute stillness about the house below me and that made it

seem caught and locked in time like the slumbering palace of Sleeping Beauty. I stepped off the bottom stair into the front entrance hall, and the sound of my shoe's striking the wooden floorboards was as startling as gunfire.

Without conscious thought, I found myself walking on tiptoe as I crossed to the entrance to the parlor. Seen without occupants, the room was like a set from a period play, with the antique furniture, the hand-carved mantel, the gold-inlaid scrollwork around the mirrors. The oriental carpet, though worn with the passage of years, glowed softly with muted colors from the past.

At the end of the room, the portrait of the bearded man in the old-fashioned coat looked like something that should have been hanging in a museum. For some reason, however, the face no longer seemed strange to me. It was a moment before I realized that the features of the face, the dark hair and the wiry beard very much resembled those of Gabe Berge.

A great-grandfather, I thought, or perhaps a *great-great-grandfather*. I was not versed enough in the history of men's fashions to be able to place the precise era of the man's clothing, but I guessed it to be from the end of the nineteenth century.

What should I do with myself until the others woke up? I wondered. Back home in Gunderland, I would have gone out to the kitchen and put on the coffee, but to do that in someone else's house seemed pretty presumptuous. It would be better, I decided, to stay clear of Lisette's kitchen until I'd had a chance to find out where she kept things and whether or not she'd appreciate help making breakfast.

Dawn had now given way to fledgling morning. In the short time that I had been standing at the entrance to the

parlor, the light in the room had already changed significantly. When I had come downstairs, it had been dusky with shadows. Now the sun had risen high enough to slant its light in through the southern windows so that it fell in pale strips across the carpet. Through those windows I could see, as I had not been able to the evening before, an assortment of wooden planters filled with orange flowers. Beyond those, there stood a low hedge of flowering bushes, and farther still a line of small, weathered buildings. I decided that since I appeared to have the whole of Shadow Grove to myself right then, I might as well seize the opportunity to do some exploring.

When I let myself out through the front door, the lush beauty of the day burst upon me. There was a richness about it, a thick, golden sweetness, that poured over me like sun-warmed honey. Directly ahead lay the driveway, a sun-spotted corridor, flanked by the incredible oaks. At its far end, the wrought-iron gate stood open to the road. When I glanced to either side of me, greenery and flowers were everywhere, in some cases so dense that they could have passed for a tropical jungle. Spanish moss and honeysuckle hung draped from branches, and magnolia trees were heavy with bursting blossoms. Tiny hummingbirds, their wings whirling like miniature helicopters, hung suspended beside the thick bushes of crepe myrtle that rose to cushion the warped edges of the porch.

I descended the porch steps and walked slowly along the front of the house, almost overpowered by the scent of so many intermingled perfumes. As I rounded the northeast corner, I came upon the brick path that I had viewed from my bedroom window the afternoon before. It was bordered by beds of ferns, and beyond those there rose a tangle of rose-

bushes sporting blooms that ranged from the palest pink to a crimson so deep that it was almost purple.

Distracted from my original purpose, I paused a moment, trying to decide whether to continue on around to the back of the house or to take the path. I decided on the latter, and several moments later was standing on the bank of a small, circular pond, the surface of which was so solidly covered with Uly pads that the water beneath them was totaUy invisible. This green carpet was broken at intervals by waxen blossoms, floating lazily with petals spread to the sky.

"Nore! Hey —Nore!"

Turning in surprise, I saw Gabe jogging toward me across the wide stretch of lawn that lay between the rose garden and the house. He was dressed in shorts and a tank top and running shoes, and his glossy hair reflected the morning sunlight Uke polished ebony.

"Hi!" he said as drew abreast of me. "What are you doing up so early? Isn't this supposed to be your vacation time?"

"I'm geared to a different time zone," I reminded him. "What's *your* excuse? Isn't this *your* school vacation too?"

"I Uke to do my running before the heat comes up," Gabe told me. That's about aU the exercise I get these days, and I want to do it right. Back in Chicago, our apartment was right near a fitness center, and I got to work out on all the machines whenever I wanted to."

"Your mother was saying last night that you might get a swimming pool," I said.

"Yeah, Josie's pushing for one," Gabe said wryly. "But, then, Josie pushes for everything. If she had her way, your dad would put in a movie theater, a skating rink and her own private video arcade."

"She must get bored in the summer," I said sympatheti-

caUy. "Having a pool to swim in could make a big difference."

"She can swim in the river now, or here in the tily pond." Gabe threw me a devilish grin. "Do you want an adventure? Why don't we go back to the house and put on our suits?"

"Not me!" I said vehemently, not certain whether or not he was joking. "I don't know how to swim, and if I *did*, I wouldn't swim in *this!*"

"I was just kidding!" Gabe said. This pond's two feet deep; *nobody* could swim in it. My kid brother and I used to wade here, though, when we were Utile. We'd get ourselves coated with mud and then go running back into the house. Maman would scream her head off for fear we'd jump on the furniture."

"Your brother!" I exclaimed. "You and Josie have a *brother?*"

"We did once," said Gabe, the laughter fading from his voice. "Louis died a long time back. He was thrown by a horse. It was a stallion — reaUy wüd — he should never have been riding it. Lou was Uke that, a sort of a daredevil. He did crazy things."

"That's awful," I said.

"It was awful, aU right. Maman about went crazy. She just couldn't face the fact that one of her children was dead."

"I know," I said, nodding. "I feel that same way about my mother. I stiU can't believe that she's gone. I see her in dreams, and it's almost as though she were right there with me."

"You must miss her a lot," Gabe said softly.

"Yes," I said. "But, you know what that's Uke. You must feel that way about your dad and brother."

"It's not quite the same," Gabe said. "I do miss Louis,

but, Uke I said, he was kiUed a long time ago, so Fve had time to get used to it. What I miss most now is the whole idea of having a brother. If Lou were here today, he'd be somebody I could talk to. He'd understand my problems, because they'd be the same as his."

"What about your father?" I asked. "What happened to *him?*"

"He got sick," Gabe said shortly.

"Sick, how? With what sort of illness?"

"I don't know. He was old; it could have been a lot of things. One night he went to sleep, and he just stopped breathing. A servant found him when she went in to take him breakfast. That wasn't the shock to us that Lou's death was. Papa'd had a fuU life."

"He couldn't have been aU *that* old," I said. "Your mother's stffi so young."

"Papa was a lot older. It was a May-December marriage." Gabe drew a deep breath. "Hey, enough of this depressing stuff. Let's talk about something pleasant. What was it that brought you out here this morning so early?"

"I was curious about the old buildings out beyond the courtyard," I told him. "I thought I'd go see what they were, and then, when I saw the path through the rose garden, I decided to walk down here and see what the pond was Uke."

"Those buildings once served as quarters for slaves," said Gabe. "Come on around back, and I'll show them to you. They're a piece of American history that you reaUy shouldn't miss."

So we walked together to the south side of the house, where the past lay spread before us in depressing dishevelment. The buildings that I had seen through the parlor windows proved to be brick and wood shacks that were so

düapidated that it was hard to imagine anyone's ever having Uved in them. Gaping doorways and paneless windows stared btindly out upon fields of underbrush that had once suppUed produce enough to feed a whole plantation. Only the cottage nearest to the house, which Gabe informed me was now used as a storage shed, appeared to be in good repair. The windows of that had been bricked over, and its sturdy door was secured with a padlock.

Behind the shacks, there stood the sheU of what once must have been a huge and impressive stable.

"Maman got rid of the horses after Louis died," Gabe told me.

"What's that over there?" I asked him, gesturing off to the right, where a wrought-iron fence enclosed what appeared to be a tiny graveyard. It was so overgrown that the rounded tops of two tombstones could barely be seen beneath the tangle of vines and grasses.

That's the Berge cemetery," Gabe informed me. "AU the old plantations had family burial plots."

"It looks old, all right," I commented. "And it surely could use weeding. Didn't your mother say that Dad had hired a maintenance service?"

They haven't had time to work on the cemetery yet," said Gabe. There's been too much else for them to do around the estate. You should have seen this place when we first moved back here. It was a fuU-fledged jungle."

As we started back toward the house, he reached over and took my hand. "So, what's your reaction? Does Shadow Grove meet your expectations?"

"I'm not sure exactly what it was that I did expect," I told him.

There are other houses tike this one aU up and down the

river," Gabe said. "They cost so much to keep up that only a handful are stff private residences. Most are owned by the state and are used as tourist attractions."

When we entered the house, we found the rest of the family at the breakfast table. The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the kitchen, and a pitcher of orange juice sat out on the counter.

"WeU, hi!" Dad said in surprise. "I didn't expect the two of you to appear together Uke this. I thought Nore was stff upstairs sleeping and Gabe was out running."

"I was," Gabe said, dropping my hand Uke a hot potato. "Hi, Chuck. Good morning, Maman. Josie, that's one huge bowl of Sugar Pops. Don't you think it would have been nice to have saved some for the rest of us?"

Josie shrugged her shoulders. Her eyes flicked up at her brother. Then she shifted her gaze to her mother, as though curious to see her reaction to the fact that Gabe and I had been holding hands.

I, too, glanced across at Lisette. Her eyes had narrowed strangely, and her full, soft lips were pressed so tightly together that they were compacted into a pencil-thin line.

"So, what have you two early birds been doing?" she asked with a show of casualness. "Don't teU me that Nore's into running too! Are we reaUy to have two exercise buffs at Shadow Grove?"

"I went out by myself Uke I always do," Gabe said defensively. He hooked his thumbs nervously under the band of bis running shorts. "Nore just happened to be up early, and we ran into each other by accident. I took her around in back to have a look at the slave quarters."

"Those buildings are interesting, aren't they? They make the past seem so terribly recent." Although she was ad-

dressing herself to me, Lisette's eyes were on Gabe. There seemed to be some sort of unspoken dialogue going on between them, like a secret second level of communication. "The present, as we know it, is of such smaU importance in the total scheme of things. Its only real purpose is to serve as a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow."

Josie continued to chew methodically on a mouthful of cereal, but she, too, seemed in some way a part of this odd conversation.

Watching the silent interplay between mother and chUdren, I experienced once again the feeling that I was missing out on something. It was as though these three famUy members had known each other so long and so intimately that they no longer found it necessary to communicate with words.

## CHAPTER

### •< 5

**T**HEN the moment was over. Everything popped back to normal.

What kind of suspicious weirdo are you, Nore? I chided myself.

From the moment I had first arrived at Shadow Grove the atmosphere had kept swinging back and forth between normalcy and strangeness so sporadically that I was never quite sure which end of the seesaw was up. It was as if I kept catching glimpses of something at the edge of my peripheral vision, but it wouldn't hold still long enough for me to get it into focus. One moment, I would be viewing my stepmother as threatening, and ten seconds later she would be chatting along in such a warmhearted manner that I would feel ridiculous for ever having entertained such a thought.

This was one of those times. I felt Uke a total idiot.

Lisette poured juice into glasses for Gabe and me. I thanked her for mine and sat down in the vacant seat across from my father. Gabe got out two more bowls from the cab-

inet to the left of the sink, and he and I poured ourselves Rice Crispies (Josie had, indeed, consumed all the Sugar Pops), and if a camera crew had happened to walk in on us right at that particular moment, we could have served as models for a "get-your-family-off-to-a-happy-start-at-breakfasttime" TV commercial.

WhUe we ate, we discussed our plans for the upcoming day.

My father announced that he would be spending it writing.

"I'm back on the job again, Nore," he said with satisfaction. "The dry spell is over. The juices are flowing again, thank God."

"That's terrific!" I exclaimed. "Are you working on another novel?"

"Yes," said Dad, "and it's different from anything I've ever tackled. It's laid here in the South right after the Civil War. I've never tried my hand before at anything historical. I guess the ghosts at Shadow Grove have started to get to my brain."

"In that case, I won't even ask if you want to drive into MerveiUe with me," said Lisette. "I have to go in to buy groceries and do some errands. I'd enjoy your company, but I don't want it on my conscience that I was the one responsible for stopping the flow of words that could have immortalized Shadow Grove."

"WhUe you're in town, please try to remember to stop by the phone company," said Dad. "I hate this business of being cut off from the world without a telephone."

"Can I go with you?" Josie asked eagerly. "We're aU out of munchies, and you never buy anything good unless Fm there."

"Why don't aU four of us go?" Gabe suggested. "WhUe

you two are doing the grocery shopping, I can show Nore around the metropolis of MerveiUe."

"That's a laugh!" Josie snorted contemptuously. "The metropolis of MerveiUe! Stffi, almost any thing's more exciting than hanging around Shadow Grove."

Lisette turned to me with a smile. "I'd love to have you ride in with me, Nore, but don't expect too much of MerveiUe. As Josie implies, it's not exactly a second New Orleans. You can come too, Jo, but I'd rather that Gabe stayed here. The work on the roof is supposed to be completed today, and someone should be here in case the men finish early."

"Chuck will be here," said Gabe.

