



POLISHED VENEER

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CHAPTER ONE

Except for the two classroom blocks poking out from each side, the private girls' high school could have been an upmarket home set in spacious foregrounds. The administration block, a double storied wooden building of 1890s vintage surrounded by a small flower garden and an expanse of immaculately kept lawn surrendered to modern demands by having a ramp that provided access to the veranda. Double glass entry doors also looked an intrusion into the classic style and a complete contrast to the colonial windows that decorated the front facade.

It was eight fifteen in the morning on the first day of the fall term and everywhere girls, most dressed in blue school uniform, wandered around the campus waiting for the commencement bell. Freshmen gathered in groups and gazed in wonder at the seventeen and eighteen-year-old young women while sophomores pranced around, swollen with their own importance. They were, after all, not the youngest at the school any longer and had seventy-five freshmen to look down on. The present roll of three hundred girls stretched the facilities to the limit with classes squeezed into buildings designed for two-thirds that number. Numerous temporary buildings dotted the grounds but the Charlotte Anderson Trust Board had once again delayed plans for a new multistoried block.

A white limo swung up the drive, screeched to a stop outside the administration block and a well dressed woman with gray hair cut in a short style stepped out and straightened her business skirt. She walked indoors and waited patiently by the glass window while the office assistant dealt with two other people in the short line.

"Can I be of assistance?" Ellen McIntyre inquired.

"I know this is frightfully late but I heard there were three vacancies in the freshmen intake and I'd like to enroll my daughter."

Ellen frowned. "This is quite irregular," she began. "The last enrollments closed back in April."

"I realize that," the woman continued. "It's just that I've only arrived in Seattle from the East where I had Penny, that's my daughter, enrolled in a girls' school in New Hampshire. Due to a sudden change in circumstances I've transferred here and wish to keep my daughter at home." She spoke in a confident educated voice and handed a business card across the counter. "My name is Mrs. Lynn McKendrick. Perhaps I could speak to Mrs. Barnsley, Charlotte Anderson School's principal."

Ellen swallowed. The woman knew all the facts, that was for sure. They did have three vacancies after last minute cancellations and Mary Barnsley was the principal.

"I'm not confident at all," she added, "but will ask Mrs. Barnsley if the vacancies have been filled." They hadn't but she was not about to reveal this. "Will you wait a moment, please."

She called through and read the visitor's name to the principal, listened, frowned and glanced up at Mrs. McKendrick. The woman had stepped back from the window and was politely examining paintings in the foyer.

"Excuse me," she said and walked through a connecting door into the principal's office.

"Shall I send her away?" she asked the dumpy white haired woman who had been at the helm of the school for fifteen years.

Principal, Mrs. Mary Barnsley studied the card Ellen had handed her and held it up. "Do you know who this is?" she queried.

"Just some pushy woman with plenty of money who thinks she can fling it around to have her own way," Ellen replied.

"It's Mrs. Lynn McKendrick," Mary replied. "The Lynn McKendrick!"

Ellen shrugged. "So?"

"One of the top defense lawyers in the country at the moment. She's been in half a dozen high profile criminal cases over the last few years. Earlier this year she was on that Senator Martinez case. Won it too, I might add."

"Of course," Ellen replied and raised her eyebrows. "I remember reading she had her

own marriage split up and had bought into a practice here." She hesitated. "But that does not mean anything."

"I'll speak to her," Mary's voice cut the air like a knife. "Kindly tell Mrs. Adair I'll be delayed for ten minutes and show Mrs. McKendrick straight in."

"If you wish." Ellen pouted and swished out of the room.

The next morning the freshmen class girls hardly noticed Penny McKendrick, a tall blonde girl with a joyful smile and warm eyes who joined their ranks.

Across in the administration block that same morning, Mary Barnsley had a meeting to discuss several decisions far more important than the enrollment of one extra pupil. She smiled across her office at the immaculately dressed, bearded man opposite her. The chairperson of the TrustBoard, Lindsay Irwin, nodded as he read the letter of resignation handed to him.

"So John finally got through to you, did he, Mary?" he remarked with empathy in his voice. "We'll miss you, you know."

"Nobody's irreplaceable," answered the principal. "It was only your arm twisting which kept me here the last twelve months." She coughed in embarrassment, something unusual for this dynamic woman. "My successor," she continued. "I know I should have no say but I ..." she stopped.

"Go on," prompted Lindsay. "You know we speak in confidence."

Mary smiled. "Okay, I'll call a spade a spade."

"You always did."

Mary waved her hand in acknowledgement and continued. "I don't want Sharon selected for the position."

The board chairperson frowned. Everybody expected Sharon Thomas, the deputy principal, to lead the school after Mary's retirement.

"But why?" he asked.

