

Two

Home to Serena Cordero was a modern and anonymous brownstone building on Forty-third Street. There was no doorman; it was not that kind of place.

Her apartment was on the fifth floor. It was bigger than Ruth expected; the living room was open plan with a tastefully decorated kitchen area leading off. A plump, middle-aged woman was folding laundry in a utility room. She looked up as they came in.

“You’re early. Did they fire your sorry butt at last?”

“I love you too, Mom. This is Ruth.” Mrs. Cordero was eyeing the stranger with suspicion. “She’s an actress. That’s a stage costume.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Are you okay, miss? You look a little shook up.”

“Ruth nearly got run over downtown,” Serena said. “But she’s fine.”

“Mercy me! You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure.”

“There’s a pot of fresh coffee,” Mrs. Cordero said, pulling on a light coat. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Nice meeting you, miss.”

The front door shut. Another door opened, and a little girl of seven or eight came into the living room. She was carrying a very fat, sleepy-looking marmalade cat, allowing its hind legs to dangle. This, then, is the daughter, Ruth thought. A pretty little thing: all pigtails, glitter nail varnish, and powder-blue gym pants.

“Mommy, Prince is sick.”

“Doesn’t Mommy get a hug no more?” She turned to Ruth. “Ruth, meet Roxana, my one and only.”

Having deposited the cat on a sofa, the child hugged her mother.

"So what's the matter with that cat?"

"I dunno. He doesn't wanna eat."

"I'm not surprised, Roxana. There's nothing wrong with that cat that not eating for fifteen minutes won't cure. But he looks just fine to me. Maybe you should just let him sleep some more."

Ruth went to the tomcat. He eyed her with grave suspicion. But she held a finger and thumb under his nose, then tickled him behind the ears. He responded by purring loudly and settling further into the sofa.

"Gee, Ruth," Roxana said, "Prince likes you. He don't usually like strangers much."

"Doesn't," said her mother. "He *doesn't* like strangers. Not 'don't'."

"Okay."

"Now put him back in his basket. You done your homework?"

"Uh-huh. Can I watch some TV?"

"Go ahead. But no more'n an hour, you hear?"

"Okay, Mommy."

Gathering the cat into her arms again, the girl returned to her room.

"She's adorable," Ruth said.

Serena nodded and went into the kitchen. "You want coffee?" she called out.

"Please."

"So you're an actress, huh? Movies and stuff?"

"I wish. No, I'm just an amateur. I do theater plays, mainly off-Broadway. Ever hear of Shakespeare in the Park?"

"*That's* a movie, right?"

"Not exactly. They put on open-air plays every summer. That's where . . ." She'd paused, was shaking her head slowly as Serena brought the coffee. "It's the damndest thing."

"What is?"

"I can't seem to . . . What's today's date, Serena?"

“Why, it’s the seventh. Is that—”

“And what time is it?”

“Nearly four. Why?”

“Oh my God, it’s happened again! I thought I was all done with that.”

“Done with—”

“Done with these blackouts. I should be on stage right this minute. In Central Park. I’m supposed to be doing a play.”

“Relax, honey. You won’t be doing no more plays today. You had an accident; that’s all there is to it. Drink your coffee now. . . . Hmm, that’s pretty.”

Two buttons of Ruth’s tunic were undone, revealing a silver chain with four gold letters attached. Serena saw they were bunched together, much like keys on a key ring but more elaborately. She tried to decipher them.

“What’s it say, ‘Hurt’?”

Ruth chuckled. “The jeweler got the order wrong. It’s supposed to spell my name: Ruth.”

“Yeah . . . of course. *Ruth* . . . *Hurt*. Never thought of that before. Isn’t that a thingamajig . . . an . . . an . . .”

“An anagram, yes.”

“You could get it fixed. There’s a little old guy right above our store. He wouldn’t—”

“No, I couldn’t do that. My dad had it made for me. I could have had it fixed, but I felt it would be . . . uh . . .”

“Disrespectful to the dead?”

“H-how did you know my dad was dead?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure, the way you talked about him. In the past.”

Serena studied the girl who’d come into her life so unexpectedly. She found herself warming to her. Yet she suspected they’d very little in common. She saw Ruth Linford’s life and circumstances as light years removed from hers. She thought she knew the type: girls born into wealth and security. The best schools,

the best boys, the best foreign vacations. And to add insult to injury, Ruth was pretty, too—even if that was in an uptown, uptight kind of way.

How different her own life was, and always would be. She'd had to fight hard for all she could call her own. She'd left junior high so she could earn her keep, take the pressure off her parents. She'd married badly, but didn't put up with it for too long. She'd known other girls who'd done their damndest to keep a doomed relationship afloat, like flinging good money after bad. And all for nothing but more grief. At least Serena had retained something fine and lovely to make up for her own disappointment: a little heartbreaker by the name of Roxana.