"Chuck is going to be working on his book."

"That's no problem," Dad said. "I won't be exactly entombed, you know. I can take an occasional break to check on the workmen."

"I'd Uke for Gabe to stay," Lisette said again decidedly. "Please, don't argue, son," she added, as Gabe opened his mouth to protest the proclamation. "Chuck has work to do, and I don't want him to be interrupted. Girls, let's try to get started as soon as we're through with breakfast. If possible, I'd Uke to get back before the work on the roof is finished, so I can check and see that the workmen have cleaned up their Utter."

When breakfast was over, I excused myself and hurried up to my bedroom to change into a blouse and skirt in lieu of my shorts. By the time I came back downstairs, Lisette and Josie had already gone out to the car. I was just headed out the front door to join them, when my father caUed after me, "Nore, will you do me a favor? While Lis is doing errands, could you stop by the Ubrary and pick up some reference books?"

"Sure," I said, pausing in the doorway. "What books do you want?"

"I'm not certain myself," Dad said. "I need background material on this part of the country. Just browse the shelves and bring back anything that you think looks interesting."

"Won't I need a card?" I asked him.

"I applied for one a couple of weeks ago," Dad said. "Check with the librarian. She should have it ready for me by this time."

The car that awaited me in the driveway was a dark blue two-door Chevrolet Monte Carlo. Lisette was seated behind the wheel, and Josie was impatiently bouncing up and down in the backseat.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," I said apologetically as I climbed into the passenger's seat next to my stepmother. "Dad stopped me to ask if I'd pick up some books at the library."

"That's easy enough," said Lisette. "The library's right around the corner from the telephone company. You can be picking out the books while I'm making arrangements to get a phone installed."

As we pulled out onto the road through the open gateway, we drove past a green truck which was obviously preparing to turn into the driveway. From the position in which I was seated, I wasn't able to take in much more than the fact that the vehicle had "Parlange Roofing Company" lettered on its side.

Josie, however, let loose with a piercing wolf whistle.

"Hey, Nore!" she exclaimed. "Did you get a load of that guy who was driving? Isn't he a *hunk*?"

"I really couldn't see him too well," I responded, trying to sound regretful. "I'm sitting on the wrong side of the car."

"Well, you really missed something! Wow-ee!" Josie

whistled again, hitting a strident note that came close to shattering my eardrums.

With difficulty, I kept from wincing.

Lisette made no such effort.

"Jo," she said, "have you any idea how crude you sound?"

"I don't see what's so crude about noticing a good-looking guy," said Josie peevishly. "He's nice, too. His name is Dave, and I talk to him every day during his lunch break. Did you see the size of his shoulders? They have to be three feet wide!"

"That's enough, Jo," her mother said curtly. "Let's leave that subject, please. No, I bet you've never seen orchids growing wild before, have you? There are some lovely ones over there in the fork of that oak tree."

"Dad pointed some out to me yesterday," I told her. "It's hard to believe that they grow right out by the roadside here, as common as daisies are back home in New York state."

And so, while Josie sat, sulking, in the seat behind us, Lisette and I continued to make chitchat throughout the remainder of the forty-mile drive into Merveille, a town that turned out to be not much different from what I had been led to expect. As Lisette had warned me, it was certainly no "second New Orleans," but there were enough stores and office buildings to take care of most people's everyday needs.

As we drove through the streets, I saw several grocery stores that I recognized as part of national chains, as well as a Walgreen's, the golden arches of McDonald's, and a J. C. Penney department store like the one in which Mother had bought our towels and bedspreads back in Gunderland. There appeared to be only one movie theater, but the mar-

quee advertised a picture that I had seen only recently in Boston, so I gathered that MerveiUe wasn't aU that terribly behind the times.

"The Teen Dance Machine!" Josie squealed in excitement, bouncing out of her surliness. "Look over there on the corner! Do you see that sign? They've turned the old sandwich restaurant into a disco!"

"I'm going to park in the Safeway parking lot," Lisette told us. That's a good central spot, considering the things we have to do here. The telephone company is just around the corner, and that building across the street is the public Ubrary. Why don't we spüt forces and do our various errands, and then we can meet back at the market to shop for groceries?"

"I want to case-out the disco!" announced Josie.

"At ten in the morning? It'll be locked up and empty." Lisette regarded her daughter with amusement. "Go along to the Ubrary with Nore, Jo. You can use Chuck's new card to check out some books for yourself."

"I'm sick of books," Josie grumbled. "It seems Uke aU I've done for a hundred years is read."

Despite her complaints, however, when we reached the Ubrary, she did head straight for the section marked "Recent Acquisitions" and began to thumb through the new selection of romance novels.

On checking through the card catalogue, I was pleased to find that the stacks contained a large selection of books on Louisiana history. Settling myself at a table to sort through the volumes, I was soon completely absorbed in accounts of life-styles so extravagant that one writer referred to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Creoles as "prince-planters who held court in their castles in the same grand manner as

the royal families of Europe." In contrast, there were descriptions of the other early residents of the bayou country, the Cajuns, a number of whom were denounced for having "diluted the purity of their bloodline" by intermarrying with the refugees from Cuba.

One author described this strain of Cajun as having "gone native, developing a society separate from that of their affluent neighbors.

"Much folklore developed," he wrote, "about the renegades who inhabited makeshift shacks along the banks of the river. Though little about their customs was set on paper, it was rumored that they practiced a form of voodoo known as Obeah. The bartering of spells and potions in exchange for material possessions was suspected to be far more common than was generally acknowledged. Many of the Cajun women were extremely beautiful and were supported as mistresses by the Creole landowners."

At this point in my reading, a hand touched my shoulder.

"Nore?" Josie said. "We've been here for hours. Haven't you found the stuff your dad wants yet?"

"We haven't been here for hours at all," I responded. "It's only been fifty minutes. I wish that we *could* stay for hours, these books are so fascinating."

"Some of the accounts are pretty exaggerated," said Josie.

"I don't know how you can make a statement like that," I told her. "I'm sure that these writers spent a great many years doing research." I gathered up the half-dozen volumes that I had chosen as being most interesting. "Let's go see if my father's card is ready so that we can check these out."

When I gave her the name Charles Robbins, the girl at the desk nodded quickly.

"Oh, yes, of course, here's his card right here." She glanced up with a smile. "Did you know that there's a well-known writer by that same name?"

"I certainly do," I said, both proud and embarrassed. This is that very same person. He's my father."

"Your father wrote *Life in the Fast Lane*?" the girl gasped incredulously. "I can't believe it! A celebrity, right here in Merveffier

"Well, not *quite* in Merveffier," I said. "We live out in the country." And for the next fourteen minutes, I expounded on Dad's writing career for the benefit of the excited librarian and her two assistants, who were summoned up from the dark recesses of the archives to be introduced to "some close relatives of the famous Charles Robbins."

It was, therefore, almost a quarter past eleven before Josie and I, having stopped at the parking lot to deposit our books in the car, entered the Safeway store in search of Lisette. We found her with a loaded shopping cart, already standing in line at the checkout counter.

"What kind of ice cream did you get?" Josie demanded immediately, peering down at the groceries in the cart with sharp-eyed interest. "Oh, great — chocolate! I can't believe you really got that. Yuck, fish again—we just had that last night. Why did you get those dry old Doritos? You know I like potato chips much better."

"I also know that potato chips make your face break out." Lisette turned her attention to me. "How did the book search go? Were you able to find all the books your father wanted?"

"Yes," I said. "There was lots of material that ought to be helpful to him. And do you know what happened when I went to pick up his library card?"

I was just getting ready to tell her about the reaction of the librarian, when a voice from the next line over exclaimed, "Lisette? Lisette Berge, can that possibly be *you*?"

Lisette seemed to freeze for an instant. Then, she turned slowly to face the gray-haired woman who was paying for her groceries at the adjoining register.

"Am I the one to whom you are speaking?" Lisette asked her coolly. "I don't believe that we know each other, do we?"

"Yes, I think —that is — I *did* think—" The woman's smile wavered, and she paused uncertainly. "No, I'm sorry; you're much too young to be the person that I thought you were. I bet, though, that you're related. You must be to look so much alike."

"You're probably thinking about my mother," said Lisette. "Her name was Lisette Berge, and I was named for her."

"Oh, that explains it then." The woman seemed grateful to have found the solution to the mystery. "I'm Elaine Shannon. I knew your mother way back — oh, it must have been twenty years ago — and *if* you're her daughter, then I remember you as well. I used to manage a custom dress shop over on River Street. When your mother came in for a fitting, she would bring you with her. You must have been twelve or so at the time —just about the age of this little girl here." She gestured to indicate Josie. "You looked like her too — the same eyes — the exact same coloring."

This is my daughter, Josephine," Lisette said stiffly. "She does look a lot like I did at her age."

"How time flies!" Elaine Shannon said with a sigh. "It's hard to imagine your pretty, young mother a grandmother. How is she, dear? I'd heard that she had moved up North somewhere."

"She passed away several years ago," said Lisette. Then — "Oh, my goodness!" Turning abruptly, she glanced into her shopping cart with an expression of chagrin. "As usual, I seem to have forgotten something important. It was nice to have met you again, Mrs. Shannon, after so many years. You are sweet to remember my mother with so much affection. Now, please ask the cashier to go ahead and start ringing things up. I'll be back in one tiny minute."

But she was not.

The cashier did ring up the groceries and then stood fidgeting impatiently while long moments passed and the line behind us grew increasingly longer.

It was not until Elaine Shannon's groceries had all been bagged and the elderly woman had left the store with them that Lisette came rushing back with a cellophane sack in her hand.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," she told the woman at the register. "I just couldn't seem to find what I was looking for."

Dumbfounded, I stared at the item that she had brought back with her.

It was nothing more nor less than a bag of potato chips.

## CHAPTER

## -4 fo >-

**W**E got back to Shadow Grove at slightly past noon. The sun was centered overhead, and its rays slashed down through the canopy of leaves to strike the driveway with sharp bullets of searing light. The warmth of the day had increased to a point that I considered uncomfortable, although it was nothing to compare with the heat that I was to grow accustomed to later in the summer.

The truck labeled "Parlange Roofing Company" was parked in front of the house. Two men — one quite young and the other probably in his forties — were seated in a block of shade under one of the oak trees, munching on sandwiches and washing them down with soda pop. I guessed immediately that the younger man — tall, dark, and shirtless — was the "hunk" that Josie had reacted to in the car that morning.

Lisette gave the horn a sharp beep, and Gabe came grudgingly out to help carry in the groceries. He was

friendly enough to me, but cool toward his mother. It was obvious that he was stiffly fuming about not having been permitted to accompany us to MerveUle.

While Lisette and I put the food away and started lunch preparations, Josie managed to drift surreptitiously back outside again. When Lisette sent me out to get her, I was not particularly surprised to find her crouched in the grass next to the workmen, chattering away like a triple-tongued parakeet.

Her expression when she saw me approaching was almost enough to send me straight back into the house.

"Lunch is ready," I said, trying to ignore her hostility. "Your mother wants you to come on in now."

"I'm busy," Josie said defiantly. "Besides, I'm not hungry-"

"I don't think that's going to go down too well," I told her. "Your mom's got the sandwiches made, and everybody's waiting."

Having had no previous experience in coercing newly-turned-teenagers, I didn't know how to force the issue. I couldn't quite picture myself dragging a kicking, screaming Josie across the lawn to the house.

"You'd better go eat, kid," the older man said in a fatherly tone. "Dave and I have to get back to work soon anyway."

"I'm not hungry," Josie repeated. After a moment's consideration, however, she did get to her feet.

"Before you go," the "hunk" said teasingly, "why don't you introduce us to your pretty friend?"

"Nore isn't my friend," Josie retorted. "She's only my stepsister. I've just barely met her myself."

"How do you do, Stepsister Nore?" The young man

grinned up at me and extended his hand. "I'm Dave Parlange, and this guy, here, is my uncle, Phil. He's the Parlange Roofing Company, and I'm the Parlange Roofing Company's assistant for the summer."

"HeUo, Dave," I said, taking his hand and shaking it. "Fm Nore Robbins, and I just got to Shadow Grove yesterday."

"You're from up North," Dave said immediately.

"Is it reaUy that obvious?" I asked, surprised. "How can you teU? I only spoke a couple of words!"

"One of them had an *r* in it. That's a giveaway." He regarded me speculatively. "New York? New Jersey? Maybe Maryland?"

"You were right on the first try," I told him. "I'm from GuUderland, New York. Now, let *me* make a guess. You were born here in Louisiana."

"Right on the button," Dave said. "I've never lived anywhere else. That's going to change in the fall, though — I've got a scholarship to Harvard."

"You have!" I exclaimed. "How marvelous! You're going to love New England. I go to school in Boston, and it's just beautiful there."

"Nore, come *on*," Josie said impatiently. "You're the one who was making such a big deal out of everybody's waiting for us."

"You're right," I said. "We had better go in. It was nice meeting you, Dave. You, too, Mr. Parlange."