".. because she's a ruthless machine," continued Mary in a seriousness voice. "Sure, she is efficient but does she really consider the girls and their feelings? My seniors are young women who'll be going to college next year and she treats them like twelve year old kids. Worse still, she has the same approach with the staff. Everything has to be her way." She frowned. "During the last half term, I've had to pull rank on her twice. In one case a staff member was about to walk away she was so distressed."

"Yes," said Lindsay. "I heard about that little incident."

"Did you?" Mary retorted. "It was meant to be confidential."

It was Lindsay's turn to smile. "Very little slips past the senior common room."

"So it would seem," Mary replied "I know you'll be chairperson of the appointment's committee, Lindsay, so all I ask is for you to bare in mind what I said. Okay?"

"Certainly," replied Lindsay and held out his hand.

"By the way," Mary interjected as he walked towards the door. "Have you short listed our new property manager applications yet?"

Lindsay stopped and grinned. The property manager used to be called the janitor. "There were ninety seven applicants," he said. "We've slimmed it down to twenty. Would you like to see the list or do you want it shortlisted down to the five?"

"I'll see it, now," replied Mary. "This may be the last major decision I make."

"Sure," replied her visitor. "I'll get the info in my car."

After he left the room Mary sat in her comfortable swivel chair and stared across the courtyard. First period had just concluded and everywhere girls, dressed in the school uniform of maroon and white checked summer dresses, walked purposely to their next rooms. Dotted between them were the older seventeen and eighteen year old young woman dressed in mufti as the seniors were allowed to do. Mary sighed. She would miss them all.

The pile of resumes for the janitor's position, as Mary still called it, varied from a hand written sheet to a marathon effort of fifty odd pages including photos and rambling paragraphs of the owner's self appraisal. Mary sighed and glanced through them again. Half an hour later she extracted one and stuck her head through the door.

"Can you check on something for me, Ellen?" she asked.

"Sure, Mary," Ellen answered.

"This guy applying for the janitor's job. He's only thirty-five. Could you discretely call around and check up on why he left his farm."

Twenty minutes later Ellen was back in Mary's office with a sheet in her hands. "It's all written here," she said.

"Tell me," replied her principal.

"The farm manager said the farm's been in the Goodall family for three generations and after his father's death about ten years ago, Neil inherited it."

"Well, so far, so good. Carry on."

"Next, I called the local sheriff's office. In a small town, they know nearly all the locals." Ellen grimaced. "Apparently his wife, Phillipa, died of cancer two years ago. After that, he lost interest in the place, put the manager in and moved to Seattle." She glanced back at her notes. "The plant shop where he is working now speaks highly of him. 'Very dependable and honest,' the manager said."

Mary grinned. "Thanks, Ellen," she said. "That ties in with his references. I think I'll call this Neil Goodall."

Two weeks later, Neil started as the new property manager at Charlotte Anderson School. He slipped into the position easily and was well liked by Kevin Winters, the young groundskeeper, and the half a dozen part-time cleaners under his care. The teaching staff were also pleasantly surprised by his unobtrusive presence around the school. Nothing was too much trouble for him and maintenance problems such as leaky faucets or jammed doors were immediately attended to. This was a distinct contrast to his predecessor who managed to grumble about everything.

"We made a good choice with Neil," commented Sally Kingsley, Trust Board member with property responsibilities, during her usual Wednesday meeting with Mary.

"Let's hope we do as well with your replacement."

"Well, that's up to you," replied Mary. "You're one of the five on the Appointments Committee. The job closed yesterday and already there are applications piled up in the office. Have fun" The principal grinned but refrained from mentioning her earlier comment to Lindsay.

Deputy Principal Sharon Thomas sat at her kitchen table and looked at a clipboard of her duties for the day. She was a large bosomed, immaculately dressed forty five year old woman who tried to hide the fact that the years were creeping up on her by running a dye rinse to hide creeping gray hair.

"Well, just don't be over confident, that's all I said," her husband, Gary, muttered as he bit into his morning toast.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Gary," she responded. "Who else on the staff has my qualifications anyhow?"

Gary frowned in annoyance. "I'm not a pupil at your school Sharon," he said, "and that is one thing which may go against you; you're too abrupt with adults. You can't go around treating them like your pupils." He purposely took another bite of his toast before continuing to

talk. "There could be applications from all over the state."

"I know," Sharon admitted. "I've carried Mary for years now and I'm sure everyone realizes that."

"It's not me you have to convince," continued her husband. "But I suggest you take a low profile and listen to the Board before you speak. You must admit you are inclined to dominate meetings."

Sharon glared at Gary then smiled. "I know you're only trying to help, Honey," she replied, stood up and gave him a brief kiss on the cheek. "Anyhow, I must leave. There are threeparents I am interviewing before school. Their damned daughters were meeting boys at lunchtime, yesterday. I don't know what's happening to the girls. Five years ago no one would have dared go into the wooded lot, let alone meet boys there."