She looked across at Ruth Linford and thought: Maybe your dad had the anagram about right. There's a lot of hurt there, a dark side to the privileges of your charmed life. I wonder how you came by that hurt, chica.

"Yes, my dad," Ruth said sadly, seeming to read Serena's thoughts. "There was a car accident. I hardly remember it. I was three years' old at the time."

Car accidents were the last thing Serena wished to think about.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Hey, it's ancient history now."

Ruth reached for her coffee cup, picked it up—and set it right down again.

"Look at my hands, Serena. They're still shaking. I don't know what's going on. That's the truth. It really, really frightens me. And yes, I'll level with you. That wasn't the first time I had a memory lapse."

"Uh-*huh*."

"Now you know. I've been having this weird stuff since I turned sixteen. I'd wake some place, and not remember how I got there. Really, really scary, believe me. I don't want people to think I'm crazy."

"Who's saying you're crazy?" She made a face. "I forgot the sugar." She returned to the kitchen area.

"Who's crazy?" said a young voice. The child had returned, complete with tomcat in arms.

“Nobody’s crazy,” Serena called out gruffly. She was looking in a cabinet. “I thought you were watching TV.”

“I got bored.” Her attention was on the visitor in the stage costume.

“Well, I don’t want you bothering Ruth and me. We got some things we need to talk about.”

“Oh, okay, I’ll—”

Abruptly, the cat began to yowl like a bereft hobgoblin.

It was an eerie sound, quite unlike that heard from toms when a female is in heat. This was altogether different. It seemed to well up from somewhere deep within, and travel far before finding release, like a cry escaping from an open tomb.

Prince’s ears were flattened hard against his skull; his teeth were bared. His gaze was fixed to the back of Ruth’s head. Before Roxana knew what was happening, he’d leaped, scrabbling, from her arms. He stood against a wall, back arched, snarling.

“What’s the matter with that cat?” Serena asked.

“Mommy?! Is she okay?” Ruth hadn’t moved.

Serena went to her and shook her lightly. “Ruth?”

No response. She shook her again.

“Hey, you all right, honey? Wake up now.”

“*Is she dead?*” the child whispered. The cat continued to snarl.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Roxana. ’Course she ain’t dead. Ruth, wake up now.”

“Maybe she needs a doctor. Maybe you should call nine-one-one.”

Serena was inspecting Ruth at close quarters. She didn’t like what she saw. Sleep was sleep, and she knew the ways of the sleeper, how a person breathed when sleeping. She decided this was something very different.

“A doctor? Maybe. But I’m gonna call somebody else first.”

Todd was there in less than twenty minutes. He came in carrying a lady’s purse,

awkwardly, and a gym bag.

“Todd MacIver?”

He nodded, smiled briefly at Roxana and her cat.

Ruth’s posture had remained unchanged; she seemed not to have moved a muscle since lapsing into unconsciousness. Her breathing was so shallow as to be barely discernible. Todd set down the purse and gym bag and went to her. He laid a hand on her brow and felt for a pulse.

“How long has she been like this?”

“Not long. My little girl found her. Thought she was asleep. I guess not, huh?”

Todd had an ear to Ruth’s lips, listening. “No. It’s more serious than that. How did you get my number by the way?”

“Ruth said something about Shakespeare in the Park. You guys were in the book.”

Todd smiled grimly and examined Ruth again.

“There’s no pulse to speak of.”

“See?” Roxana cried. “I *said* she was dead but you—”

“Hush with that foolishness!”

“Sorry, Mommy.”

“I’m no doctor,” Todd said, “but my guess is that she’s in a coma of some kind.”

“She got a knock on the head. It must have been—”

“No, a knock on the head wouldn’t do this.”

Serena made a face. She looked puzzled. “You a good friend of hers?”

“You might say that. We’re close, yes. She went a little crazy in the Park. We were in the middle of a scene, and she . . . she just kind of lost it.”

Serena studied the tall, well-built young man. On the phone he’d sounded different. Older, for starters. He’d one of those very clear, very distinct voices she associated with the more mature talk-show hosts. Consequently his youth surprised her, as did his lean looks. She could understand why a girl like Ruth

would fall for him. She'd wondered briefly if they were lovers, but decided they were not. Ruth was the serious type. Serena saw her marrying a professional man, probably at least a decade older, and settling down to a steady, married life in which kids would feature big—but so, too, would country clubs, workouts at the gym, and beauty treatments. Todd was otherwise; she could tell right away. She thought there was something of the rebel, the swashbuckler, about him. She could picture him being—

The tomcat squealed.