As we headed back to the house, Josie stalked ahead of me with head thrust forward and shoulders set belligerently. I was more amused than upset by the exaggerated display of pique. In the short time I'd been at Shadow Grove, I had already begun to become accustomed to my stepsister's fluc-

tuating moods. The emotional thunderstorms seemed to come and go with little rhyme or reason, and I was willing to bet that this particular one would soon blow over.

I was right. Within minutes after the four of us were seated at the table (Lisette had served Dad's lunch to him in his office, so that he wouldn't have to tear himself away from the typewriter), Josie's aura of gloom had been displaced by her brighter side. As she gobbled her sandwich, her lack of appetite forgotten, she enthusiastically described to Gabe the newly discovered discotheque.

"It's called the Teen Dance Machine," she said. "They've got a big sign up that says they're open every night but Sunday. Why don't we go there tonight and see what it's like?"

"Suits me," Gabe said. "How about you, Nore — want to go dancing?"

"Sure," I said. "It sounds like fun."

"I don't think that would be a very good idea tonight," said Lisette. "Nore has only just arrived, and her father has hardly had a chance to say hello to her. I'm sure that Chuck would like to spend a little time with his daughter before you children go rushing off to some local nightspot."

"Dad won't mind," I said with certainty. "We have the whole summer."

"I want you to wait, Nore." The tone of Lisette's voice left no room for argument. "I'd like to get some information about that 'Dance Machine' place before I give Gabe permission to take you girls there. You don't know what sort of people might frequent an establishment like that. Some of those dance spots are totally inappropriate for teenagers."

"That's crazy!" exclaimed Josie. "It's called the *Teen Dance Machine*! It wouldn't have that name if it weren't an under-twenty-one club."

"We'll discuss this later," said her mother. "Let's not argue over lunch, dear."

"You're mean!" Josie exploded. "You're just plain mean! You never want us to do anything!"

"I said *later*, Jo," Lisette repeated quietly.

"'Later' — later' — it's always 'later!' I'm sick of 'later!' What's the sense of Uving if we can't have some fun right *now*?"

Shoving back her chair so hard that she almost tipped it over, Josie jumped up from the table and bolted from the room.

Lisette sighed. "Once again, I apologize for my daughter, Nore. I hate for you to have to keep witnessing scenes like this one, but I can't start giving in to Josie when she throws these tantrums. She's right at that age when nothing is less than a crisis to her. After she's calmed down a bit, I'll go up and see if I can reason with her."

She paused, shifted mental gears, and then asked brightly, "Who wffi have another sandwich? You're ready for one, aren't you, Gabe? You've always been a two-sandwich boy. Now, teU me, Nore, which books did you find for your father?"

So, I described the books that I had checked out of the library. Lisette seemed to be familiar with almost aU of them and commented knowledgeably on both the contents and the authors. The remainder of the lunch hour passed pleasantly enough, and, although Gabe did not take much part in the conversation, he did not seem to be especially upset about the fact that our half-formed plan for the evening had been aborted.

When the meal was over, Lisette suggested that we all go upstairs and "take a midday Ue-down."

That's a custom here in the South," she explained to me. "We get up early to take advantage of the cool of the summer mornings and then take siestas in the middle of the day to avoid the heat."

When the idea was proposed it sounded reasonable enough. Once ensconced in my room, however, I found napping impossible. Although I'd been up since dawn, I wasn't the least bit drowsy. The pounding of the workmen on the roof shattered the noonday quiet, and the moment I lay down on the bed, my mind started seething with questions about this family that my father's marriage had made me an inadvertent part of.

The exchange at the breakfast table stifi disturbed me. Something had happened there, something not obvious enough for me to be able to pinpoint, but meaningful nevertheless. And what about the scene that morning at the supermarket? Why had Lisette reacted so strangely to the encounter with her late mother's dressmaker? It was not surprising that she would not have recognized the woman — twenty years was a long time to remember anyone — but I could see no reason for her response to have been so icy. And the potato chips! Lisette had told Josie that she would not buy them. It was obvious that the "important errand" that had taken her back into the store so hastily had been manufactured to escape further conversation with Elaine Shannon.

That wasn't aU that bothered me either. Mrs. Shannon had called my stepmother Lisette Berge, a name that, Lisette had tried to explain, had also been her mother's. Yet Berge had been not Lisette's maiden name, but the name that she had acquired through her previous marriage.

The room was unbearably close, and my body was sticky

with perspiration. When I had first come upstairs, I had pulled shut the louvers of the French doors in an effort to block out the sunlight. Now, realizing my mistake, I got up from the bed and threw both the front and side doors open to the balcony.

No stir of breeze rewarded this effort. Beyond the wooden railing, the great, green heads of the oak trees hung motionless in the still air. In the driveway below, the gleaming metallic roof of the Parlange truck threw off shimmering waves of heat, and in the garden to the east, the rosebushes seemed to sag wearily beneath their overload of drooping blossoms.

The combination of the midday heat and the dry textured sandwich I had eaten at lunchtime was making me terribly thirsty. Turning away from the balcony, I went back across the room and opened the door to the hallway. As soon as I stepped out into the hallway, I became conscious of the low hum of voices in the adjoining room. True to her word, Lisette had apparently gone in to talk with Josie.

I was halfway across the hallway, en route to the bathroom, when my stepsister's voice rose suddenly in high-pitched accusation.

"— because of *Nore!*" she exclaimed. "It's just not fair!"

"Hush," Lisette said. "Hush now, Jo. You know better than that."

Her voice dropped, and the rest of the words were lost to me.

I continued on into the bathroom and ran a glass full of water. I felt oddly shaken, both by the jolt of hearing my name shouted out so unexpectedly and by the emotion with which it had been uttered. What I had heard in Josie's voice had not been the resentful whine of a complaining teenager. It had been a cry of very real anguish.

I drank the water slowly and then, with the empty glass still clutched in my hand, went back out into the hallway. The murmur of voices continued in the room across from me, and though I couldn't be certain, I thought that I again heard my name.

For a long time I stood immobile, staring at the closed door. Then I did something that it embarrasses me to admit to. I lifted the bathroom water glass to the door of Josie's bedroom and held its open end tight against the wooden panel. Then, I pressed my ear to the bottom of the glass.

The technique that I had once read about did actually work. The sound in the room beyond the door was tremendously magnified.

It was Lisette who was speaking.

"— keep them apart as much as possible," she was saying. "Your brother is obviously very much attracted to her."

"You can't hope to keep them apart," Josie objected. "Both of them *live* here. There's no way to keep them from seeing each other."

"I *also* live here," her mother reminded her. "At Shadow Grove, I am the one in control of things. Gabe knows that and, while he may not like it, he has no choice but to accept it. They will see each other here, yes, but under my supervision. In a dating situation, the atmosphere would be different. Things could get out of hand very quickly,"

"But, how, at a disco —"

"You must trust me," said Lisette. "I do know what's best for us."

"How can you say that!" Jose fired back angrily. "*You* got us into this! *You* made the deal! You never asked our advice or our permission! It was bad enough for the boys, but for *me*—"

"I know," Lisette said softly. "Josie, I do know, and, believe me, I'm sorry. This situation is in a way worse for me than for anyone. If I had it to do again, I would certainly do it differently. But, I didn't think. I was young—I was furious—my emotions were out of control. I did what I thought would be the right thing for the four of us."

"But, it *wasn't!*" Josie was crying now. "We can't go on like this, Maman! We've got to get some fun out of Ufe! Please, let us go dancing!"

"No," Lisette said regretfully. "Please, trust me, dear. I made one bad mistake, but I don't intend to make another. If a romance should develop between Gabe and Chuck's daughter, it could destroy everything. Gabe might even tell her—"

"He wouldn't do that!"

"Nore Robbins is a danger." Lisette's voice was low, but the glass brought the words to my ear with the precision of a telephone receiver. "She is by far the worst threat that we have ever had to face."

"Why?" Josie asked her. "Just tell me, *why* is Nore such a threat? Because Gabe likes her? Gabe's liked lots of girls! You've never objected before when he got hung up on somebody. We all of us know how those romances of his have to end."

"This is different," said Lisette, "because Nore is Chuck's daughter. She is part of the package that Gabe will soon have to deal with. But there may be even more of a problem than that, Jo. Maybe it's something to worry about, or maybe it isn't; there's no way yet to be certain what effect this may have on things. The fact is, though, that with Nore Robbins, for the first time since all this started, we are involved with someone who has an uncanny awareness of *time*."

## CHAPTER

I WAS far too ashamed of the way in which I had eavesdropped on that conversation to have even considered repeating it to my father. I have wondered since what his reaction would have been if I had. It was stiff so early. The friction between us had not yet developed. Might he have believed me then, if I had told him the things that I had overheard, and, if so, would they have made any sort of sense to him?

I doubt that they would have, for they certainly didn't to me. Safely back in my room, with the door closed behind me, I sat down on the bed and let the strange dialogue play back through my mind. "*You* made the deal!" What deal could Josie have been talking about? "Nore Robbins is a danger." That was ridiculous. How could a seventeen-year-old girl be a danger to anybody? The "awareness of time" that Lisette had referred to was of no importance to anybody except to me, for whom it was significant only because it meant that I didn't have to wear a watch.

Perhaps I had heard things incorrectly, I told myself. It was possible — no, it *was probable* — that the drinking glass had distorted the voices behind Josie's door. What Lisette had said, quite likely, had been, "Nore Robbins is a *stranger*"—a stranger whose presence might threaten her control over her son.

In retrospect, I realize that the more I sifted through the sands of that strange conversation, the more the tiny grains of meaning slid away from me. At last, exhausted from the effort, I stretched out on the bed, determined to take Lisette's suggestion to take a "siesta." The activity on the roof had now ceased, and before long I heard the engine of the Parlange truck come to life in the driveway. That sound receded with increasing distance and was replaced at last by silence, broken only by the drone of cicadas singing their naptime songs in the trees beyond the open doors to the balcony. I did manage to nap a bit, though my mind must have kept on rationalizing while I was dozing, because when I opened my eyes again, the exchange between Lisette and Josie had taken on the semblance of a half-remembered dream. The one fact that did remain sharp in my mind was the one that I *wanted* to hold there — that his mother felt that Gabe was attracted to me.

At dinner that night I was so aware of Gabe's presence that I could scarcely bring myself to look across at him. I had found him attractive at first meeting, and the possibility that this feeling might be reciprocated was enough to make me both exhilarated and nervous. The high, arched cheekbones that stood out like wings beneath the taut, tanned skin; the sensitive mouth; the deep-set eyes, sometimes shadowed and thoughtful, sometimes twinkling with laughter, all seemed suddenly incredibly exciting.

As often happened when he was enthused about a new writing project, Dad was monopolizing the conversation. Lisette sat, listening in fascination, as he went over every detail of the scene that he had worked on that afternoon. Under the assumption that everyone's attention was directed toward my father, I permitted myself a quick glance in Gabe's direction. I was startled to find that his eyes were waiting for mine.

Our gaze locked into place, and I felt my cheeks growing hot. To cover my embarrassment, I groped blindly for my water glass. My hand slid past it and almost knocked it over.

Keeping a deadpan expression, Gabe let one eyelid drop in an exaggerated wink. Josie, who was seated next to him, raised her napkin to her mouth in an attempt to muffle a giggle. As I glanced back and forth between brother and sister, I saw that both sets of eyes were dancing with light that was more than a simple reflection of flames from the dinner candles. It seemed suddenly to me that the two of them were enjoying an amusing secret that I was being silently invited to share.

"Did you get a nap today?" Gabe asked me softly.

"A nap?"

"I know Maman sent you upstairs to take one. She's a great one for that sort of thing." His voice dropped even lower, now almost a whisper. "The problem is, though, that I don't think she took a nap herself. I have this weird feeling that she and your father may get sleepy quite early tonight. What do you think, Josie?"

"I think it'll be lullaby time along about nine-thirty." This time Josie's giggle could not be stifled, but came bubbling out in a kind of hiccup.

Her mother turned to frown at her.

"What in the world are you whispering about, Jo? If it's all that funny, why don't you share it with the rest of us?"

"We're telling dirty jokes," Josie said blandly. "We didn't think that you'd be interested in hearing them."

"Well, you were right about that," said Lisette. "I don't want to hear them, and *you* don't need to tell them, especially not at the dinner table. If you ever tried listening, for a change, instead of talking, you might learn something interesting. How many people have the chance to know the plot of a book before it has even been written?"

For the remainder of the meal, we listened to Dad's discourse on his new novel, and it wasn't until dinner was over that he had finally managed to talk himself out. Then, while Gabe served the adults after-dinner drinks in the courtyard, Josie and I cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. By the time that we were finished in the kitchen and could join the family outside, their conversation had become focused on other subjects.

"— to bring a crew out here to put in the telephone," Lisette said saying, as Josie and I came out onto the patio. "We're out so far from town, they'll have to put in a special line. It may take them a while to get this sort of project going."