In her office at school fifty minutes later, Sharon nodded grimly at Gavin McLean, a prominent businessman in town who had been called in from an important meeting for an interview. His daughter, a junior, sat in the corner with defiant eyes.

"When I received a call, Mrs. Thomas," he said in a steely tone. "I was led to believe that Valerie was in serious trouble and you tell me she was only found talking to boys yesterday."

"She was in the back wooded lot, Mr. McLean. That area of the school property is out of bounds for the students. Furthermore, her friends and her were talking to boys from the local state high school and cigarette smoke could be smelt on their breath."

"Not marijuana, I hope," replied Gavin and winked at his daughter.

"This is no laughing matter, Mr. McLean," retorted Sharon. "Valerie has broken school rules, therefore I shall have to enter it on her records and suspend her from school until the end of the week."

McLean's face turned dark. "This is the third time in the last year I have been called into the school over frivolous matters, Mrs. Thomas and I am telling you now," His voice remained quiet but hard, "you will not suspend, Valerie."

"It is not up to you, I'm afraid," hissed Sharon. "We have our standards to maintain."

Gavin stared straight into the deputy principal's eyes. "This interview is over," he said and turned to his daughter. "Come on Valerie. We'll go and see Mrs. Barnsley."

Mere minutes later Gavin and Valerie were sitting in Mary's office. After he had explained his reason for being there Mary offered him a seat and looked over at Valerie.

"Could you wait outside a moment please, Valerie," she said. "I'd like to talk to your father alone."

"Certainly, Mrs. Barnsley," replied the girl politely and left the room.

Gavin had by now simmered down a little but was still annoyed. "Unless something is done about Mrs. Thomas and her overbearing manner I shall write to the trust board and file an official complaint." he began, "and I tell you, Mary, there is a lot of discontentment amongst the parents."

Mary nodded. Everything Gavin had said was true and confirmed her earlier discussion with Lindsay Irwin but, diplomatically, she couldn't repeat this.

"I agree the punishment was somewhat harsh," she said quietly and continued. "Your other comments are noted."

"I mean it, Mary," he continued. "If that woman is put in charge, the school will suffer."

Mary's eyes met his but she merely nodded and pressed an intercom button on her desk. "Ellen, could you ask Mrs. Thomas and Valerie to step into my office?"

"Tell us, Miss Fernhill." Lindsay fixed his eyes on the next candidate on the shortlist. "Being Principal at Charlotte Anderson School involves working in a different environment from state

schools. If you were appointed, what would you see as one of your first duties?"

He inspected the attractive brunette woman sitting opposite. Dressed in a light brown suit and cream blouse she appeared almost too young for the position. However, her credentials were of the highest quality and there was an air of confidence about her. Whereas the last candidate they interviewed clutched her purse and talked too much, this young woman was very precise in all her replies.

"Get to know the people here; trustees, staff and the pupils," Gail Fernhill answered.

The five people on the committee glanced up from their notes and waited.

"Is that all?" one woman finally asked.

"No, of course not," Gail continued with a slight smile, "but I believe the people in a school are more important than bits of paper. A principal of a school is beyond the chalkboard, so to speak. Staff morale and loyalty are of the highest importance. One has to know her staff before formulating programs, finding out previous school policies and so forth. It would be foolish to rush in with masses of theory that may not suit the school."

"I see," replied Lindsay in a neutral tone and jotted some notes on a piece of paper. His eyes met Gail's deep blue ones. "I notice that you passed your Masters Degree in Business Administration. Was there any reason for this?"

"I wanted to broaden my interests," replied Gail. "Taking purely educational or academic subjects can be restricting."

"I noticed you passed with honors. Congratulations," Sally Kingsley added.

"Thank you," the woman responded modestly but didn't elaborate.

The interview continued for another fifty minutes with set questions and several personal queries made. Gail answered with confidence and those present noticed she wasn't afraid to give an opinion if it was called for.

"That concludes our interview, Gail," Lindsay finally stated. "You will be advised of the outcome within the next two weeks. Thank you for coming. Please feel free to have another look around the school. Janice, one of our seniors on the student council will be your guide. As well, you're welcome to have afternoon coffee in the teacher's lounge before you leave."

"Thank you," Gail said. "I saw some of the school before the interview and am very impressed. I'd love to see the rest."

She rose, shook everybody's hands and left the room.

When Sharon was asked the set interview questions, she was back to being her old blunt self again and seemed to have completely forgotten the encounter with Gavin McLean only a week earlier.

"We need to tighten up on our girls," she said. "In the modern environment we must offer something the public schools don't and one of these is tight discipline that leads to high academic results we can be proud of."