He struggled to free himself from Roxana's grasp, succeeded, and once again backed against the wall, ears flat, tail held low, hissing. His attention was fixed firmly on Ruth.

Her eyes were wide open.

Todd went to her, and bent over her. He reached for her hand.

Without warning, she sat bolt upright—and grasped him forcibly by the shoulders.

"Take Ruth to her home!" she cried in a voice he hardly recognized. It was Ruth's, yes, but the words seemed to sit uneasily on those lips he knew so well. "Quickly, do it now! My time is brief. I am in peril. As is my father."

The instruction having been delivered, she relaxed her grip. He took her wrist gently. The cat continued to hiss.

"Ruth, hey . . . What are you saying? You're not making sense."

Her brown eyes—the eyes he thought he knew so well—lanced into his. He was abruptly conscious of the presence of another person there: a stranger, one quite unlike Ruth. This was an imperious presence, one that sat exceedingly well with the aristocratic clothing Ruth wore.

"I am Lady Eleanor Livingstone," the voice declared. "Heed my words, for they are of vital import. Take Ruth now to her father's house."

"Ruth. . . ?"

"The locked chamber. Find thee the book, and learn thee the key."

“Wow,” Roxana whispered. “*Awesome!*”

Ruth’s eyes shut again. She sank back onto the couch. The cat began to mew soulfully, like a creature beyond comforting.

“Mommy, what does the lady—”

“Hush, Roxana. Todd, what’s going on? What’s *really* going on here? Tell me. Tell me the truth now.”

The tall young man looked chastened; her words had struck home. She waited.

“This isn’t the first time it’s happened,” he said at last. “I wasn’t there before but I heard about it from a friend of hers. Seems there’s a pattern here. I only wish I knew what it was, but I don’t. That’s the God’s-honest truth.”

She looked at him carefully, questingly. Who, she wondered, are these two people who’ve busted into my life and turned it upside down? Actors. Well, actors did not have a good reputation as a general rule. They were not as other folk. Serena had the sudden, wild thought that she’d fallen feet first into the middle of a bizarre theatrical production, and that she hadn’t yet had time to read the script. She wished somebody could start behaving normally, or, failing that, set her down with a nice rum cocktail and tell her what the hell was going on.

Then she took another, closer, look at the tall stranger and thought otherwise. He seemed to be as much at sea as she was. And she seemed to sense his fear of the unknown.

“So who’s Lady Eleanor Living-whatever?”

“Livingstone. I think she said Livingstone. I have no idea.”

“She’s not in one of those plays you guys do?”

He shook his head.

“Then why was Ruth saying she was this Lady Eleanor? Was she on something? Dope?”

“Absolutely not!” He was angry, causing Serena to regret her words. But he calmed down almost at once. “No, definitely not. Not Ruth. You don’t know her

like I do. She would never do drugs—period.”

“Okay. So maybe she was hallucinating. She got a bump on the head today. When she came to, she was coming out with stuff like that. It was pretty scary, I don’t mind telling you. She sounded like somebody else. She was using old-fashioned words. Then she told me she was an actress and I figured she was imagining she was on the stage. But you think there’s more going on?”

He nodded. “I’m beginning to, yes. I don’t know much about this, Serena; it’s not my field. But I did some reading in high school on psychology. The mind is a funny thing. A blow to the head can trigger all sorts of odd things. A person could start believing she’s somebody else. Also, a person can create a fantasy world for themselves. Harmless by itself, but a blow to the head can perhaps make them believe that that fantasy world is real.”

“Hmm. That’s way too deep for me.”

Todd was checking Ruth’s breathing. With a forefinger he raised one of her eyelids. She didn’t respond.

“Perhaps we should get her to a hospital,” he said. “It could be that it’s—”

“No!” He looked at her strangely. It was her turn to adjust her tone. “I mean: What can they do? They’d likely just keep her in for observation, run some tests. And what help would that be to Ruth? There’s obviously some sort of problem that she needs help with, and she won’t get that help in no hospital.”

Serena hoped she was making sense. Anything, anything but a hospital.

“You may be right,” he said. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“What’s the alternative—to bringing her to a hospital?” She indicated the purse he’d brought with him. “That hers?”

“Yes. You think we should do what she wanted? Take her home? Look for a locked chamber?”

“We?”

“I-I’m sorry. I simply thought . . . well . . .”

Serena smiled inwardly. Todd MacIver, she thought, you’re not as tough and

brave as you look, are you? You're as scared of all this weird stuff as I am.

At that moment she made a decision she prayed was the right one. In her heart, however, she felt as though she were poised on a high cliff above the ocean, looking down at the surface of the water below—and having not the vaguest notion of how deep that water was, or what species of predator was swimming below its surface.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay what?”