"What I don't understand is why you didn't have it done long ago," said Dad. "In this day and age, how can anybody live without a phone?"

"I've never missed it," said Lisette. "A telephone's a luxury that simply never struck me as particularly important. I'm not a person who gets involved in many social activities. Not putting in a phone meant one less intrusion on our privacy."

"You and your precious privacy!" The exasperation in

Dad's voice was tempered by affection. "Well, I can't afford that luxury. My agent and editors need to be able to reach me. Besides, I don't think it's safe to be so out of touch with people. What if we had an emergency out here and needed to get help? What if one of the kids got hurt and we had to call an ambulance?"

"Please, Chuck, don't lecture me. You're right, I know. I told you, I've got our name on the müe-long waiting list. The telephone company will get to us as soon as they can." Lisette shielded her mouth to cover a yawn. "I don't know why I'm suddenly so sleepy. I'm embarrassed to say, I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"I'm not so bright-eyed myself," Dad admitted a bit sheepishly. "It's been so long since I've spent a fuU day writing that I'd almost forgotten how draining it could be. Why don't we make an early night of it?"

"I won't give you any argument about that." Lisette glanced across at me. "Nore, you must be exhausted, you were up so early. Aren't you about ready to turn in, too?"

"Not reaUy —" I started to say, but Gabe interrupted me.

"Why don't we all of us caU it a night? I've got some reading to do. Now that I've got a famous author for a step-father, I need to start reading novels."

"I'm going to go up to my room and play records," announced Josie.

So, although I was not feeling in the stightest bit sleepy, I found myself leaving the moonlit courtyard with the others. As I mounted the stairs with the rest of them, I couldn't help but think how strange it was that Gabe and Josie had predicted this early retirement hour.

We bid each other goodnight in the upstairs hallway. Dad gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, but bis eyes were on Li-

sette. Then we spüt forces to head for our respective bedrooms.

"Don't go to bed yet," Josie whispered to me as we walked together down the haU. "I know you're not any sleepier than I am."

"What do you mean?" I asked her. "What else is there to do?"

"We can go to the disco."

"Go *where*?" I regarded her incredulously. "But, your mother told us —"

"Give our folks fifteen minutes, and they'll be out for the count. Neither one wffi know another thing until morning." Josie flashed me a mischievous grin. "Go on into your room and wait. IU check things out with Gabe, and then IU be back for you."

Too surprised to question her further, I did as directed. Once I was in my bedroom, however, I felt both foolish and bewüdered. Was this some sort of joke, or was Josie serious? Did she actually expect to be able to puU off a stunt like this?

I sat down on the edge of the bed to await further developments. Ten minutes passed — which became fifteen — then twenty — then twenty-two. Then, just as I was making the decision to get into bed and read myself to sleep, there was a Ught rap on my door. When I opened it, I found Josie standing in the haUway. She was dressed in skintight jeans and a V-neck shirt that hung open to a point halfway down her chest. Her cheeks were bright with rouge, and her lashes so lathered with mascara that they adhered to each other to form one sotid layer of sediment.

"Are you ready?" she whispered. "Gabe's getting the keys out of the Maman's purse. He's going to meet us out front with the car in a minute."

"Oh, Josie, I really don't know about this," I said doubtfully. "Your mother *did* tell us —"

"Nore, please?" Josie said beseechingly. "Gabe won't take me out dancing unless you come too. He doesn't want to go anyplace like this with only his sister."

"You want to go so badly?"

"It'll be a blast, Nore!" Josie's eyes were shining. "They've got this great huge video screen and aU the latest rock tapes. There's this disk jockey guy whoU play anything you want him to. AU the kids from MerveiUe go there. It's where all the action is."

"How do you know aU this?" I asked her. "It wasn't on that sign we saw."

"Dave told me," said Josie. "You know, Dave, that guy with the roofing company? He said it's a reaUy cool place. He goes there aU the time."

"I see," I said softly, gazing down into her small, hopeful face, so painfuUy vulnerable beneath its ridiculous clown mask of makeup. I *did* see — exactly. I had been thirteen once myself. "AU right, Jo, I'll go with you. But, just this once. I'm not going to make a business of sneaking out Uke this."

"Nore, thanks! You're terrific!" Josie threw her arms around me in an impulsive hug. The embrace was so out of character and took me so by surprise that I was nearly toppled over. "It'll be fun, youU see! We're going to have a great time!"

"I hope so," I said, "because I don't feel good about this, Josie. I reaUy do hope that the evening turns out to be worth it."

I would Uke to be able to say that my decision was altruistic and I was agreeing to sneak out that night just be-

cause of Josie. That's partially true, of course. I did feel sympathy for my young stepsister; I could remember all too well my own first crush on an inaccessible boy. I will have to admit, though, that I had another motive as well. I wanted a date — a real, away-from-Shadow-Grove date — with Gabe Berge. I wanted — well, all right, I'd come right straight out and say it — I wanted to spite Lisette. And I wanted to be kissed by her son.

So, shivering slightly with nervous anticipation, I crept with Josie down the hall and down the stairs and out into the magic of the flower-scented night.

Lisette's Monte Carlo was in front of the house with the motor running, and the door on the passenger's side was standing open. Josie shoved the front seat forward so she could scramble into the back, and Gabe raised a hand from the steering wheel in a gesture of greeting.

"I knew you'd come!" he said triumphantly as I shoved the seat back into place and climbed in next to him. His face, illuminated by moonlight, seemed to throw off its own strange radiance as though it were lit from within as well as from above. "The first moment I saw you, I knew you were my kind of girl!"

"I've got to be crazy to be doing this," I told him, puffing the door closed as carefully as I could in the hope that it would make a click rather than a slamming sound. "If your mother wakes up and checks on us —"

"She won't do that," said Josie. "Maman never wakes up when she's had the sleepytime anisette."

"She drank anisette last night, too," I reminded her. "That didn't make her sleepy. She and my dad were up long past the time that I went to bed."

"What they drank last night was from the bottle in the

pantry," said Josie. "Tonight Gabe poured their drinks from the bottle in his room."

"From his room?" I repeated skeptically. "Do you mean there are two different bottles?"

"Josie and I like to refer to them as the 'regular' and the 'sleepytime,'" said Gabe. "One's for ordinary nights, and one's for special nights like this one." There was a note in his voice that made me think that he might be smiting, but we were now moving down the shadowy driveway, and I could no longer see the expression on his face.

When he pulled through the gate out onto the road, however, the moonlight came bursting upon us like a silver spotlight.

Gabe turned to grin across at me. "Well, we made it! Out of the cobwebs of Shadow Grove and into the *now I*"

"And off to the Dance Machine!" crowed Josie.

"Yes, off to the Dance Machine!" This was a whole different Gabe from the one I was used to seeing. "Get over here, Nore!" he commanded with mock ferocity. "Tonight we're going to forget all the 'stepbrother' stuff. If you've got a hometown boyfriend, I don't want to know about him."

Willingly, I stepped across to sit close beside him.

"I don't have a boyfriend," I said. "At least, not anyone serious. The boys I dated in Gunderland were just good buddies."

Gabe's arm slipped down and tightened around my shoulders, and I felt those electric currents run all the way through me.

It was the beginning of a night that I would always remember.

It was also, in certain ways, the beginning of the end.

## CHAPTER

### -4 g >-

**I**T was almost ten-thirty by the time we got to MerveiUe. As we cruised through the center of town, the place seemed so empty that I began to wonder if we had made a mistake in coming. There was no one on the sidewalks, and the row of storefronts facing out upon the main street were either totally dark or Ut dimly from the back. The only evidence of Ufe was a few cars parked in front of the movie theater and some people munching hamburgers behind the window of McDonald's.

As we approached the Teen Dance Machine, however, the atmosphere changed abruptly. We were stffi a fuU block away when the blare of rock music came rolting down the street to meet us, and when we puUed into the lot at the side of the building, there were enough cars assembled there so that Gabe had difficulty finding a parking slot.

"We close at twelve on weeknights," the man at the register told us as he accepted our admission fees. "That's not going to aUow you kids much time here."

"That's okay," Gabe told him. "We really just want to see what the place is like. Next time we'll get here earlier."

"Suit yourself," the man said with a shrug. "It's your money."

He stamped the back of Gabe's hand with the date in India ink and then did the same to mine.

When Josie, in turn, extended her hand, he hesitated.

"This is a teen club, kid," he said suspiciously. "You don't look more than twelve to me."

"Are you crazy!" Josie exclaimed indignantly. "I'm as teenage as anybody!"

The man regarded her skeptically. "How about showing me your student I.D.?"

"I don't have one," said Josie. "I don't go to school here. I've been living in Chicago."

"The schools in Chicago don't give out student I.D. cards?"

"Not the school I went to," Josie told him.

"I'm her brother," Gabe interjected. "I'll vouch for her. She's thirteen and a half."

"Well, okay," the man said reluctantly. "But, she's your responsibility. Keep an eye on her and see that she doesn't get hassled."

"Nobody has to take care of me," snapped Josie. "I've been to discos a whole lot wilder than this one."

I, myself, could not have made that statement. Although I'd been to plenty of school dances, the crowd I'd run with back in Gunderland had not been in the habit of frequenting dance halls, and my year in a restrictive New England boarding school had certainly not provided any such experiences. To me, the Teen Dance Machine was a new adventure, and within seconds my senses were reeling with the impact of flashing lights and ear-shattering music. The ceU-

ing of the cavernous room was hung with spinning mirrors that threw whirling rainbows down upon the gyrating teenagers below it. At the room's far end, on a huge, rectangular video screen, the images of rock stars writhed and twisted right along with the dancers to the crashing rhythm of recorded sound.

"Dance with me, Gabe?" Josie pleaded eagerly.

"Later, kid," Gabe told her, not unkindly. This first one's with Nore."

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me out onto the dance floor. For one crazy moment, as people closed in on all sides of us, my mind flew back to Josie's remark about the fire in the Ringling circus tent when she "almost got trampled to death" in a mad stampede. An instant later, however, that thought and all others were forgotten as Gabe's arm came around me and I gave myself up to the pounding beat of the music.

Time passed; I don't know how much. My time sense was overpowered that night by my other senses. The flash of lights and the intensity of sound, combined with the immediacy of Gabe's presence — the grip of his hands on mine, the heat of his body, the strange sense of intimacy, as though we two formed our own private island in a churning human sea — were too overwhelming to allow for any further sensations. Gabe danced with the grace of a jungle cat, his body surprisingly strong and under perfect control. We were so close in height that our faces were on the same level, and as he spun me away and then brought me whipping back to him, I could see my reflection in the dark twin mirrors of his eyes.

When the music came to an end, he pulled me to him. For a moment, I was held so tightly against his chest that I could feel the thud of his heartbeat as though it were my own.

Then, just as abruptly, he released me.

"You can dance!" he said approvingly. "I mean, *really* dance!"

"So—can — you!" I gasped, breathless as much from his nearness as from physical exertion. "Do you see Josie anywhere? We probably shouldn't have left her so long by herself."

"She wasn't by herself. She was out on the dance floor when we were." He scanned the milting crowd. "Oh — there she is, over there. She's latched onto the Incredible Hulk from the roofing company."

Following his gaze, I saw a radiant Josie headed toward us, her hand clamped firmly onto the arm of Dave Parlange.

"Look who I found!" she announced triumphantly as they came up beside us. "We were out there dancing! Did you see us?"

"Gabe did, but I missed it." I couldn't help smiling at the mental picture of such an unlikely combination of dance partners. Dave had to be over six feet tall, and tiny Josie, in her provocative outfit and exotic makeup, looked like nothing so much as a small girl dressed for a costume party.

"Hi, Dave!" I said. "Have you met Gabe Berge, Josie's brother?"

"I don't think so," Dave said, extending his hand. "Good to meet you, Gabe."

"Same here," Gabe said with a minimum of enthusiasm. He gave Dave's hand a perfunctory shake. "I hear that you guys finished up with the roof today."

"At long last," Dave said good-naturedly. "That was one big job! I'm sure you're not going to miss aU that banging over your heads." He turned to Josie. "What do you say, kid? Ready for another round?"

"Oh, yes!" Josie's eyes were shining. "See, Nore, wasn't I right? I told you we'd have a blast here, and Maman won't ever have to know."

"Gabe," I said, as Josie and Dave moved out of earshot, "I want to know about this 'sleepytime' anisette you gave our parents. It scares me to think of doping people up like that. Are you sure the stuff that's in it isn't going to hurt them?"

"Of course I'm sure," Gabe said. "We've been doing this for years, Nore. It's not a prescription drug, it's just some herbs."

"Herbs?" I repeated. "You mean like mint leaves or orégano? How can something that grows in the garden put people to sleep?"

There are plenty of herbs in the world that you've probably never heard of," Gabe said. "Pasóte, tártago, bilda, xanthan and anamu for starters. The right combinations can do aU sorts of things to people. The secret is, you have to know how to use them."