"--and what about staff morale?" prompted Sally after she'd reread the notes taken when Gail discussed the same question.

"Of course that's important," Sharon retorted. "With good discipline, this will follow."

"I see," replied Sally.

Before the interviewing process, she'd supported Sharon but some of their replies at present coming through made her feel the other woman might be a stronger candidate. She knew, too, there had been rumblings about the D. P. being too forceful in the school. Yet the other woman was so young. Almost absentmindedly she drew a large question mark on the paper in front of her and decided to wait to see what the other members thought.

"Gail Fernhill presented herself well," Sally commented as the members shuffled through their notes and began to evaluate the candidates.

"Hell, she looked younger than thirty-two," muttered Bob Smith, a stout bald man in his fifties. "I'd have trouble picking her out from our senior girls. Good looker, too."

"Trust you to notice that, Bob?" chided Sally.

"Well," replied Bob, "her references are excellent. Mind you, it would be a big step here after being a dean at a state school."

"Yes, I admit she is relatively young," added Sally, "but if it wasn't for Sharon, I'd probably recommend her."

Lindsay coughed. "I would like to oppose Sharon's selection," he said quietly and took out a brown folder. "I believe she has the wrong personality for the position."

"Come on," protested Ted Quigley, another Board representative. "Sure she's strict but isn't that what we need?"

"No," replied Lindsay. "Not when it's at the expense of individual initiative, senior pupils are treated like juniors, staff are stressed out ..."

"Okay," interrupted Ted. "I get your point."

Lindsay opened the folder. "I have here, letters from parents complaining about Sharon's treatment of their girls. In the last term we received at least a dozen addressed to either Mary or myself." He glanced around the table. "Why, only last week, Gavin McLean phoned me to complain."

"Okay," replied Bob and sighed. "I see it is not a foregone conclusion to select Sharon. I suggest, therefore, we go back to our job description and rank the candidates as we originally agreed."

"I agree," answered Lindsay. "Let's begin. Now, part one is ..."

For several hours the discussion continued with three candidates being eliminated for various reasons until it was finally time to make the decision.

"This seems to be it," Lindsay began. "The final selection is between Sharon Thomas and Gail Fernhill. Shall we take a vote?"

Five hands went up to nominate Gail. It was unanimous.

When Lindsay walked into Sharon's place early the next morning he wished his visit was over but he'd earlier decided at least he'd give Sharon the curtsy of telling her the news to her face rather than over the phone.

"Come in, Lindsay," said Gary after he'd opened the door. "I'll get Sharon," replied Gary.

"Oh, hello, Lindsay," Sharon said pleasantly when she walked in the room. She stood waiting with an expectant gaze.

Lindsay glanced at her. "I came to say, I'm sorry but you missed out in the principal's position. It was very close but..."

"Missed!" gasped Sharon and her hand went to her mouth. "How could I?"

Lindsay sighed. "Another candidate was considered a better choice. We discussed your relative merits for hours but finally it was decided to give the position to Miss Gail Fernhill."

"I see," replied Sharon. "Which one was she?"

"Miss Fernhill was the young dark haired woman. She's thirty-two."

"Thirty-two!" Sharon's voice grew louder. "You gave the position to a thirty-two year old?"

Lindsay nodded. "When all of your relative merits were taken into account she, in the appointments committee's opinion, came out the strongest."

"How?" Sharon retorted.

"She has an honors degree but you don't want me to go through every reason, do you?"

"No, of course not. I'm disappointed, that's all."

"Of course you are," replied Lindsay. "You have every right to be but I'm sure once you get to know Gail you'll find her a very mature and approachable person."

"No doubt," replied Sharon with a trace of sarcasm in her voice. "Thank you for your personal approach, Lindsay. I appreciate it."

She turned and abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Gail Fernhill studied the large white envelope that had arrived in the morning's mail and noticed the maroon coat of arms above ornate gold lettering reading "Charlotte Anderson School" in the left top corner.

"Oh well," she muttered to herself as she slit the envelope open. As she read the first page her eyes opened wide.

'Dear Miss Fernhill, ' it started, 'It gives us great pleasure to advise you that the appointments committee of Charlotte Anderson School ...' Gail read the rest with increasing excitement. My God, she'd won the position! She flipped through the other sheets and turned back to the first page to reread the last paragraph. 'Could you please advise us by the end of this month if you are prepared to accept the position to take affect as from ... '

"Yes, oh yes," she said and ran inside to phone her mother.

Jennifer Pearson received her daughter's information with delight.

"I always knew you'd do it, sweetheart," she replied. The still youngish looking woman in her mid fifties glanced across at her husband, Lance and repeated the news. Lance smiled. He was thrilled as well. Since meeting and later marrying Jennifer he had always related well with Gail though she had been a very hard young woman to befriend. There was a sort of barrier around her, beyond which nobody could go.