“I’m in.” She gestured at the comatose Ruth. “The girl needs help. Seems there’s no one else. Maybe she picked me to help her today; maybe that’s why she ran out in front of my truck. Call me crazy, but I’d like to see this thing through. So count me in.”

He nodded. She reached for her cell phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“My mom. She lives just down the hall. . . . Lorena? Can you get over here right away? . . . No, she’s fine; it ain’t that. Just come over, okay?”

She stowed the phone in her purse. To Roxana she said: “Honey, Mommy has to go out again. Lorena’s coming straight over. You be good now, okay?”

Meanwhile, Todd had found Ruth’s keys.

“Why can’t I come?” Roxana asked.

“No reason. You just stay put. And if the phone rings, you don’t answer it. Let Lorena do it. That clear?”

Three

The Linford family home was the sort of place Serena had always promised herself and her daughter—while knowing with near-certainty she could never, ever aspire to such ostentation. It was a colossal house situated in East Hampton, but built in a style very different from the “classic” Hampton shingle home. Two weeks before, Serena had seen a television documentary that featured the Beverly Hills mansion once owned by a screen heartthrob of the 1940s. This house resembled it, as much in extent as design.

She'd stopped the SUV immediately outside the gate. It was locked securely, as were most gates in the area—there was much wealth to safeguard. Seen from the road, the house stood stark at the end of a straight, cinder driveway, with only a line of tall yew trees beyond. *Yews*. The trees of the graveyard.

She knew little about architecture but had a hunch that the house dated from Victorian times. It was built of red brick, and had tall, ornate chimneys, perhaps twenty in all. A lot of rooms to heat in the winter, she thought. There were three stories, each with windows of varying designs. The topmost were flat and multipaned, like windows in a bishop's house; those on the ground floor bowed outward, as though they could scarcely contain the treasures within.

“That's some place,” Serena said. “What did you say her dad did?”

“I didn't, but he was a Yale lecturer and a writer. He wrote several books on philosophy and a couple novels.”

“Uh-*huh*. It gets better and better. 'Deed it does.”

Ruth, still comatose, lay supine in the back of the truck, a light blanket covering her. Lorena had helped Serena dress her in her regular clothes, and remove the stage makeup. She'd been tempted to apply some of her own but thought better of it. How would *I* like it, she'd asked herself, if somebody else applied *my* makeup while I was out for the count? Besides, her own makeup was for dark

skin. She'd smiled to herself on imagining Ruth's dismay on waking to find herself wearing a black girl's cosmetics.

Nevertheless, Serena had lingered over Ruth while Todd entertained Roxana. (He was good with kids, she decided; something in his favor.) She'd studied the young woman who'd come into her life in such a dramatic way. What did she know about her? Apart from the fact she was an actress, dismayingly little.

Yet here she was—Serena Cordero, rag-and-bag lady and soon-to-be-homeless mother of one—preparing to violate the private domain of a girl she scarcely knew. And all because that same girl had been talking in her sleep, giving orders like she was the Queen of Sheba. It was absurd.

Todd was fishing something from a pocket: a small black oblong of plastic with a red button.

"It's a remo I found in her purse," he said. "The only use I could figure for it was to activate a gate of some kind. And here it is."

He pressed the button and the gate slid back with no more than a low hum. Then they were moving slowly up the driveway, the cinders crunching beneath the tires, the great house looming in a manner Todd found intimidating. Perhaps it's the air of desertion that's hanging over it, he decided. No sign of life, no lights burning within, no cars parked near the front door. Only some large black birds circling several of the chimneys. They could have been rooks or crows, or ravens even; he didn't like them.

This house, he thought, has the look of death about it.

"Gothic," he said aloud.

"Excuse me?"

"It's built in the Gothic style. It was fashionable at one time. Don't ask me why. Why would anyone want to live in a spooky-looking place like this?"

Dusk was coming on fast when they stepped out of the car. Serena got the front door of the house open while Todd went to fetch Ruth. She was light and he was strong. An odd feeling struck him as he carried her over the threshold.

He thought fleetingly of brides and bridegrooms, and dismissed the thought as foolish.

Yet later that evening he'd recollect that transient thought, which on consideration was not so much a thought as a sensation. It was akin to *déjà vu*. It was the feeling that a certain act had been performed before, or—and this was the uncanny part—that the act would be performed in the future, and the circumstances surrounding that act would be alien, unimaginable. Todd found himself growing uneasy.

Serena had thrown the switch that lighted the hall. The decor was as astonishing as the house's exterior. It was quite magnificent in its own way: all oak paneling, polished floorboards, chandeliers, and brass fixtures. One wall was taken up by swords of varying lengths and broadness of blades—from *épée* to cutlass—and all cleverly arranged to form a figure-of-eight lying in the horizontal.