"Where did you get the herbs for the anisette?" I asked him skeptically.

"From one of the Cajun 'witch girls,' " Gabe said with a grin. "A pretty girl, too, but not quite as pretty as you are."

"Was she your girlfriend?" I asked, trying to make the question sound casual.

"I guess you could say that," Gabe said. That was a long time ago, though. I don't remember too much about Fetiche, except that she was pretty and lived in a cottage over by the river. She had this herb garden out behind it, and she gave me some cuttings. I planted them at Shadow Grove."

"It couldn't have been *that* long ago," I objected. "You're only seventeen now. What did you do, start dating when you were in nursery school?"

"I was a very precocious child," Gabe told me blandly. "And — talk about precocious — here comes my baby sister with her muscle-headed roofer friend. The guy looks totally bushed, and the song isn't even over yet. I think Jo's danced him straight through the floor."

"Dave may be big," I said, "but he's certainly no 'muscle-head.' He's been accepted at Harvard, and he's even got a scholarship."

"No kidding!" Gabe said. "Well, I've heard that those Ivy League schools like to flaunt their token minority students. Maybe they've accepted Parlange as their 'token roofer.' If you ask me —"

He broke off the sentence as Josie came rushing up to us with Dave trailing wearily along behind her.

"Come dance with me, Gabe?" she pleaded, grabbing her brother's hand. "Dave's tired, and I'm not, and it's almost twelve already. This place is going to close in just a few minutes."

"And you want to make good use of every one of them, is that it?" Gabe asked teasingly.

"Yes, of course! It's a special evening, and Nore's had *her* turn!"

"Go ahead, Gabe," I said, laughing. "I'm all danced out. I want to see which of the two of you is going to drop first."

"It won't be Josie; you can bet on that," Dave commented wryly, as we watched her drag Gabe out onto the dance floor. "That little girl's got more energy than a steam engine. What do you guys feed her, anyway — pep pills à la mode?"

"Sugar Pops," I told him, "and gumbo and potato chips. Actually, she's not always this hyper. She's just a little souped up tonight and excited about being here."

"She's a funny kid," Dave said. There's something about her—" The end of his sentence was drowned out by the blare of the music.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, leaning closer. " 'Funny,' how?"

"I don't know exactly," he said. "I've been trying to figure it out. The first day my uncle Phil and I started working at Shadow Grove, she came out to talk to us. She seemed like a nice kid — kind of lonely and at loose ends — I didn't mind visiting during our lunch break. My sister Marcy's an eighth grader, so I'm used to girls that age. But, Josie would say things — reaUy weird things —"

"Like what?" I asked.

"WeU, Uke for instance, she asked me how taU I was. When I told her, she said, 'My brother would give anything to be six foot one.' I said, 'Who knows? Maybe he will be. I grew a fiffi three inches my senior year in high school.' And Josie said, 'That won't happen to poor Gabe. He's stuck where he is.' "

"She was just being sffiy," I said. "I think she says dumb things sometimes just to get attention."

"AU kids do that," Dave acknowledged. "Even Marcy does sometimes. But this thing with Josie was different. It was like the statement just sort of popped out without her knowing it was going to. Then, when she realized what she'd said, she got aU flustered and tried to make a joke of it."

"That *is* odd," I admitted.

"WeU, maybe I'm making too much out of it." He paused, then smiled. "Hey, not to change the subject, but how long are you here for? In the state, I mean, not here at the Dance Machine. Is it just for a short visit or for the whole summer?"

"For the summer," I said. "It's a 'get-acquainted' visit with my stepfamily."

"Then, would it be all right if I called you sometime? Maybe we could go to a movie or something."

"That would be nice," I said. "The problem is, though, we haven't got a telephone."

"How about my stopping by if I'm out in your area?"

"When would you ever be 'out in our area'?" I asked teasingly. "According to Josie, Shadow Grove's a million miles from nowhere."

"Maybe I can come up with an errand of some kind to bring me out there," Dave said. "Josie tells me that you're having a pool put in. Don't you think it would be useful to have it roofed over?"

"It certainly would," I responded, matching his solemn tone. "I don't swim, so I wouldn't get much use out of it myself, but it would keep the others dry if they wanted to swim when it was raining." Unable to keep up the game, I started to laugh. "Do come out if you can. We'd all be glad to see you."

Especially Josie, I added silently, picturing her ecstasy if Dave Parlange were to suddenly appear on the doorstep. For my own part, I wasn't too sure that I was ready yet to get into a round of summer dating. Before I started going out with other people, I wanted to see if what I felt happening between Gabe and me was going to escalate into a fledged romance.

As we had been warned by the manager, the Teen Dance Machine closed down exactly at midnight and there was a noisy mass exodus out to the crowded parking lot. "See you soon, guys," Dave said casually as we headed off in opposite directions to locate our cars. The Monte Carlo was parked

safely where we had left it — it had not, in Cinderella style, turned into a pumpkin — and Gabe, Josie and I pUed into it, aU three of us suddenly gone quiet, drained and exhausted by the high tempo of the evening.

It wasn't untü we had left the town of MerveiUe behind us and were out on the highway that Gabe seemed abruptly to zero in on Dave's parting remark. When he did, his reaction was unexpected.

"What did Parlange mean by that comment about 'seeing us soon'?" The tone of his voice made the question more of an accusation than a query. The roofing's been completed. There's no reason why we should ever have to see that guy again."

I was sitting with my eyes closed, relaxed and almost dozing, enjoying the pleasant ache of tired muscles and the soothing rush of soft air as it washed in against my face through the open window.

"Dave asked me if he could come visit us out at Shadow Grove," I said drowsUy. "I told him that, of course, we'd be happy to see him."

"You told him that, without asking the rest of us first?" Gabe's formerly jubilant mood seemed to have vanished completely. "Don't you think that was pretty presumptuous of you?"

"No, I don't," I said, surprised and hurt by the question. "I didn't think I needed permission to ask someone over. Your mother told me herself that I was to consider Shadow Grove my home. In my own home, I should be free to invite the guests I want."

"Don't be sffiy about this, Gabe," said Josie, leaning forward in the backseat to add her two cents' worth to the conversation. "You know how much I want to see Dave

again. If Nore *had* asked us, I would have said, 'Wow-ee! Terrific!' "

"I'm sure you would have," said her brother. "You've got another one of your king-sized crushes, and you're just not thinking straight. This guy is college age. You don't really believe that it would be you he'd be coming to see, do you?"

"Well, sure," said Josie. "Who else would it be? I'm the one who's his friend. He hardly knows the rest of you."

"You're living in a dream world, Jo," Gabe said, with what seemed to me an inappropriate show of bitterness. "You should know by this time that this sort of thing can't work. It hasn't before, and it won't now. It won't in the future either, not in aU of the next miffion years."

In a sudden, startling display of unprovoked anger, he slammed his foot down on the accelerator, and the car leapt forward with a jolting burst of speed. With his right foot pressing the gas pedal flat against the floorboards, Gabe gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands and glared out through the front windshield at the long strip of empty road unwinding ahead of us.

Sliding low in my seat, I watched nervously as the needle crept higher and higher on the gauge of the speedometer. Beyond the side windows, the moontit shapes of trees shot past us at increasing speed until they melded into an indistinguishable blur.

"Gabe—" I began shakily, unable to believe that this could really be happening. My voice was lost in the rush of wind past the windows.

"Gabe, slow down!" Josie yelled at the top of her lungs. "You're scaring me! What are you trying to do, get us aU kffied?"

"Why not?" Gabe shouted back at her. "We've none of us

died before! It would be an exciting experience, better even than disco!"

"Don't joke about things like that!" Josie commanded. "You're not being funny, Gabe. Please, slow down! You just can't *do* this to us!"

"Oh, can't I?" Gabe asked matter-of-factly. "You've had your evening of dancing. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? Now, here you are, complaining because I want to have a good time too. I like to drive fast; it gets the adrenaline flowing. What's the use of tiving if you can't do the things you enjoy?"

"You're sounding just Uke Louis!" Josie cried miserably.

"So, maybe I *am* Uke Louis, or maybe I'd like to be! Lou had guts! He did things his way and accepted the consequences!"

"Gabe, stop this! Have you gone crazy?" I tried to shriek out the words, but my voice had shrunken with terror, and the plea that emerged was no more than a strangled whimper. "I don't know what this is aU about — but, please, Gabe — please—"

At that point, something happened that, I now feel certain, saved our Uves that night. The whine of the wind was joined by another, shriller sound — the famUiar wail of a siren, growing steadily louder.

"It's a poïce car!" Josie twisted in her seat to look back through the rear window. "Gabe, you're going to have to pull over! He's right behind us!"

"A cop?" Gabe said blankly. "Where could a cop have come from? I didn't think anybody ever patroUed out here by the river."

"Thank God, you were wrong!" I said, regaining control of my voice as retief surged through me. When I felt the

speed of the car beginning to lessen, my terror was replaced by anger. "I hope he fines you a fortune! I hope that he —"

"Do you have your driver's license with you?" Gabe asked me.

His voice was calm and pleasant. I turned to stare at him. This was the old Gabe, speaking — the Gabe who had walked with me by the pond that morning, who had given me a tour of the slave quarters, who had laughed and joked with me at dinner. The wUd-eyed young man of a moment ago had vanished. I could not beUeve the suddenness of the transformation.

"Do you?" he prodded.

"Yes, of course," I said. "It's in my waUet."

Then, change seats with me when we stop. There's no time for arguing—" as my mouth popped open in automatic protest. "Don't worry, I'll finance the fine, but you've got to help me. If I'm nailed as the driver tonight, there's going to be heU to pay."

"What do you mean?" I asked in bewüderment. "Don't *you* have a license?"

"Not any longer," Gabe said. "It expired, and there was a problem about renewing it. I'll explain the whole thing later. Nore, you've got to come through for me! I know you're mad right now, but this is terribly important."

The most incredible part of this story is that I did what he commanded. As Gabe brought the car to a rolling stop on the shoulder of the road, I aUowed him to haul me across his lap and place me in the driver's seat. He, himself, sUd across to the passenger's side, so that by the time the patrolman came up to the car, it was I who was situated behind the wheel

The policeman was a grandfatherly man with a shock of

thick, gray hair and a face weU-grooved with smUe lines. He was not smiling now.

"I booked you at almost ninety," he told me icily, as he watched me fumble through my waUet to locate my Ucense. "Do you see that big tree sticking out in the curve of the road up ahead? Back at the station, we call that Killer Oak. A half-dozen people have lost their Uves plowing into that. What were you kids trying to do, commit triple suicide?"

My mind echoed the question — what *had* Gabe been trying to do? What possible reason could there have been for his crazy behavior? He had not been drinking; had not done drugs; had not even, as far as I could see, had anything happen to him that night that might reasonably have been expected to have made him angry. Obviously, he had not been happy about my having invited Dave over, but that, alone, should not have evoked such a violent reaction.

As the policeman wrote out a ticket, I glanced surreptitiously across at the young man next to me. His head was bent, and his face was lost in shadows.

"TU explain the whole thing later," he had assured me. Well, I certainly meant to insist that he keep his word.

## CHAPTER

~4 M }>

**A**LTHOUGH I did not know it then, my initial days at Shadow Grove were more important than the sum of the events that followed them. They were my initiation to the strangeness of my new situation and my introduction to the further strangeness that was soon to follow.

As life settled into place and I became used to the regime there, what had, at first, seemed noteworthy began to seem commonplace to me. There was a regular routine to which I quickly became accustomed. I grew used to waking to the rosy light of a southern dawn and to watching the sunrise fade from two sections of sky. I settled into the routine of taking an early stroll about the grounds, although Gabe was never again to be a part of such occasions. I would see him, sometimes, engaged in his morning running, and he would smile and wave in greeting as he passed me, but he never stopped to talk.

The truth of it is that during those particular weeks, Gabe

didn't talk to me much at all. It was as though the romantic attraction that had initially flared between us had been killed on that mad drive back from Merville.

I don't mean to imply that he totally stopped speaking. The morning after our traumatic evening, he apologized profusely for having been "so dumb and reckless" and for having given his sister and me such a terrible scare. He paid me the money to cover the fine for speeding and even volunteered to carry the preaddressed envelope the policeman had given me down to the road to hand in person to the mailman. Beyond that point, he was polite and pleasant when we were together as a family, but on all other occasions he kept his distance, both physically and emotionally.

When I pressed him on the subject of his driver's license, he was, at once, both vague and seemingly candid.

"I let it lapse while we were living in Chicago," he told me. "I'm sure that by this time you've noticed what a worrywart my mother is. She was so uptight about my driving in city traffic that I never got to use the car, so it just didn't seem important to get my license renewed."

"You could have had it done in the months since you got back," I said. "It can't be all that difficult a procedure."

"You wouldn't think so," Gabe agreed, "but it's turned out to be a hassle. I've had to send to Baton Rouge for a certified copy of my birth certificate, and for some weird reason, I'm having a hell of a time getting it. The original is there someplace, of course, but there's some sort of mess-up in the records department, and they can't seem to locate it. They're making a search, but, in the meantime, I'm not supposed to drive."