"Here, let me speak to her," he said. "Congratulations, Gail," he said with a genuine excited voice. "Like your Mom, I had no doubt you'd win a job like this. You certainly deserve it. Are you doing anything tonight?" He smiled and knew his conscientious step-daughter wouldn't be going out. "... Well, how about a big shout? I'll book us into one of those cozy restaurants downtown.... Fine. See you about six. I'll hand you back to your mom. Bye."

After Jennifer took the phone, he smiled and continued to think about Gail. In all the time he'd known her, she had never gone out with men. It was almost as if she was scared to build up a relationship. He remembered the graduation night she had received her M. A. After she'd been capped he'd walked over and given her a big hug. She had literally stiffened in his arms and had stepped back with a flushed expression. Yet they were really the best of friends. Often they would talk for hours about common interests.

"Listen everyone," said Mary on the final Wednesday before the Christmas vacation, "I'd like to introduce your new principal. This is Gail Fernhill," She turned to the visitor and smiled. "You've met Sharon earlier so if we start on the left, we have...."

Gail walked around, shook hands with the staff and purposely made a mental reference so she could remember the names. The staff was predominately woman with only a few men present including a young teacher called Boyde and the property manager.

"I'm really just the janitor," Neil Goodall said as she shook his hand.

He was a tall, well built man in his thirties, clean shaven with short dark hair.

Afterwards, Gail made a point of moving between groups and asking questions, which seemed to put the staff at ease. When the bell rang for classes to recommence she watched as everyone quickly filed out.

"They're keen," she said pleasantly to the deputy principal.

Sharon looked at the young woman and retorted. "It's what we expect here, Miss Fernhill."

"Please, call me Gail."

"Yes, err, Gail," replied Sharon and relaxed a little.

Gail observed the deputy principal and tried to interpret the body language. Some mistrust and resentment was evident but that was only to be expected. Apparently, Sharon was an efficient teacher and administrator and would be needed in the new term.

"I want to know what you consider the school's priorities are," she said. "Mary's told me everything as she sees it but we're the ones that will be working together."

"You mean you're interested in my thoughts and ideas?" asked Sharon with a tint of amazement in her voice.

"Sure," replied Gail. "Why not?"

"No reason," answered Sharon. "I didn't expect it, that's all."

"I look forward to your help," Gail replied and walked over to where Mary was waiting for her.

The first Monday in January arrived with a special assembly to welcome the new principal and parents crowded into the school auditorium. The stand-alone building was the newest addition to the school and built after many years fund raising by the alumnae plus several generous gifts by local firms.

Gail was waiting in a small anteroom behind the main stage with Lindsay Irwin, Sharon Thompson and several other trust board members. She heard the school orchestra playing light music as the girls filed silently in.

"Excuse me," said Sharon. "I'll get the assembly started."

Gail nodded and gazed around. It was quite an occasion and everyone was dressed formally. She was glad she had decided to wear her new suit, modest earrings and light stockings. Suddenly the music through the door stopped and she could hear Sharon's voice in the background. A young woman in mufti and youngster in the school uniform knocked politely on the door and walked up to her.

"Good morning, Miss Fernhill," said the young woman. "I am Francis Matthews, student president and this is Abbey Miller. Abbey is a freshman and the youngest girl in the school."

"Only by two days, Miss Fernhill," said the younger girl.

"Hello Frances; Abbey," said Gail and shook their hands. "I must say I like your uniform, Abbey. I've never been in a school with them before." The younger girl was dressed in a maroon and blue kilt, light blue blouse and maroon jacket.

"Thank you," said Abbey. "It is a special occasion so we all were instructed to wear our formal uniforms to welcome you. I guess you haven't seen it before."

"It is our job to introduce you to the school," continued Frances, "so if you'd follow me, Miss Fernhill."

Gail smiled, nodded and walked behind the two girls into the auditorium. She immediately noticed how grand it all seemed. In front of her, sitting in blue cinema-type seats

were the pupils with parents and friends at the rear including her mother and Lance. Teachers sat in seats along the side or the auditorium.

At the rear, a massive school crest made from colored tiles created a mosaic pattern on a lightly polished background and beneath were four smaller crests naming the four schoolhouses. A grand piano was on the left below the rostrum and a small orchestra was assembled opposite.

The stage area had a semicircle of seats across it, with all but the three center most ones filled by board members and senior staff. Just off center was a polished table with an enormous vase of flowers on it. Several potted plants completed the furnishings. Gail smiled to herself and couldn't help comparing it to her last school where over two thousand pupils sat on wooden and steel seats, which tended to squeak and rattle all the time.

