

Whatever tragedies had visited the girl, they didn't stop her from seeking the refuge of sleep.

After the bursts of tears quieted and she drifted off, a strange energy sizzled in the air. It altered the physics of the servants' quarters, as if supercharged atoms of sadness and despair were colliding. They seemed to snap and pop in a dismal dance.

Banishing the odd notion, Meade Williams stepped away from the bed.

The jarring truth had yet to set in. A stranger—a girl barely on the brink of womanhood—was here, asleep in a portion of the mansion no longer in use.

Not that the lack of occupants in the servants' quarters could alter the habits of Meade's housekeeper and friend, Reenie. Year in and year out, Reenie vacuumed and dusted each room with unstinting devotion. She took simple pleasure in keeping the floors gleaming, and freshening the beds at the onset of each season. Spring, summer, autumn, winter—she perfumed the air with the scent of fresh linens as if readying the environs for a staff to rival the number of maids, butlers and cooks employed during the mansion's glory days.

There was no sense in dissuading Reenie from her habits. They were as ingrained as the lines on her face.

The housekeeper smoothed the blankets around the sleeping girl. She took care not to brush her fingertips against fluttering eyelashes or soft skin. A moan drifted from the girl's lips. Her shoulders flexed and Reenie pressed her palms down as if calming a child fleeing danger. The instinct was a good one. The girl sank deeper into dreams.

With relief Meade left the room.

She hurried down the hallway past the row of empty bedrooms. A flood of memories accompanied her: The timid maid who'd taught her how to jump rope when she was five years old, and the cook, a moon-faced woman who'd shown Meade photographs of the family left behind in Ireland. The rooms housing the butlers, valet, and her father's chauffeur had been off limits, but the women servants had allowed the lonely child to rummage through drawers and fondle the keepsakes positioned on dressers. To this day, Meade missed them all.

The heels of her Italian pumps clicked as she climbed the stairs to the first

floor. Shadows churned in the kitchen like spirits writhing in a panorama of ash grey and black. Outside a flash of bluish light erupted. Thunder followed, a booming gong that silenced, for the briefest moment, the rain tapping on the windows.

In the foyer's echoing spaces, Meade paused at a side table and flicked on a lamp. A golden glow spilled across the ocean of ivory marble beneath her feet. On instinct she glanced up the curving staircase. Stained glass windows cradled the stairwell's landing. Behind them, another blue flash lit the sky. The thunder rolled off, and she listened for movement on the second floor.

A reassuring silence greeted her ears. With luck her father had taken a sleeping pill. Reenie may have given him one while helping him to bed, before her evening was interrupted by the appearance of the girl tucked in downstairs.

To release tension, Meade rolled her neck. As she collected her thoughts, she was faintly aware of the ache in her hand. She glanced down at her fingers clenching the briefcase in a white-knuckle grip. She set the case down.

The day had been long, with a shipment of perfumes from Paris delayed and several members of her staff up in arms about the increase in next week's hours. During the afternoon an order of cosmetics from a supplier in Avignon went missing in the warehouse. Pandemonium ensued as several employees cornered a young man, recently hired. He'd logged the shipment incorrectly then stacked the packages in the wrong place.

May was always a busy month, with unexpected orders from shops purchasing for summer and the larger department stores making last-minute additions to Mother's Day inventory. On the long drive home, Meade was stiff with tension.

Now she had a girl asleep downstairs—a girl who was little more than a child, really. What was she *doing* here? And what was her relationship to Reenie?

In the library, she went directly to the bar. Imbibing during the workweek wasn't typical, but today warranted the exception.

She was finishing the last of a very dry martini when Reenie announced her arrival with a subtle clearing of her throat. Her eyes were inked with worry.

"Who is she?" Meade asked.

The question sent a tremble up the housekeeper's spine.

"Glade Wilson. She's the daughter of my niece."

"Is your niece aware she's here? Perhaps we should call."

"Oh, I don't think it'll do much good."

"You don't? Why not?"