And so the slow-paced days of summer slid one into another, indistinguishable except for Wednesdays, which were

the days when Lisette's cleaning girl came. After my step-mother's dinner-table dissertation on the Cajuns and the exotic descriptions I'd read in the books in the library, I have to admit to experiencing a slight feeling of disappointment when Cetina arrived that first Wednesday, dressed in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and blue jeans, with a Walkman cassette player attached to her belt. A quiet, gentle-faced girl, not much older than I, she wore her long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and worked to the accompaniment of hard rock channeled to her through earphones. Although I did recall Lisette's statement that "the strain has been watered down," I was still unprepared to meet someone so pleasant and ordinary.

As the summer progressed, so did the heat. I could literally feel it increasing from one day to the next. By the third week of June, the promise of it was there awaiting me before I opened my eyes in the morning, and by nine the total weight of it was already starting to descend upon us. The midday siesta became not only acceptable to me, but a necessary part of each day, and evenings did not drop to a temperature that I considered comfortable until several hours after the sun had disappeared behind the oak trees.

What did we do with ourselves during those long, drifting days of heat and inactivity? We were all of us there together, and yet we did not mesh our lives.

Dad was involved with the writing of his novel. He had submitted the first three chapters to his agent, who was now in the process of bargaining with a publisher, and Dad was hurriedly trying to finish a total outline before going to New York to work out the details of a contract.

As for Lisette, she always seemed to be busy doing something—dusting furniture, doing needlework, preparing

meals. Sometimes she sat at the piano in the parlor and tinkled out delicate melodies that I had never heard before. On other occasions, she would change pace abruptly and start pounding out good, strong Dixieland that shook the walls. She spent a lot of time doing things with flowers and would spend long periods of time standing at the kitchen counter, arranging roses in antique vases and floating cream-colored gardenias in low, silver bowls.

Once or twice a week, Lisette drove into town to do errands and to shop for groceries. Often, on those occasions, Josie and I went with her to check books out of the library or take in an afternoon movie or simply to wander, browsing, through clothing shops and record stores.

Gabe did not, after my initial morning at Shadow Grove, express any further interest in accompanying us to Merveille. Instead, he seemed suddenly to have developed an all-consuming passion for fishing. Through a classified ad in the Sunday paper, he bought himself a secondhand rowboat with an outboard motor and moored it in the rushes across the road from us. From then on, we hardly saw him. Every morning, he would disappear with a fuel can and his fishing gear immediately after breakfast and would reappear around dinnertime, sometimes bringing back a few bass, but, more often than not, empty-handed.

Once, Lisette surprised me by suggesting that he take me with him.

"Don't you think that it's time that you showed Nore some of the scenery along the river?" she asked him. "It's like a whole foreign world back there, so green and lovely. I'm sure she's never seen anything quite like it."

Gabe shot his mother a quick, dark glance and shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "There's plenty of time for that. We've got all summer."

"Sometimes it's better not to put things off too long," said Lisette. "You never know what problems may arise if you do."

"I said, *later*," Gabe told her brusquely. "I'm just not ready yet."

He turned on his heel and stalked angrily out of the room.

That evening, he didn't come home until after dark. The rest of us had long since finished eating, and Josie and I were out in the kitchen in the process of loading the dishwasher. Gabe entered the room without a word of greeting, served himself from the soup pot on the back of the stove, and left again, still without speaking. A moment later, I heard the sound of his feet crashing hard upon the stairs and realized that he was taking his supper up to his room.

"Why is he acting this way?" I asked Josie, not attempting to conceal my hurt and bewilderment. "He seemed to like me well enough when I first got here. What have I done to make him so angry now?"

"You haven't done anything," said Josie. "Gabe gets Uke this when he's under a lot of pressure. He's got things on his mind, that's all."

"What sort of things?" I asked her, and then — as a possible explanation occurred to me — "Could it be that girl he used to go with, the one who gave him the herbs he uses in the anisette? He said that she lived in a cottage over by the river. Do you suppose he might be seeing her again?"

"No," Josie said with certainty. "Félicité is gone. She and Gabe broke up a long time ago."

"Maybe she's changed her mind and come back," I suggested. "If that were the case, it would explain so many

things — the long hours Gabe spent away from home each day, the often nonexistent catch after a whole day's fishing, his resistance to his mother's request that he take me with him on one of his excursions on the river.

"That's impossible," said Josie. "Felicité's dead."

"Dead!" For some reason, I reacted with as much shock to that statement as if I had known Gabe's former girlfriend personally. "When did that happen? Did Gabe just find out about it? No wonder he's been acting so distant and preoccupied."

"It didn't just happen. Gabe's known about it for years," Josie said. "He wasn't all that upset by it, even back when it happened. By then, the two of them had been broken up for ages."

"He *wasn't upset by it!*" I repeated incredulously. "But, Jo, he *had* to be! Maybe they weren't still going together, but to have somebody your own age, someone you'd once really cared about, *die* —"

"It happens aU the time, Nore," Josie said calmly. "Friends grow away from you, and they *do* die. That's why it's better not to get too attached to people. When you do, aU that happens is that you end up sad."

Lying in bed that night, I thought back upon that statement and could hardly believe that the chüd had actually made it.

Despite her peculiarities, however, as the weeks slid past, I found myself developing a real fondness for my stepsister. With my father and Gabe so involved with their own activities, a lot of my time that summer was spent with Josie. I grew familiar with all her favorite records, and she, with the contents of my tape collection. We experimented with my blow dryer and curling iron, giving each other wild and

wonderful hafrdos; we took long walks along the bank of the river, and we lay in the sun, developing our tans, while a crew from a company caUed Holiday Pools, Inc., lined an oval-shaped pit with cement to create a swimming pool.

Often, in the late afternoons, when shade feU into the courtyard, we sat out behind the house in deck chairs and drank iced tea and played card games.

On one such occasion, Josie had just spread her winning hand out on the table and shouted, "Gin!" when a famüiar voice spoke up unexpectedly from behind us.

"Aren't you a little young to be ordering cocktails, Miss?"

"Dave!" I exclaimed, turning in surprise. "Where did you materialize from, aU of a sudden?"

"I didn't plan to burst in on you Uke this," Dave Parlange said apologetically. "I did ring the doorbell, but I guess you can't hear it out here. Cetina said that your dad was working and Josie's mom was napping, but she thought I'd find the two of you around back."

"I'm so glad you're here!" Josie crowed happily, bouncing up from her chair like an excited puppy. "I've been wondering and wondering if you were really going to come!"

"How do you know CeUna?" I asked, surprised by Dave's use of her name. "Did you meet her when you were out here doing the roofing?"

"All the old-time residents of MerveiUe know each other," Dave said. "It's like belonging to a club that goes back a hundred years. Celina was one year ahead of me in high school. Did you know that her grandfather, Charlie, used to work here as a gardener?"

"Did he reaUy?" exclaimed Josie. "Maman will be interested to learn that. How long ago was it?"

"Way back before either you or your mother was born,"

said Dave. "I believe he said it was back in the nineteen-thirties. I ran into the old guy at the hardware store the other day. He was laughing about what a coincidence it is that another generation of his family should be working out at Shadow Grove for the Berges."

"There's something sort of nice about that," I said. "It's Uke finishing a book and then suddenly finding there's a sequel. Sit down and cool off, Dave. Would you Uke some iced tea? I'd invite you to swim, but our pool doesn't have any water in it."

"That's no problem," said Dave. "I love to swim in dry pools; there's so little chance of drowning. No — seriously — I couldn't stay that long anyway. I've got to be leaving in just a few minutes. It's my sister's fourteenth birthday, and I've got to get her a present."

"Why did you go to the trouble of driving all the way out here, if you're just going to turn right around and go straight back?" In her usual, quicksilver manner, Josie had, in one instant's time, switched from a beaming smite to a petulant pout.

"I wanted to check with Nore about her plans for the weekend," said Dave. "Since you don't have a phone, this was the only way I could reach her."

It took a moment for the significance of the statement to register with Josie. When it did, the light drained abruptly from her face.

"You're asking *Nore* for a *date*?" she asked in a small, stunned voice.

"I thought we might take in a movie or something," Dave said. He plowed right ahead, obtivious to her reaction. "What do you say, Nore? Would you like to go out somewhere next Friday night?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "It would be fun — but —"

My eyes shifted to Josie. The pain on her face was more than I could contend with. "It would be fun," I repeated, "but I can't. I'm sorry. I already have plans for Friday."

"Then, what about Saturday?"

"I'm busy on Saturday, too." I longed to cushion the refusal by offering some sort of explanation. I was afraid, though, that if I did, Dave would compound the problem by inviting me to go out with him the following weekend.

"I'm really sorry," I said lamely. "Thanks, though, for asking me."

"Yeah — weU — those are the breaks, I guess."

I could tell that I had hurt him, but I could think of no way to soften the harshness of the rejection.

"Are you sure you don't want some iced tea?" I asked him awkwardly. "It's only about four right now. You don't have to leave quite yet. The stores in Merveffie will be open for another few hours."

"No, thanks. Like I said, I've got to be heading back." His smile was a little too brilliant, the show of casualness a bit too elaborate, to be convincing. "WeU, see you around, girls. Maybe we'll run into each other at the disco again."

"I hope so," I said. "I really do hope so, Dave."

There was nothing left to say then except "Goodbye." We both said that at once, avoiding each other's eyes in mutual embarrassment, and Dave left us the way he had come, disappearing around the corner of the house in several long-legged strides. A few minutes later, we heard the sound of his car starting up in the driveway. The roar of the engine seemed so loud in the afternoon stillness that I could not imagine how we could have missed hearing him arrive.

For long moments after his departure, Josie and I sat in silence.

It was I who finally broke it.

"Do you want to play another hand?" I asked.

"No." Josie had been staring down at the cards, spread face-up on the table between us. Now, she lifted her eyes to meet mine square on. "Why did you tell him that you were busy this weekend? You know that's a lie. AU we're going to do is just sit around."

"I didn't come here to spend my summer dating," I told her. "I came here to be with my father and get to know my new family."

"That's not why you turned Dave down," Josie said. "You did it because of me. You knew that I wanted to go out with him, so you wouldn't." The expressive dark eyes — so much like Gabe's, so exactly like her mother's — were suspiciously bright. That was nice of you, Nore, but you didn't have to do it. Gabe was right in what he said the other night. Nothing is ever going to work the way I want it to. No matter what I do — or what you do — or what anybody else does — nobody is ever going to fall in love with me."

"That's ridiculous!" I exclaimed. "You're only thirteen, Jo! When I was your age, I wasn't dating either!"

"But, then, you got to be fourteen — and fifteen — and sixteen!" Her voice was sharp with sudden, startUng anger. "Guys like Dave think you're pretty. They won't even *look at me!*"

"In another few years —" I began.

"That won't make any difference!" The words were accompanied by a strangled sob. "I'm skinny — and I've got zits — and I don't have any boobs — and I'm ugly — ugly — ugly — ugly!"

The tears that she had been struggling so valiantly to hold back burst free in one great rush, as though a dam were breaking and a century's worth of pain were being spewed

forth. Instinctively, I opened my arms and held them out to her, and, just as instinctively, Josie jumped up to throw herself into them. Gathering the weeping youngster tightly against me, I rocked her back and forth as though I were her mother, shocked and bewildered by the intensity of the outburst.

"You are *not* ugly," I told her. "You're at a terrible age — thirteen. Boy, do I remember how awful it was! You're not a child any longer, and you've got aU these strange, new feelings, but you're not an adult either, so there's nothing yet for you to do with them. What you've got to realize, Josie, is that everybody goes through this. In only a couple of years it will all be different."

"No, it won't!" Josie cried miserably. "Nothing's ever going to change, Nore! Time keeps going by, but it just doesn't count for anything!"

"It *does* count!" I said helplessly. "You just have to be patient. When you grow up, you're going to be beautiful!"

"No, I won't." The words were muffled by the pressure of her face against my shoulder. "I'm never going to look any different from what I do now."

"You will be *beautiful!*" I repeated with total sincerity. "How could you be anything else? Why, just look at your mother!"

"I *have* looked at Maman!" said Josie with frightening bitterness. "I look at her all the time, and I hate how she looks! I hate how she talks — how she acts — I hate everything about her!"

"You don't mean that," I said. "Oh, Josie, you know you don't mean that!"

But, even as I spoke, I knew deep in my heart that she did.

## CHAPTER

**I**T had been planned that I was to die on the following day. I was not aware of this, of course, as I lay on my bed the morning after Dave's visit to Shadow Grove, watching dawn break beyond the open doors to the balcony. Fire spfied into a crystal sky, and the gold rose slowly behind it, and then the blue. I thought about Josie and wondered if she was watching it also, lying in her own bed in the room next door to mine.