Abbey walked up to the microphone and waited until the applause had subsided. In a very confident voice she welcomed Gail on behalf of the junior pupils. When she finished, Frances added her welcome and it was Gail's turn to speak.

"Oh my Goodness," she said in a relaxed manner. "What a welcome! Thank you Abbey and Frances. Thank you everyone." She continued with a short speech including a couple of jokes, which went down well. Finally she thanked the orchestra for their items and sat down.

During her first two weeks at her new school, Gail did two many unexpected things. First, she declared there would be no staff meetings until the third week and secondly, she visited every classroom. Not once, though, did her classroom visits appear intrusive. In fact, she often sat with the girls and participated in the activities, asked about what was being done and generally made herself known to the pupils. The teachers were at first surprised by the visits as it rarely happened with Mary and even Sharon only visited rooms if there was a problem of some sort. However, when they found Gail was never judgmental or tried to pull rank as Sharon did, they relaxed and some of them even commented about it to their colleagues.

"That's what I'm here for," Gail replied when Lois Torrance, the assistant principal and third ranking staff member, mentioned it to her one evening after school. "I need to get to know everyone and vice versa."

"Yes, I know," replied Lois, "but you are so relaxed about it all. On behalf of the staff I'd like to say how we appreciate it. Oh, I know a couple of teachers still feel self-conscious when you walk in but most of us enjoy your visits. My senior girls even commented on it and you know how cynical that age group can be at times."

"Thanks Lois," replied Gail. "I am very impressed with the programs we have operating and it's a thrill to see everyone wanting to learn."

She mentally noted how different Lois was to Sharon. Her assistant principal was very quiet and in many ways had a similar approach to her own. Perhaps that was why she could relate so easily to her.

It was a little before two one afternoon and still officially his lunch break when Neil Goodall began polishing the stairwell banister. The huge double stairs lead up from the main administrative block to classrooms above. He rubbed the surface until the polished veneer glistened. No state school would have such an ornate stairway. As he finished, a line of photographs of previous principals glaring down caught his eye.

"You're a grim lot," he muttered. "I'm glad our new principal doesn't take after you."

"Why thank you, Neil. I'll take that as a compliment," said a voice that made him jump in

fright. He swung around and saw Gail Fernhill smiling at him.

Neil flushed. "Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Fernhill," he replied. "I didn't see you."

"Call me Gail," she replied and, in a distinctly unprincipal like manner, sat down on the stairs. "Isn't it still your lunch break?"

"I know," he said. "I don't need an hour. I'd only get bored so I might as well do something useful." He gazed around. "Isn't this stairway grand? I was just comparing it with the state schools. They'd never have built it."

"It is," Gail replied. "I love the whole administration area. It's very upmarket." She frowned. "It's a pity the classrooms aren't up to the state school minimum standards, though."

"Yes, they are tiny," agreed Neil, "but I guess our classes are smaller." "Not by much," continued Gail. She smiled and switched the conversation. "Why don't you come in the teachers' lounge for morning and afternoon coffee?" she asked.

Neil shrugged. "Tradition I guess. We have our own room in the cellar next to the boiler room. Apparently the janitor and grounds staff always stayed there."

"I see," replied Gail. "Well, that can stop. I'd like you to have your morning and afternoon coffee with the teachers. Tell Kevin he's welcome, too."

"I'd like that. Thanks," replied Neil, "but I reckon Kevin will be too shy to come."

Gail smiled. Kevin was a good worker but really introverted and probably got on better with the senior girls than the staff. "I'm easy," she replied, "but tell him he's welcome if he wishes to come."

She stood up and straightened her skirt. "There's something else I'd like to talk to you about, Neil. Can you spare a moment?"

"Sure," he replied and followed her down the stairs and along to her office.

"This office is too exposed," she said after he took a seat. "Is there anywhere in the school where I can go when I want to work without interruptions? You know, a sort of second office?"

Neil thought for a moment. "There's another room in the basement but that's pretty dark and dingy." He frowned. "What about the bell tower? "

"What's there?" asked Gail.

The bell tower stretched above the top of the administration block but hadn't been used for its original purpose for years.

"Junk," said Neil. "They took out the old bell years ago and enclosed it with windows on three sides. It's actually quite big. Do you want to have a look?"

"Sure."

Neil led the way back up the stairs and along a long corridor with classroom doors on each side. A narrow staircase was squeezed in a gap between rooms twenty-five and twenty-seven. Gail couldn't remember seeing it before. Neil pushed the top door open to show a cobweb-infested room. The principal stepped in and gazed around. It was filled with dust and grime covered junk but was actually larger than her office downstairs. She pushed several boxes out of the way and made her way to a window.

"It's perfect," she said. "I can see nearly the whole playground from here."

"I don't know why it was lined," said Neil after he'd turned on the light. "There's even central heating. Would you like me to clean it up for you? It wouldn't be hard to put a phone and computer terminal in, if you wished."