"Glade is terribly independent. She wouldn't have the sense to tell anyone she was coming to Ohio. Certainly not her mother—or me, for that matter." Reenie worked her hands with jerky movements. Finding a measure of composure, she added, "A while back, in West Virginia? She dropped out of high school and ran off. The police brought her home, but she ran off again."

"How difficult for your niece."

"There wasn't much she could do. She tried the usual things. She asked the police to talk to Glade. They gave her a good talking to in hopes she'd change her ways. A social worker was brought in, but she wasn't able to settle the girl down. Some kids have a wild streak running through them like a fever."

"What happened after she ran away the second time?"

"No one in the family has seen Glade for quite some time." The housekeeper lowered her eyes. "Until now."

The explanation was disheartening. Struggling for calm, Meade pinched the skin between her brows. Her sister's wedding was less than a week away. The preparations had already taxed the last of her energy. Add in her chronically depressed father, and the situation couldn't be more problematic. Even in the best of times his depression made unpleasant changes a burden on his fragile nerves. If the girl stayed, even for a few days, how would he respond to the intrusion? The Williams mansion was a broken kingdom. Reenie was all that was left of a brilliant era.

With a look of apology, the housekeeper stepped into the library. She continued working her hands at risk of rubbing them raw. Yet her tall, slender frame hid a resolute character.

During the worst years of her employer's depression, she'd remained steadfast. Reenie coordinated the basic maintenance of the mansion around an

emotionally unpredictable man's visits into Liberty and the rare vacations he took at Meade's insistence. Gardeners to prune the topiary, a flurry of maids brought in periodically to air out musty rooms, the servicemen who stomped through the house checking the furnace or the air conditioning—she orchestrated the completion of a thousand tasks during the spare hours when her employer left the estate. A lesser woman would have quit long ago.

Taking pity, Meade poured Reenie's favorite drink. Handing over the brandy snifter, she asked, "Where's Melbourne?" Usually her beloved toy poodle waited with ears perked for the sound of her car.

"We gave him a good, long walk this afternoon. He trotted off to bed with your father."

"More bribery with biscuits? If I didn't know better, I'd think my father was trying to steal Melbourne's allegiance. He's grown fond of my dog." They shared a smile then Meade steered the conversation back on track. "Did Glade arrive by taxi? I didn't see a car."

"She walked from the bus station in Liberty."

"In the rain? She walked all the way?"

"Folks in West Virginia are used to it. She wouldn't think twice about a ten-mile trek."

The information melted the temper festering inside Meade. She'd returned home to the shocking scene of Reenie calming the sobbing girl she'd bundled into bed. No luggage in evidence, and the girl's coat was flung across a chair. Little more than a rag, it smelled of grease and something else, a woody scent reminiscent of the camping trips Meade had enjoyed with her father during childhood.

Apparently the scent had arrived all the way from the Appalachian Mountains, a region as graced with beauty as it was mired in poverty. The trailers where Reenie's extended family lived were crammed together in isolated hollows, the children underfed and skittish. Privately Meade understood *why* her father insisted on paying the housekeeper an outlandishly generous wage. Much of the cash, sealed in envelopes, was mailed south each month.

Now one of those relatives was in trouble, a girl with feverish independence.

Why else make the journey all the way to northeast Ohio? Given the other pressures filling Meade's days, she didn't need another problem to untangle.

She sank onto the sofa and patted the cushion to her left.

"Reenie, please sit down," she said, glad when the suggestion brought the housekeeper forward. "I'm not angry, truly. It's safe to say we're both surprised by Glade's appearance. It's late. We can sort out the particulars in the morning. My father . . . he was asleep?"

"Oh, yes. He didn't hear the doorbell. As soon as I saw who it was, I brought Glade down to the servants' quarters." Perched on the cushion's edge, Reenie took a grateful sip of brandy. "She was crying buckets of tears. Hard to understand anything coming out of her mouth."

She patted the housekeeper's knee. "How awful. For you, and her."

"Every time she tried to explain, she started sobbing again. Something happened to scare her nearly out of her bones."