Standing directly below the center of the sword display was a complete suit of armor. Serena studied it for a moment or two. It was not the customary, classical suit, but one that featured a chain-mail vest that fell to below the knee, and a bell-shaped helmet with a broad nose guard. It occurred to Serena that it might perhaps have been better to have a mannequin in there; there was something about the blackness inside the empty helmet she found disturbing, as disturbing as the house itself.

For one thing she was thankful, however. The house was warm. The heating, she decided, must operate on a time switch. No fires to light then.

Todd had carried Ruth into the first room that presented itself. It was furnished to match the hall but had a number of comfortable chairs and sofas. There was a large, velvet-covered chaise longue, too, and he laid Ruth gently on it. Serena joined him.

"Welcome to Castle Dracula," he said, looking about him. "What a place."

Serena tidied Ruth's mussed hair with her fingers. "Yes, no wonder she's kinda . . . funny."

She caught a sharp look from Todd, and found herself wishing she hadn't been so forthright.

"Think we can leave her alone for a couple minutes? The Candyman won't come to fetch her?"

He smiled. "Well, we granted Ruth her first wish anyway. She's home. Now for the next step: finding the 'locked chamber.'"

"A 'chamber' is just another word for a room, that right?"

"Sure. Like bedchamber. Old English."

"So why was Ruth talking in old English? Was that because of the play you guys were doing?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so." He was lost in thought for a moment, studying the unconscious girl on the couch. Then he said: "No, I believe there's another explanation. And something tells me we'll find it right here."

They shut the door gently behind them and headed off down the left corridor, switching on lights as they went. The doors to all the rooms were open. They retraced their steps and started on the right-hand corridor. All its doors were likewise open. They returned to the entrance hall.

"Upstairs?" Serena said.

"Upstairs."

Todd felt uneasy as they climbed the big staircase. They were intruding; there was no other word for it. Their intentions might be noble, yet in the eyes of the law, should the law catch them in the act, they were committing a criminal offense. Furthermore, should the owner of the house catch them intruding, he or she was empowered by law to shoot them dead. He'd never been guilty of so much as a misdemeanor, let alone a criminal act. The thought of what he and a stranger were doing made him hesitate.

Yet what, he asked himself, was the alternative? Ruth Linford lay comatose, afflicted by an ailment he didn't understand. In a semilucid state she'd called out to him to help her, had given him instructions that made little sense then, but

were beginning to make some sort of sense now. He'd known that Ruth lived in the Hamptons. Yet he'd never envisaged her home as anything remotely resembling the bizarre mansion they now found themselves in. In this context, in these surroundings, mysterious books and locked chambers seemed less incongruous than hitherto. Indeed, Ruth's mysterious words—"Find thee the book, and learn thee the key"—were beginning to sound not at all out of place here.

There were mostly bedrooms on the next floor, together with two bathrooms and a utility room. All were unlocked.

A smaller staircase led up to the top floor. It was different from the others; it appeared to have been built earlier, but that made no sense, Todd thought. It was the windows that gave that impression. They were narrow and mullioned, the sort one found in the homes of clergymen in centuries past. Their Gothic arched frames heightened the ecclesiastic feel of the corridor in which he and Serena found themselves. Large tiles of black and white marble, laid diagonally, completed the impression.

Todd pushed open the first door. An odor of disuse greeted him. The second room seemed to be in use as a storeroom. There was old furniture, boxes and trunks, and standing lamps: all arranged neatly. The third room turned out to be a library. Curious, he stepped inside and inspected the shelves. He recognized several authors: Descartes, Lacan, Freud, Hegel, Nietzsche, and many who were strangers to him. He looked in vain for titles by John Linford.

The next door they came upon was locked. They exchanged looks.

Without a word, Todd drew a Swiss Army knife from his pocket, folded out a long and thin implement, and fiddled with the lock. It sprang open almost instantly.

"Where did you learn to do *that*?" Serena asked, impressed.

"Boy Scouts."

"Hmmm."

They found themselves in a study decorated by an eccentric. By day it would

have been illuminated by the trio of mullioned windows set into one wall. The furniture, in keeping with the rest of the house, was antique. There were shelves of leather-bound books, ancient globes and wall charts displaying a flat earth with a good deal of *terra incognita*. There was another suit of armor, similar to that in the hall, and ancient weapons.

“Norman,” Todd said.

“That’s old English too, right?”

“Partly. The Normans came originally from France. They were descended from the Vikings, who also called themselves Norsemen or Northmen. When they settled in France they called their territory Normandy, which meant something like ‘Land of the Northmen.’ The British called them Normans.”

“You sure know your history. Did you learn that in the Boy Scouts too?”