"I'm trying to get away from the phone," replied Gail with a smile, "but it will probably be a good idea. I could give Ellen a special code to ring for important calls."

"I'll get it set up for you. There's plenty of spare furniture in the cellar," replied Neil.

"Only when you have time. There's no hurry," replied Gail. She stepped towards the door. "Well, I guess I'd better get back to work. Remember, afternoon coffee in the teachers' lounge."

"Sure," replied Neil and watched as his principal disappeared down the narrow stairs. She was certainly easy to talk with. He grinned at himself... and to look at, too.

That Saturday, Neil returned to school with Kevin and removed everything from the old bell tower room. It took three hours of grunting away with old desks, cupboards and ten thousand ancient books but finally it was clear.

"You know, I reckon Miss Fernhill's got you twisted around her little finger," commented Kevin. "I bet you wouldn't have done this for Sharon or even Old Mary."

"Probably not," agreed Neil. "Anyhow, thanks Kevin. You can go now. I'll just wash the room out."

"Okay," said the younger man, "but don't get too chummy with the boss. I reckon she's tough underneath. You know, the iron fist under the velvet glove."

"Could be but remember she asked you into the teachers' lounge, too."

"With all those over painted females," retorted Kevin. "No thanks. I'll stay downstairs with the cleaners. You go, though."

"Oh, I will," replied Neil, "but we can still have the lunchtime cards in our own room."

"I hope so," replied Kevin. "I need a chance to win back that two bucks you took off me last week." He headed for the door. "See ya, Monday."

"Right and thanks," replied Neil.

After the scraggy bearded young man left, Neil started cleaning. For some reason he wanted to have it finished by Monday. He shrugged. There was nothing else he was going to do, anyway.

By Tuesday afternoon, everything was complete. There was a faculty meeting that continued until half past four but he managed to intercept his principal just as she walked into the main office.

"Would you like to see your new room?" he asked in an almost shy voice.

Gail glanced at him. "Why not now," she replied. "I'm really curious, I admit. "She grinned. "After knocking holes and threading telephone wires all over the school."

"Excuse me, Gail," interrupted Sharon from the door. "We were going to discuss..."

She nodded as if it was something confidential that shouldn't be spoken about in front of the janitor.

"Okay," replied Gail in a slightly indignant tone. "I won't be long." She turned to Neil. "Come on, show me."

Neil smiled. He reckoned Sharon Thomas had met her match. The deputy must have been mad to be beaten to the principal's position by someone fifteen years younger than herself. Serve her right, though. He'd come across those bossy women with no feelings towards others before. When they arrived at the room in the bell tower, Gail gasped in amazement. The transformation was amazing. Everything was spotless, there was a desk, two cupboards and computer set up on its own table. Neil had even found a large painting that he'd hung on the one windowless wall.

"It needs curtains," he said modestly, "but I'll leave that to you. " He picked up the phone. "You punch in a three to get the main office and Ellen has a similar code to call here. You can get an outside line with a four or have outside calls directed straight through, if you wish. I've written it all down. The computer's connected to the school system or directly to the office computer or Internet."

Gail grinned. "How did you get it done so quickly? It's marvelous. Thank you."

"Oh, I twisted Kevin's arm to help and the rest. It wasn't too difficult."

Their eyes met and they both smiled.

"I'll bring some of my files up tomorrow," continued Gail. "Thanks again. I never expected you

to do all this and I will get some curtains. Perhaps Anne can help there." Anne was the technical arts teacher.

"I'll ask her," replied Neil. "After all, I've done a fair bit in her room lately."

"Yes," replied Gail. "I noticed."

Neil grinned again. He doubted if Gail missed much in the school.

Over the next few weeks the friendship between the principal and property manager grew.

It was now winter with rain and brief snow showers buffeting the city while, on fine days freezing smog hung around for much of the day. Teachers in the outlying buildings complained that the heaters were not coping so, in his usual conscientious manner Neil said he'd tend to it. It was a little after nine in the morning when Gail found him lying on the floor under the boiler trying to rectify the problem.

He stood up, wiped his hands with an old rag and grinned. "I think I've found the trouble," he said. "There's a new valve connected to a pipe that sends the heat directly to the outer rooms. For some reason, it was closed so they only received their hot water after it traveled through the rest of the school. By time it reached them it was lukewarm. I'd say they had the same problem in previous years and the new pipe was installed."

"Surely someone would have remembered," commented Gail.

Neil grinned. "Ordinary staff never think of things like that. They just expect everything to be going."

"Thanks Neil," Gail replied. She hesitated as if she wanted to talk.

"How about a cuppa in my little room," he said. "It's such a terrible day, I doubt if there'll be any visitors waiting for you."