"A man?" An impetuous romance followed by a devastating break-up—was there anything more common?

"From what I gathered, she broke it off."

"Did you get his name?"

"She won't say. Mind you, I didn't press. It didn't seem worth the trouble."

"She's overwrought. A full night's sleep will help. Get to the bottom of it tomorrow." Meade sent a glance toward the ceiling. "I'm not sure how to explain any of this to my father. You know how he is about strangers."

The comment bowed the housekeeper's back. "I'd never want to upset him. He's been in such a good mood, what with the excitement surrounding your sister's wedding. You know what happened yesterday? He asked me to deliver his tux to the cleaners. I just about dropped my jaw to the floor."

"Why does he care about an old tux? I bought him a suit for Birdie's wedding." The ceremony would be held in Liberty Square's center green. "Most of the women will wear floor-length gowns, but the men will be in suits."

"Don't bother trying to talk him out of his choice. Wearing the tux reminds him of your mother. Doesn't matter how long she's been in heaven, he'll always miss

her.”

It was doubtful her mother had earned a place among the angels. Keeping the dreary assessment to herself, she said, “You’re right, of course. The tux brings back fond memories. Let’s do this. Find a seamstress in Liberty who can work on short notice. It’s been so long since he’s worn the tux, it’s too large. If Daddy thinks formalwear is perfect for the wedding, who are we to disagree?”

Despite her best efforts to ward off the emotion, her heart throbbed. Many of her most cherished memories were of clinging to Reenie’s knees, hidden from the crowds in the ballroom, as her parents glided past their adoring guests in a swish of red satin and elegant black.

Now the ballroom was yet another area of the mansion blanketed in bitter memories, the chandeliers threaded with cobwebs and the air redolent of expensive perfume. A cleaning crew would arrive in the morning to air out the massive room for the wedding reception.

Was it foolhardy to think they’d host hundreds of guests without stirring up memories best forgotten? Dispelling the thought, Meade asked, “What do you think of the flowers? I need a second opinion. I promised the florist we’d get back to her on the final arrangements.”

The library boasted two walls of floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Between them, a bank of windows, during daylight hours, gave an arresting view of the manicured grounds. The long table situated before the windows was bedecked with a dozen floral bouquets, everything from creamy tea roses to fragrant sprays of freesia.

“I can’t decide which I like best,” Reenie admitted. Appraising the bouquets, she added, “Which one do you think your sister will choose?”

“Birdie, choose wedding flowers? Don’t hold your breath.” Releasing a soft wave of laughter, Meade slipped off her pumps. “She doesn’t know the first thing about planning a wedding and this is all terribly rushed.”

“I suppose she couldn’t have organized a wedding in three weeks’ time without you.”

“Which is why she’s leaving most of the decisions to me.”

“Even the choice of flowers?” Reenie asked with faint disapproval. “Do you

mind?"

"No more than I mind taking care of the invitations, band selection and a million other odds and ends. Daddy and I paid the wedding planner double her usual wage. The caterer took some bribing, but we're on his schedule." Taking charge was an instinct, one she relied upon.

Birdie, on the other hand, was still resisting simple lessons like how to use a checkbook or keep a proper schedule.

"Putting together a wedding this quickly isn't Birdie's forté. At least she's going through with it and making Hugh an honest man. He's been so patient. I will say this—she walked right into a wedding gown. No alterations, nothing. Even the hem is the perfect length. She should've been a model."

"Did you help her pick out the gown?"

It was more accurate to say she'd dragged Birdie into the boutique after a ridiculous argument about *why* it wasn't appropriate to recite wedding vows in a sundress. If Birdie had won the argument, she probably would've walked down the aisle in flip-flops. Meade's younger sister had a quick comeback ready for any conversation; she also had no respect for ceremony.

"We shopped earlier this week," Meade explained. "The gown is beautiful. Nothing but my sister's flawless skin until you get to the silk organza bodice and the yards of sherbet tulle. Hugh will faint when he sees her. I should pack smelling salts. Or you should. I'll be too busy orchestrating the event."