He smiled. “No, just high school stuff. Anyhow, the Normans crossed over to England and colonized it. There was a big battle in ten sixty-six. A King by the name of William the Conqueror won. The English King was killed; got an arrow stuck in his eye. It’s supposed to have gone right through into the brain.”

“Yikes.” She was studying the weapons more closely. “Looks like Ruth’s dad was really interested in those Normans. Wonder if this stuff is real.”

“I doubt it. You can pick up replicas like these in lots of places. You’d need to go to a museum to see the originals.”

“But did he really work here?” she asked. “This place creeps me out. Talk about a museum.”

She went to a big desk near the windows. It gleamed. Pride of place was given to an old but shiny Remington typewriter. Neat piles of paper lay next to it; there were pencils and fountain pens. Laid out in no particular order on the desk was an assortment of curios: a dagger and a crystal ball; a pair of baby booties, gold plated; other bric-a-brac a man might collect and treasure for whatever sentimental reason. Serena ran a finger over the surface of the desk.

“Looks like somebody still works here, Todd. The desk is spotless.”

He shook his head.

"I don't think so. I think you were right: this room is a museum. Or a shrine."

He went to a wall. There were framed newspaper cuttings, yellowed with age.

"Ruth told me about this," he said, reading. "She only said that her dad died in a car wreck. This is morbid. Who would want to remember the guy this way?"

"Ruth's mother?"

"Who else? . . . God Almighty!"

"What's up?" She joined him.

"Says here the car caught fire, but the coroner figured it took three, maybe four minutes to burn up. The way they found the body, Linford was roasted alive."

"But that's horrible. I don't even want to think about it. So why would she want to be reminded of a thing like that?"

"Perhaps it's more than a reminder," he said. "Perhaps it's a warning."

"Excuse me?"

"Just a hunch. I could be wrong. All the same . . ."

He turned away from the newspaper cuttings. He was lost in thought. Serena frowned.

"Todd?"

"There's something . . . Did you ever have that, Serena? You see something; it's looking you straight in the eye, but you don't know what it is?"

He began to move about the room, inspecting, reinspect, stopping at items he'd already studied. He went to the fireplace. It was big enough to walk into. He did, glanced up. Nothing.

"The locked chamber. Find thee the book, and learn thee the key."

"I come into a room," he said. "I take a look around. There's something there, and I don't know what it is. Unless . . ." He had stopped at a bookshelf, was scanning the titles.

"Unless?"

“Unless it isn’t something that’s there, but something that’s *missing*. Are you a reader? I mean: do you read books?”

“Sure. . . . Uhh, not much. . . . Well, no, I guess not, no.”

“I do,” he said. “I have lots of books. Perhaps not as many as the late Mr. Linford, but a lot.”

“So?”

“So a writer should have multiple copies of each of his *own* books, side by side on his shelves. A friend of mine’s mom is a writer, so I know. Where are Linford’s? Not one. Not one single book by John Linford. Same goes for the library next door. There are books there by any philosopher you care to mention, from Socrates to the modern guys, but nothing by Linford. And I happen to know he wrote at least five.”

He sat down in Linford’s chair and swiveled slowly. He picked up the gold-plated booties.

“You know, I believe this is real gold.” He passed them to Serena.

“Yep, it is. I had Roxana’s first shoes done in bronze. Wasn’t Ruth the lucky little girl.”

But Todd was only half listening. He was staring at the typewriter. “Come over here, Serena.”

She came and stood next to him. He waited.

“You don’t see it?” he asked.

“I don’t see . . . what?”

“You don’t type either, right?”

She grew irritated. “No, I don’t read books and I don’t type. Smite me with boils, o Lord, for I am a sinner. What am I supposed to be seeing?”

“The qwerty layout. They call it qwerty because the top row of the keyboard begins with the letters Q-W-E-R-T and Y.”

“Uhh, yeah, I see: Q-W-E-R . . . Hey, wait a second, that’s—”

“Exactly. That’s not a y, that’s an H. Somebody swapped out the H and the y.

So now it reads R-T-H-U, which is an anagram of—”

“Ruth!” Serena was recalling a conversation she’d had with a young stranger earlier that day. She was recalling a silver chain and its wearer’s words.

“My dad had it made for me. I could have had it fixed to read ‘Ruth’ but I felt that that would be . . .”

“Disrespectful to the dead,” she said, half to herself.

“Pardon me?”

“Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

“Now imagine for a moment you’re John Linford,” Todd went on, “a man who makes his living as a college professor. When he isn’t lecturing he’s writing books on his subject. He’s at this desk perhaps most days. Is he using this typewriter? I don’t think so. Not unless he’s trained himself to type a y every time he should be typing an h, and vice versa.”

“Maybe he wrote his stuff by hand, with a pen. Or maybe with what do you call those things . . . a quill pen? That would fit in with all the other weird stuff.”