Josie had not been with us for dinner the previous evening. She had developed a headache after her tirade of weeping and had gone upstairs to her room. It had fallen to me to explain the situation to Lisette, who had seemed more concerned about the fact that Dave had been to see us than about Josie's emotional reaction to his visit.

"What was he doing here?" she asked me. "The roofing was completed weeks ago. Why would one of the workmen come here now?"

"He wasn't just 'one of the workman,' " I said hesitantly. "He had gotten to be a — sort of—personal friend."

"A friend of whom?" asked Lisette. "Not of Gabe, I'm certain. You, yourself, only saw the young man once that I'm aware of, that time I asked you to go out and fetch Josie in for lunch. So, whom did he come here to see? What business did he have here?"

The truth of the matter — that we had all of us become more than casual acquaintances during an evening spent together at the disco — was impossible for me to offer. I glanced nervously across at Gabe in hopes that he would come up with something, but he was staring down into his plate as if he weren't following the conversation.

"I think this is something I'd better discuss with Josie," Lisette said finally, when neither Gabe nor I spoke up to volunteer an answer. That girl has become so boy-crazy, she invites aU kinds of liberties. I'm afraid that someday she may get herself into serious trouble."

True to her word, when dinner was over, she did go upstairs, and she remained in Josie's room for the rest of the evening. When I went up to bed at ten forty-five, I could hear the murmur of their voices, stffi rising and faffing in serious discussion behind Josie's closed door.

I did not go directly to sleep that night. Instead, I lay awake for over an hour, staring out through the two French doors into the star-fiUed sky and thinking back upon the scene that had occurred that afternoon. No matter how hard I tried to sort things through, I continued to have the feeUng that there had been something there that I had not been able to grasp. The weeping girl whom I had held in my arms had seemed, on the surface, to be as typical a thirteen-year-old as one could find, a reincarnation of myself at that miserable age, racked with all the insecurities common to early adoles-

cence. Yet, there had been some underlying current that I could not quite fathom — an intensity of feeling, a depth of pain, a strange sort of empty hopelessness — that I had never experienced at Josie's age, or, for that matter, *ever*.

Time passed, and eventually I did doze off, slipping from wakefulness into slumber in such minute gradations that I can pinpoint no true crossover point at which reality can be said to have given way to dreaming. As though sound had been put into slow motion, the voices in the adjoining room grew gradually louder, and the words of the conversation began to become clear to me. Although I knew at some level of fading consciousness that this could not actually be happening, it was as if I were standing, once again, at Josie's door with my ear to a drinking glass.

"If a romance should develop" ... "You got us into this! You made the deal!" ... "At Shadow Grove, I'm the one who is in control of things!" ... "We can't go on Uke this, Maman!" ... "Nore Robbins is a danger ... a stranger ... a danger..."

"... in danger." Another voice rose, like an echo of Lisette's. "You and your father are both in terrible danger!"

I thought, but could not be certain, that the voice was my mother's.

At some point during that long and restless night, my dreaming must have been shaped and structured by the sound of the door to Josie's room opening and closing. In my dream state, I got up from my bed and slipped, ghost-like, through the wall, to trail my stepmother down the hallway to the room she shared with my father. To my surprise, she did not enter, but continued on to the far west end of the hallway, where she opened the door to Gabe's room, stepped inside, and closed the door behind her.

Once again, I heard voices, low pitched but clearly distinguishable. "I said later ... I'm just not ready yet." ... "Sometimes it's better not to put things off too long." ... "We've got all summer." ... "Nore Robbins has an uncanny awareness of time!"

Then, suddenly, the whole scene changed, as though the channels on a television set had been abruptly switched and a new program was being shown. In this new vignette, I was standing on the bank of the river, but I was not alone there. I was in the midst of a group of people clothed in long, black robes, and every one of them was holding a candle. From behind us in the darkness there came the heavy, rhythmic beat of jungle drums, and at the river's edge, several yards away, there knelt five figures, one in a scarlet robe and the other four clothed in white.

"Watch, Nore! Please, watch carefully, Nore, and remember!"

I turned to see that my mother was standing beside me. Her normally smiting face was creased with worry, and her eyes were turned toward the little group by the river.

I followed her gaze and saw to my surprise that the figure in scarlet was not a man, but a woman. She appeared to be combining ingredients of some sort of an earthen bowl, and her four companions were watching the procedure with intense interest. After what seemed an eternity, the red-clad figure lifted the bowl in both hands and raised it high above her head. Swaying back and forth to the drumbeat, she began to chant. The words held no meaning for me, but the voice, low and guttural like the growl of a predatory animal, made my flesh crawl. The candle-bearers took up the chant, growling the strange, foreign syllables rather than speaking them, as the woman in scarlet lowered the bowl

and bent to hold it in turn to the Ups of each of the white-clothed figures kneeling at her feet. Then she threw back her head and uttered a long, shriU cry, and, blessedly, the vision vanished.

I must have tossed and turned incessantly during those dream sequences, for when I awoke the foUowing morning i felt as exhausted as though I had really lived through all these experiences. Although I came awake at my usual early hour, I did not get up immediately to take my walk. Instead, I continued to lie there, watching the sunrise fade from the sky and Ustening to the chorus of bird voices twittering in the oak trees, until, without my planning to, I aUowed my eyes to drop closed again. When I opened them for the second time an hour and a half later, the room was flooded with the briffiant light of full-blown morning.

It was the latest I had slept since my arrival at Shadow Grove. Although I knew in my rational mind that it was ridiculous to let one instance of oversleeping make me feel guilty, it was so ingrained in me to run on a regular schedule that I threw on my clothes in a rush that was almost panicky in a frantic effort to redeem myself.

As I descended the stairs, the smeU of coffee rose to meet me, and I wondered if the rest of the family might stffi be at breakfast. This hope was squelched, however, when I passed through the downstairs hallway and heard the sound of my father's typewriter already clattering away behind the closed door to the study.

When I reached the kitchen, its sole occupant was Lisette. She was standing at the counter, slicing up the leftover ham from the previous night's dinner. Seen in silhouette against the window behind her, her facial features seemed almost unreal in their perfection. The knife she was holding made a

firm, sharp clicking sound as it repeatedly descended upon the cutting board, sending slices of pink meat falling, one on top of another, in a neatly stacked pile.

"Well, hi there!" she said when she looked up to see me in the doorway. "What happened to that built-in alarm clock that we're all so in awe of? Did you forget to set it last night?"

"Oh, I set it all right," I said sheepishly. "It went off at its usual time, but I guess I must have pushed my mental 'off' button. Why in the world are you making sandwiches at this hour? Or am I really so late that it's almost lunchtime?"

"You, with your time sense, must know better than that," said Lisette. "What I'm doing is fixing a picnic for you and Gabe to take with you out on the river."

"What do you mean, 'out on the river'?" I asked in bewilderment. "I thought that Gabe didn't want any company on his fishing trips."

"That was yesterday and the week before that," said Lisette. "That boy's changing moods are almost a match for his sister's. Out of the blue, he announced this morning that he's finally decided to introduce you to the bayou country. He asked me to tell you to come over to the boat when you've finished breakfast."

"All I want is coffee," I said, puzzled by this sudden turn of events. "Is Josie going with us? Is she waiting at the river, too?"

"Josie's still in her room," said Lisette. "You weren't the only one to sleep late this morning. Actually, I have to take responsibility for Josie. I was afraid that she'd never be able to settle down last night, so I gave her a pill to help her get to sleep."

"She *was* upset," I acknowledged, pouring coffee into a

mug. "She was crying so hard yesterday that it was almost scary."

"Jo is a high-strung girl," agreed Lisette. "Her adolescent hysteria gets totally out of hand. She has to realize that this Parlange boy is far too old to be interested in her. Obviously, the person he came here to see was Celina."

"Celina?" I exclaimed in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"Josie told me that he and Celina went to high school together," said Lisette. "A lot of men seem to be attracted to Cajun women. Personally, I've always thought them to be rather coarse looking."

I was startled by the bitterness in her voice.

"I think Celina's quite pretty," I ventured tentatively.

"And quite promiscuous, too, I'd warrant," snapped Lisette. She seemed to assert a major effort to get a grip on herself. "Please, forgive me for that outburst, Nore. It must have sounded strange to you. I was being unfair, of course. Celina does seem to be a nice enough young woman, and I didn't have any right to imply that she wasn't. I have to keep reminding myself that this current generation should not be held responsible for the deeds of its ancestors."

"Speaking of ancestors, did you know that Celina's grandfather used to work at Shadow Grove?" I asked, seizing gratefully upon this chance to change the subject. "Back in the nineteen thirties, he was a gardener here."

"So Josie told me last night," said Lisette. "It's an odd coincidence, isn't it? I can only assume he was employed by my first husband's grandparents."

Our conversation lapsed into less threatening chitchat, and I sat down at the breakfast table to drink my coffee. As I sipped at the hot, black brew, Lisette continued to prepare the lunch for Gabe and me, placing the slices of meat be-

tween thick wedges of buttered French bread and wrapping the sandwiches in Saran Wrap. She placed those and some cookies and two cans of root beer in a small wicker picnic basket and set it on the table in front of me.

"There you are," she said. "I hope it's enough for the two of you."

"I'm sure it will be," I said, setting down my mug and getting to my feet. Thanks so much, Lisette." I paused, and then continued, a bit awkwardly, "Thank you, too, for all the other nice things you've done for me. I really appreciate the way you've made me feel so welcome here."

There was a moment's silence.

Then, Lisette said quietly, "You're a nice girl, Nore. Josie told me about how kind you were to her yesterday. She said that she wished that the two of you were blood sisters. I, too, wish that your relationship with us were different."

Suddenly, to my surprise, she leaned forward and kissed me. "Run along now, dear. Have fun on your excursion with Gabe. My son is very fond of you. A mother can sense such things. It would have been wonderful if you and he could have met under other circumstances."

I left the house by the front door, and as I descended the porch steps, perfumed air roUed up to engulf me Uke a tidal wave. Honeysuckle and magolias poured forth their respective fragrances, and the mingled scents of the various flower-laden bushes that bordered the porch had already thickened in the heat of morning to a cloying sweetness. The long driveway lay stretched ahead of me like the dim aisle of a great cathedral, spotted with pagan coins of light that slipped through gold-paned windows. As I walked down to the gate beneath the canopy of oak leaves, I felt dwarfed by the immensity of the trees on either side of me.

At the driveway's end, I paused for a moment to brace myself for that initial step from the pleasant shade of the trees out into the full intensity of the blazing sunlight. When I did take that plunge, heat came pouring down upon me like molten copper, and within minutes my blouse was damp with perspiration and plastered to my back like a second skin. I hurried across the road, painfully aware of the heat that was rising in waves from the asphalt to attack my feet through the thin rubber soles of my sandals.

At this particular spot only a matter of several yards separated the shoulder of the road from the bank of the river. I saw Gabe immediately, standing at the water's edge with his back toward me. His shoulders were slumped, and he was leaning in a dejected manner against the bow of the weathered rowboat, which had been pulled up a foot or so onto solid ground. He was obviously listening for me, because he turned immediately when I stepped from the asphalt into the rustling grasses and stood, watching me walk toward him, with an expression on his face that was not likely to have made anybody feel very welcome.

"So, you did decide to come fishing today," he said. "I thought that maybe you wouldn't want to, all things considered."

"Your mother fixed us a lunch," I said, holding up the basket. "I thought that was a really nice thing for her to do."

"Sandwiches and cookies and stuff," Gabe said caustically. "That's a nice little touch, all right. Trust good old Maman to think of it." He gestured toward the boat. "Well, climb aboard if you're going to. I need you to weight down the stern so I can get us shoved off."

"I'm going to track in mud," I warned him, glancing down at my sandals which were already deeply embedded in the marshy earth.

"That doesn't matter," Gabe said. "Not with this old bucket. Go ahead — get in."

I did as directed, scrambling awkwardly over the side of the boat and almost dropping the picnic basket in the process. Once safely in, I set the basket on the floor by the center seat and moved to the back to add ballast to the end with the motor. Gabe threw himself against the bow, and there was an unpleasant, slurping sound as the boat began to slide backward across the wet mud and then settled into the river. Walking it out from the shore until he was knee-deep in water, Gabe grabbed hold of the side of the boat with both hands and hauled himself up and in.

The skiff lurched dangerously beneath the sudden new input of weight, and I clutched at the rusty engine for support.

"Be careful!" I exclaimed. "You almost tipped us over!"

"Sorry," Gabe said. "Look, Nore, I know that you're not much into water stuff. If this tipsy boat makes you nervous, why don't you just say so? Go on back to the house and tell Maman that you've changed your mind. There's nothing she can do about it if you decide that you don't want to come with me."

Actually, I had been contemplating doing exactly that. I was not pleased, however, to have Gabe be the one to suggest it.

"What are you trying to do," I asked, "get rid of me?" I was swept by a surge of perversity. "That's not going to be that easy. You invited me to come today, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me. Where do you want me to sit?"