The lighthearted joke didn't reach its mark. If anything, the stab at humor deepened the frown lines framing Reenie's mouth. She downed the last of her brandy. Placing the glass on the coffee table, she stared straight ahead.

Meade pressed her palm to Reenie's back. "Now what's wrong?" Physical affection wasn't her strong suit, but the housekeeper's distress was palpable.

"I've never seen your father this happy. Going on about the wedding, talking to anyone who'll listen. He's more apt to stare out a window brooding. When the florist dropped off the flower samples, he talked her ear off."

"That's news." Usually he stalked off to a shadowy room until the mansion was restored to an unhappy silence.

“He was a regular chatterbox. Birdie this and Birdie that, and wasn’t it something how she and Hugh Schaeffer were making the *Liberty Post* into the finest newspaper in the county. Oh, I don’t mean he loves your half-sister more than you. Of course he doesn’t. He’s always been proud of your achievements, running your own company and all those employees—you’re cut from the same cloth. When your father was your age, he was one of the most respected bankers in Ohio. Now you’re making your own mark. Birdie, why, she isn’t like either of you.”

“She had a difficult childhood.” An understatement. The horrors she’d known as the daughter of the notorious grifter Wish Kaminsky were hard to imagine.

Reenie nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes. Such a pity to have a criminal for a mother. Conning people out of their money, taking advantage of decent folks like your father—Wish Kaminsky is the worst sort. She never deserved a daughter as nice as Birdie. Thank goodness *your* mother, rest her soul, never learned of the affair or your father’s illegitimate child.” The housekeeper cut off, her cheeks quivering. Clearly she thought she’d gone too far. On a nervous laugh, she added, “Everything worked out, didn’t it? You’ve discovered the younger sister you didn’t know you had, and your father has found his missing daughter. I doubt he imagined Birdie would make Liberty her home, let alone turn the *Post* into a success and marry Hugh in the bargain.”

Her father *was* happy—ebullient. A wedding couldn’t eradicate his depression, but he was filled with a zest for life he hadn’t displayed in recent memory.

“A wedding is exactly what our family needs. My mother has been gone for a long time, and this old house could use grandchildren running around. And Birdie’s mother can no longer cause harm. From what I gather, she’s back in Mexico.”

“She ought to be in jail.”

Meade couldn’t agree more. Wish Kaminsky was a criminal who’d scammed people across the U.S.

“She’d better hide in Mexico. If she tries to return to the States, she’ll do prison time,” she assured the housekeeper. “Hugh’s best man, Hector Levendakis? He has friends keeping tabs on her.”

"I like Hector. He always has something nice to say. Your father will miss him when he leaves."

"So will Hugh." She declined to add that Hector was too flighty for her liking, a man approaching middle age without a clear direction. It seemed miraculous that someone so groundless *had* driven Wish away. "Thanks to him, she'll never hurt my father or Birdie again."

"They both deserve happiness, your father especially. He's such a good man."

"He is."

Reenie knotted her hands. "I don't want to hang a cloud over him," she whispered. "I don't know what to do."

"I don't understand." A lie. Meade's powers of perception were honing in on a problem too uncomfortable to contemplate.

She was circling the truth when Reenie said, "It's Glade. I can't turn her out, not until I find her somewhere safe to live. Glade's mother, my niece? She has three other kids under her roof and she's divorced. She's got her hands full."

Meade's compassion for the housekeeper warred against her responsibility to her long-suffering father. "You're asking if Glade can stay for an extended visit?"

"The timing couldn't be worse, but I can't ask her to leave. Not in her condition."

Meade's throat was unbearably dry. Another martini? She was sure she'd need it as Reenie pulled to her feet and began pacing.

"Glade didn't just drop out of school." Reenie's eyes seemed to beg for mercy. "She was drinking and carrying on with the worst sort of boys, the type that'll use an impressionable girl without thinking twice about it. How can I let her down? I'm the only relative she trusts. Please don't ask me to disappoint her."

Meade grappled for a sense of calm. When she'd found it, she asked, "When is the baby due?"