He smiled. “Yes, it would, wouldn’t it? But I do believe he used a typewriter, only not this one.” He pointed to the desk. “You see this discoloring? It’s slightly darker than the rest of the wood. I think I know why. Because the rest of the wood was exposed to more sunlight than this area. Whatever was here was bigger than the Remington.”

“And it’s gone now,” Serena said, “like Linford’s books.”

“Like Linford’s books. Not a trace of his work remains. Not even his typewriter.”

She gestured at the Remington. “So this thing is just for show.”

“Perhaps. Let’s just see, shall we?”

“What are you gonna do? Don’t do any scary stuff now, Todd.”

“Trust me, I won’t.”

He hit four keys. Slowly, carefully.

“R . . . U . . . T . . . H.”

Something was happening.

Machinery that had lain dormant for a long time was kicking into life.

A section of the bookshelf facing the desk was sliding back.

Jumbled thoughts of ancient tombs raced through Todd's mind. He was recalling something about deadly traps laid to slay the tomb robber. Serena was holding her breath.

The mechanism stopped.

Revealed were an old-fashioned television set and a video recorder.

They exchanged looks. Serena pointed at the typewriter.

"Learn thee the key.' That's what Ruth said. 'Learn thee the key.'"

But Todd was already examining the recorder. "It's a Betamax," he told her. "I haven't seen one of these in the longest time."

"Will it still work?"

"Only one way to find out."

Todd found a remote control for the recorder. He pressed it, hit the power button on the TV. The screen sprang into life.

The old videotape began to roll. There were small hisses and pops from the television speakers.

Images began to appear on the screen. A man of perhaps thirty-five was sitting behind a desk, speaking to camera. It was this desk, this room.

"Hello, Ruth," he said. "*You got this far. Good girl! I knew you would.*"

"Is that—"

"Ruth's father, yes," said Todd.

"*You're all grown up now, baby girl,*" Linford continued. "*I'd love to be there to see you. But that's impossible. The fact that you're watching this recording at all means I'm dead. That was never my intention. Please—*"

Todd froze the image.

"This doesn't make a lot of sense," he said. "First off: how did he know he was going to die? It was a road accident, wasn't it?"

“Unless it was suicide.”

“Good try, Serena. You saw the newspaper cuttings. The man died in agony. Me, if I wanted to kill myself, I’d choose another way.”

“Could be he did. Could be it went wrong.”

“Perhaps,” Todd conceded reluctantly. “But why did he wish to die and leave his wife and kid behind? He was a bestselling writer. Look around you. He was wealthy. He loved his daughter so much he had her baby shoes gold plated. Why would he wish to end it all?”

He hit the **REWIND** button, then resumed the tape.

“—means I’m dead,” continued the dead man. *“That was never my intention. Please believe me. I love your mother too much for that. And I love you too, baby girl.”*

Linford leaned closer to the camera. *“The next step is for you to read my diary. It’s all in there, Ruth. It explains how I got to be where I am right now, and how you can join me here.”*

“The study ought to be exactly the way I left it, all except for my own books and my typewriter. Your mother promised me she’d do that. Go to the bookshelf behind my desk. There are books there in leather bindings. Classics. Third shelf from the top.”

Todd paused the tape again and went behind the desk. He reached up and took down a book.

“Is this what he meant? One of these?”

Serena picked up the remote and hit **PLAY**.

“One of the titles is The Time Machine by H.G. Wells,” Linford said. *“Look for it.”*

“Got it!” Todd cried excitedly.

“You found it?” Linford said after a few moments. *“Open it up, Ruth.”*

Todd opened the book. “Damn!”

“What’s the matter?” She paused the tape again.

“It’s a fake, Serena.”

“Huh?”

He was leafing through the book. The pages were blank. "It's a fake book. No ... wait ..."

She joined him. She saw there was handwriting on some of the pages. Neat lines in a crabbed hand, beginning about midway through the book.

There came sudden sounds from the room immediately below them.

They exchanged anxious looks.

Somebody was coming up the stairs.

"*Ruth?*" Serena mouthed.

Todd shook his head. He was hearing heavy footfalls on the timber boards; they were too heavy for someone of Ruth's light frame.

Serena was looking about the room, as though seeking a hiding place. The automatic reflex of a cornered creature. Her eye fell on the walk-in fireplace.

Todd handed her the book. "*We have to get that bookshelf back the way it was,*" he whispered.

He tried to shove it back. It wouldn't budge.

"*Damn it!*"

The footsteps had reached the door. Somebody was rattling the doorknob.

"Hello?" a male voice called out. "Is there somebody in there?"

"*Did you lock that door again?*" Serena whispered.

He shook his head. He was baffled. Had the door locked itself?