Gabe was silent for a moment. Then, with a shrug of defeat, he seemed to accept my decision as irrevocable.

"You can ride up in the front," he said. "It'll give us better balance."

He moved aside to let me edge past him. The boat kept dipping back and forth as I gingerly worked my way forward, and by the time I was settled on the small, triangular seat in the bow, we had drifted back to bob against the shore.

Gabe picked up an oar and pushed us away again. Then he seized the cord to the engine and gave it a vicious puU. The motor sprang into Ufe with a sputtering roar. Gabe adjusted the throttle, and we began to chug out into the middle of the river.

It wasn't until we were a good hundred yards downstream that it occurred to me to wonder why the boat contained no fishing gear.

## CHAPTER

-4 || \*-

WHERE are the poles and things?" I asked. "Wasn't this supposed to be a fishing trip?"

Gabe glanced down at the floor of the boat, as if expecting to see the poles materialize there.

"I must have forgotten to bring them," he said.

"Do you want to go back for them?" I asked him.

"Maybe in a little while," Gabe said. "For now, though, let's just concentrate on giving you a tourist's-eye view of the bayou country."

In perfect agreement with that suggestion, I turned my attention to the foreign scenery that now surrounded us. Within the few short minutes that we had been out upon the water, the river had routed itself far enough away from the highway so that we had put all signs of civilization behind us. The terrain that now enclosed us was a ghostly forest of palmetto shrubs and live oak trees, the moss-draped branches of which hung above us like shabby, gray tents.

Knobby-kneed cypress rose from the river on either side of us, and the smooth, dark surface of the water threw back their reflections as perfectly as a mirror.

As we continued our slow-paced journey up the river, pale lavender flowers, which Gabe informed me were called water hyacinths, began to appear along side of our boat. The farther we went, the more numerous these blossoms became, until, eventually, they massed together to form one sodid sheet of purple, which covered the surface of the river from one bank to the other. White herons, evidently disturbed by the noise of our motor, rose with screams of protest from the reeds at the water's edge and went streaking off into the treetops, dragging their long, strange legs behind them like excess baggage.

After we had traveled several miles of this world of shadows, the river suddenly widened, and the branches above us parted to let the sky show through. In this broader expanse of water, dead trees floated like lumpy corpses, caught in the tangle of roots from the clotted water-flowers. When I observed these logs more closely, I was surprised to discover that the "lumps" were not, as I had at first imagined, knots in the wood, but were turtles, fined up Uke cookies in the oven to soak up the sun.

Gabe idled the engine and then let it die completely. The silence that followed was like nothing I had ever experienced. It was so deep and so intense that it seemed to contain some mysterious sound of its own, pitched at a level either too high or too low for human ears to decipher. Against this massive silence, the tiniest sounds were as startling as gunshots. The splash of a fish. The cry of a bird. The rustle of a squirrel, leaping from one tree limb to another.

"I see now why you like to come here," I said softly to

Gabe. "It's a whole different sort of world from the one we Uve in."

"It's a place where time doesn't seem to exist," said Gabe. "The outside world keeps changing, but back here everything stays the same."

"Josie made that same sort of statement yesterday," I told him. "She said her *life* is Uke that, locked in place with nothing ever changing."

"Poor Jo," Gabe said with sympathy in his voice. "I do believe Ufe is harder for her than for any of us."

"It was strange," I said, "to hear that sort of statement from a thirteen-year-old. Do you have any idea what she could have been talking about?"

There's not much about Josie that I don't know by this time," Gabe said. "My sister and I have known each other for a lot of years." Abruptly, he changed the subject. "There's a question I need to ask you, Nore." He paused, obviously searching for exactly the right words. "What would you say—to the idea—of our going away together?"

"Going away together!" I repeated in bewüderment, unable to believe that I had heard him correctly. "What do you mean? How could we do *that*?"

"We could take the Monte Carlo," Gabe said carefuUy. "Don't worry—you can do the driving—at least, until I work something out about getting myself a license. We could go back to the house right now, and you could wait for me out by the road while I stip into Maman's room to get her keys. Then we could just take off."

Take off to go *where*?" I asked him.

"Anywhere we want. California might be a good place to start. There are a lot of young people out there on the Coast,

all coming and going; nobody ever knows exactly who anybody is. We could rent an apartment and maybe get jobs as movie extras. Or you could waitress, and I could work down on the docks or something. It wouldn't much matter, as long as we were free and together."

"You want us to *live together*?" I whispered incredulously. "But you're not even in love with me!"

"I could be," Gabe said, "if I let myself. How about you? Do you think you could fall in love with me if you tried?"

"I — might," I said hesitantly, reluctant to admit that I had been half in love with him ever since my first day at Shadow Grove. "I don't understand, though — if you feel this way about me, why have you been acting the way you have? You've hardly even spoken to me since that night at the disco."

"It hit me, that night, how hopeless the whole thing was," said Gabe. "I didn't want to get any more attached to you than I had to. I didn't think there was any chance of things working out for us, and it's so damned hard when you care about people and then have to — lose them. Then I got this idea about our going away together. It could be the answer, sure — at least for four or five years. Are you willing to give it a try?"

"Why do we need to run off like criminals to be together?" I asked him. "We live in the same house right *now*. Why can't we wait, at least until we graduate from high school? That would give us some time to find out if we were really right for each other."

"That's impossible," said Gabe. "It has to be now, or it's never."

"Why?" I regarded him blankly. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You just have to take it on faith

that I know what I'm talking about. Felicité didn't understand either—at least, not at first."

"Feticité? You mean, your old girlfriend?"

"She wasn't just a girlfriend," Gabe told me. "She and I Uved together like husband and wife for almost eight years."

"You couldn't have done that!" I exclaimed. "You're just seventeen *now*! When did this big romance take place — when you were nine years old?"

"I know you won't be able to accept this, but we were both seventeen when Felicité and I fell in love," Gabe said. "Eight years later, she was more of a mother to me than a sweetheart. An older man came along, and that was the end of our relationship. They got married, and I went back to Uve at Shadow Grove."

"What you're saying makes no sense at all," I said irritably. "I hate it when you play games with me this way. This was the way you were talking that night on the way back from the disco. It isn't funny, Gabe; it's just terribly upsetting."

"Then, you won't go," Gabe said. It was a statement, rather than a question.

"No, of course I won't go," I told him. "It's a crazy idea. I'd never hurt my father that way; he'd worry himself sick about me. Besides, it just wouldn't work. We'd never be able to support ourselves. Kids our age aren't ready for that kind of Uve-together setup."

There was a long moment of süence, broken only by a splash as one of the turtles stid off its log and sank into the river. It went down Uke a stone, and from the spot at which it had entered the water, ripples moved out in a series of ever-widening circles.

Then, Gabe said with stotid acceptance, "All right. That's it, I guess."

He reached down and took hold of the rope that activated the engine. His jaw was set, and his eyes would not meet mine.

"Don't be angry," I said more gently, regretting my use of the hurtful term *crazy*. The romantic idea had not been crazy, just totaUy unworkable. "This doesn't mean that everything's over, Gabe. We have so much time —"

"It *does* mean that everything's over," Gabe said quietly. "I'm not angry, Nore, I'm just sorry—just terribly sorry."

He gave the rope a sharp yank, and the engine caught immediately. Gabe set it on idle, and then, at last, turned to look at me. There was pain in his eyes, but, when he spoke, his voice was expressionless.

"How about getting out some sandwiches before we head back? I know it's early for lunch, but I didn't get much breakfast."

"Neither did I," I said, relieved at the change of subject. "Don't start up the boat yet. IU get the picnic basket."

Getting up from my seat in the bow, I moved cautiously back toward the center of the skiff, taking care not to set it to rocking with any sudden movement. Bending down carefully, I picked up the basket from the floor by the middle seat and stood, balancing myself, while I unhooked the latch that held the Ud in place.

"Your mother made ham —" I began.

At that moment, the engine came to life with a mighty roar and the boat shot forward. An instant later, the peace of the swampland was shattered by a jarring crash, and I felt myself being catapulted backward over the bow of the boat, still clutching the picnic basket, too shocked even to scream. The last thing I remember seeing before I struck the water was a wide arch of blue, filled suddenly with thrashing wings, as water birds rose from the marshes on every side

of us and exploded in one wUd burst into the shelter of the sky.

The river closed around me, and I went down, weighted by clothing and terror, plunging Uke the turtle into the thick, soupy water until I actuaUy felt my face brush the river floor. For one frantic moment, the thought occurred to me that I might be destined to stay there forever, sucked in and immeshed and swaUowed, coated with stickiness, caught by the mud like a fly in a jar of honey.

Almost immediately, however, I felt myself beginning to rise again. At some point during my descent, I had released my grip on the basket, and now, with my hands unencumbered, I raked wüdly at the water in a feverish attempt to claw my way with my bare fingernails up out of the brown depths of the river into the world of light.

I was stffi clawing, when my hands and then my head broke surface. Choking and strangling, I dragged in a great gasp of tepid air. When I btinked the water out of my eyes, I saw our boat, rocking peacefully back and forth like a cradle, only a few yards away. Gabe was seated in the stern in exactly the same position that he had been in before the accident. I could only imagine that his grip on the rudder control handle had prevented him from being sent flying out as I had.

"Gabe!" I tried to call out to him, "Gabe —I can't—I can't—"

He *knew* that I couldn't swim! I had told him that on my very first morning at Shadow Grove, when the two of us had stood chatting together down by the lily pond. Was it possible that he could have forgotten and actually be thinking that I was capable of swimming across to the boat?

"Gabe —please!" I gasped, and felt myself going under once more. This time, I descended more slowly, but with a

sort of leaden certainty. My feet struck bottom and seemed to keep right on going, sinking into the gummy sediment as though they belonged there.

After what seemed like hours, I did begin to rise again, but this, too, happened slowly. My chest felt ready to burst by the time I again reached the surface of the water. My head thudded hard against something solid, and I reached up and grabbed it, shoving it out at arm's length in front of me so that I could come up behind it.

Clinging for dear life to whatever it was that I was grasping, I spat out a mouthful of water and hungrily sucked in air. When I had gained enough control of my senses to fully comprehend things, I saw that the object of my salvation was a floating log.

It was probably this that our boat had gone plowing into. But where had that boat disappeared to? I could see it nowhere. Clutching the log, I glanced wildly around me in all directions. When, at last, I did spot the skiff, I could not believe what I was seeing. It was a good fifty yards downriver, chugging rapidly along like a squat, gray pony headed determinedly for its stable. All that I could make out of Gabe was the back of his head. He did not even turn back to look over his shoulder.

I stared after the boy and the boat with increasing horror.

"Come back!" I tried to scream, but the sound that emerged from my throat was no more than a whimper. In another few moments, the boat was a speck in the distance. Then it disappeared altogether around a bend in the river.

*Gabe had deliberately gone off and left me to drown!*

The mere idea of his having done this was so incomprehensible that I could not immediately absorb it. For an unreasonably long time, I stayed where I was without moving, clinging to my makeshift life preserver and waiting hope-

fully for the skiff to reappear. It was not until the herons had begun to settle, lured back to their places of residence by the unbroken quiet, that I was able to accept the situation for what it was.

Gabe was *not* coming back. He had no intention of trying to save me. If I were going to survive this adventure, I was the one who would have to get myself back to dry land.

In my logical mind, I was no longer frightened of drowning. My log seemed remarkably buoyant, and as long as I kept my hold on it, there was little chance of my going under again. With this fear set on a back burner of my mind, I immediately turned my thoughts to other dangers, such as the sorts of creatures that might be sharing the river water with me. Alligators, water snakes, and leeches were almost as horrible to contemplate as drowning had been. I would have to get to shore, and the sooner the better.

By twisting my shoulders with quick, hard jerks, I was eventually able to work the log around so that it angled toward the south bank of the river. Then, using the water-soaked wood as a paddle board, I started an awkward flutter kick, which slowly moved me in the direction that I wanted to go.

As I drew closer to land, my progress was slowed even further by the masses of water hyacinths that blocked my way. These deceptively delicate-looking flowers, which had been sparsely scattered through the center of this wider portion of the river, became increasingly more numerous closer to the shoreline, and their long, trailing roots intertwined to form a net of snakelike coils. Tearing a pathway through this was far from easy, and I was as exhausted physically as I was emotionally by the time that I finally dragged myself out of the water.

I did not stop to rest, however. I was too filled with adren-

atine — too hurt, too angry — too determined to get to my father and inform him of the incredible thing that had happened. Turning my left shoulder toward the sun, I set off toward the south, the direction in which I knew the highway must lie. My soaked sandals slurped across mud and caught on high grasses. I shoved my way through shoulder-high thickets of palmetto shrubs and thrust aside low-hanging tree limbs, and with every step I took, I grew more and more furious.

By the time that I had reached the road, my mind was centered upon one thing only — the fact that Gabe, who had just finished telling me that he wanted to Uve with and love me, had not only tried to kiU me, but had come very close to succeeding.