"I know there's someone in there. Open this door!"

"*Try the typewriter!*" Serena whispered.

"*What?*"

The doorknob rattled again.

"*The typewriter. If it opened up the bookshelf, it might close it again. Hurry!*"

The doorknob was being pushed, hard. "Come on, open up!"

Todd went to the Remington. He typed. He typed again.

"*It won't work!*" he breathed. "*Christ, it won't work!*"

He typed again. And yet again. No response.

He knocked up against the baby booties and they rattled on the desk.

"That's it; I'm calling the police!" the voice warned.

"Try it back to front," Serena urged in a whisper. *"Back to front. 'Ruth' back to front."*

Todd hit the keys in that order.

The bookshelf slid back to its original position.

Heart pounding, Todd went to the door. He saw now what he hadn't noticed when they'd entered the study: the knob had a button that, once pressed, locked the door from the inside. One of them must have hit it by accident. He turned the knob and opened the door.

Todd was six-two. The man outside was a head smaller; he took a step back on seeing Todd, skittish. He was suntanned, casually dressed, middle aged and balding.

"Who are you?" Todd asked.

They were the first words that came into his head. No sooner had he uttered them than he appreciated how nonsensical they were. He, Todd, was the intruder.

"Well, I might ask *you* the same question," the man said. He saw Serena. "Yes, who the devil are you people?"

"Friends of Ruth. She's—"

"How did you get in here? Where's Ruth?"

"In the front room," Todd told him.

"Has she been in here? In the study?"

"Er, no. We brought her—"

"Bob?" It was a woman's voice, calling nervously from the stairs.

"Be right there, Carrie," the man replied. To Todd he said: "Is that Ruth's car out front?"

"No, it's mine," Serena told him. "We think Ruth's in a coma."

The man's face fell. "Good Lord! You didn't call the hospital . . . a doctor?"

“No, we figured—”

“It wouldn’t have helped. You did the right thing.”

He was holding open the study door; he wanted them out of there. He saw the book in Serena’s hand.

“What’s that you have there?”

“Just a book.”

“Give it here,” he said curtly.

She complied. He looked at the spine.

“It belonged to Mr. Linford,” Todd said.

“I see.” Bob crossed to the bookshelf. “Well, we’d best give it back to Mr. Linford, don’t you think?” He saw the gap and returned the book. “What were you doing in Linford’s study?”

“We, er, needed an address where we could reach Ruth’s mother,” Todd said.

“Hmm. Well, that’s no longer necessary. She’s right here.”

They found Ruth in much the same condition as they’d left her. Serena noticed that her hair had been tidied some more. The woman who sat with her on the chaise longue was elegant, and a good deal younger than Serena had expected. A closer inspection, however, revealed the handiwork of one or more expert—and doubtless expensive—cosmetic surgeons. Carrie Linford resembled, if anything, Ruth’s older and more glamorous sister.

But she greeted them coldly. Their presence in the house was not welcome. Serena decided she didn’t like Mrs. Linford.

“Is it the same as last time?” her companion asked.

“Worse. Who are these people?”

“Friends of Ruth’s.”

No introductions were made or asked for. Todd was left wondering about the unexpected return of Mrs. Linford and friend. He’d understood they’d been on vacation and wouldn’t be back for several days. Had something, or somebody,

alerted them?

“Has anybody looked at her?” Mrs. Linford asked Todd.

“You mean a doctor? No.”

“Like I said, the doctors can’t help her,” the man said. “You may have guessed that Ruth has a very unusual illness. Her mother and I have consulted a number of specialists but nobody seems to know what’s causing it, never mind being able to treat it. How long has she been like this?”

“Three, four hours,” Serena said.

“I see. All right, we’ll handle it from here. I guess we ought to thank you for taking care of Ruth.”

“Yes, thank you,” said the mother. “But please leave us now, if you don’t mind. Mr. Cassano will see you out.”

Todd nodded, and took one last look at Ruth.

“Can you give me two seconds, Mrs. Linford?” Serena said. “I left my purse in the study.”

They said their farewells presently. Cassano watched them walk to the car, as if to make sure they were genuinely leaving. Todd held Serena’s door open.

“I don’t recall you having a purse with you,” he said.

“I didn’t. But I do now.” She showed him a leather bag. “I remembered seeing it on Linford’s desk.”

He grinned. “And the book’s in there, right? Good work, Serena. Did you get the impression Cassano was relieved that Ruth hadn’t gone into her father’s study? I certainly did.”

“You think she never went in there?”

He nodded. “Ruth never saw that tape. I’m sure of it. If her father had a plan then that plan didn’t work out.”

She started the engine.

“Face it, Serena,” he said. “Only three people know about that diary. You, me, and a dead man.”