"Why not?" Gail replied with a sigh. "I've been at school since seven thirty."

"I know. You beat me here this morning."

Neil found Gail talked to him about more and more school items and, often by using his own farming administration experiences he could advise her. At other times he became a sounding board as someone to share things with. This time Sharon Thomas was the problem. Neil realized Gail was quite upset. It was only a small item but it was as if the other woman was constantly trying to catch her principal out.

"She's only jealous that you're popular with the staff and pupils," he commented as he handed her a cup of steaming coffee.

"Am I?" responded Gail and her blue eyes linked with his. "I didn't realize. All I seem to do is give orders."

"It's how you do it," added Neil. "That's the difference between Sharon and yourself."

I guess you're both aiming for the same thing but you make people feel they are important." He coughed and glanced away. "That's how I feel, anyway."

Gail smiled and stood. "Thanks Neil. You're a great morale booster," she said quietly, "but I must go. Thanks for the coffee."

Neil drove home that night deep in thought. He knew his feelings for Gail were growing beyond pure friendship and wondered what to do next. She had a reserve built around her that he could rarely get by. He was certain it wasn't her position as principal but something else. He swung into the driveway he shared with Margaret Sefton, the elderly lady occupying the house in front of his, and saw her standing on her front porch as if she was waiting for him.

"Hi, Margaret," he called. "Is anything wrong?"

"I locked myself out," shouted back the little old lady. Her white hair blew in the wind and, if it wasn't for a walking stick, he was sure she'd be blown away. Neil drove into his garage and took his keys out. Months before Margaret had given him her front door key in case this very thing happened.

"Why didn't you call me at work?" he said after unlocking the door.

The frail old lady was at least eighty but her mind was alert and often her dry humor

came through. "It only happened an hour or so ago," she replied. "Come in and have a drink."

Neil didn't have the heart to refuse so he followed Margaret into her kitchen and sat down. He often came across for a chat and it had become a habit to have a meal with her every Thursday evening.

"It was Whisky's fault," Margaret snorted. Whisky was a massive furry black and white cat who seemed to spend his daytime with Margaret and evenings with Neil after she went to bed. The cat had adopted them both six months earlier. "He meowed to go out. I followed him as I thought he only wanted to go to the toilet. The wind caught the door and that was it. Stupid woman," she scolded herself. "I know I should have left the other door unlocked."

Neil laughed. "You spoil that cat," he said.

"I know," Margaret replied and her little blue eyes glanced at him. "How's your young lady today?"

Neil frowned. "My young lady?"

Margaret smiled. "Don't you try to hide it. Gail what's-her-name, your principal. You're sweet on her. You can't fool an old lady. Every time you talk to me she comes into the conversation. I'll have to meet her sometime."

"I didn't realize Sorry to bore you. Anyhow, there's nothing in it."

Margaret grinned. "Now perhaps but not for ever. "

Little did they both know how close her premonition was to the truth.

Neil's friendship with Gail might have remained just that if an incident didn't happen at school the following Thursday afternoon. Neil had taken it upon himself to clean the Bell Room, as Gail's second office became known, every afternoon. Humming an old tune to himself, he carried the vacuum cleaner up the narrow stairs and blundered in. He'd already shut the door when he realized Gail was sitting at her desk. In her hands was the morning's newspaper and he could see tears rolling down her face.

"Gail, what's wrong?" he asked sympathetically and walked across to her. He noticed her hand was shaking and the paper opened to page five. She looked up and glared at him. "Get out!" she said angrily.

"What is it?" repeated Neil, taken back by the tone in her voice. He had never seen her so distressed before. Something was wrong!

Gail stood up and her eyes looked like ice. "Go, please, Neil," she said in a slightly calmer voice. "You can clean later."

"But, Gail.."

"For God's sake leave me... " She wiped tears from her eyes but still gave him an icy stare.

CHAPTER THREE

Gail glanced at the empty doorway after Neil retreated and felt ashamed of her reaction. She knew Neil was only trying to be kind but how could help? How could anybody help? It was her life, the deed had been done but for fifteen years she could not block it from her memory and get on with her life. She glanced once more at the newspaper and tears again flooded her eyes as she crumpled the object up and flung it in the trash. But the seventeen-year-old memories were still in her mind, crisp and clear as if it all happened yesterday.

The slim fifteen-year-old shut the bedroom door and stared at her bed and the large teddy bear sitting on the pink eiderdown. She walked across and sat in front of her dressing table, brushed back her brunette hair and tried to shut out the sobbing coming from up the corridor by having her radio blaring out the latest pop tune at full volume. 1984 must be the worst year of her life. Finally, though, Gail could stand it no longer, flung her door open and stormed along to her parents' room. They were involved in yet another argument and her father Derek was becoming violent.

"For God's Sake, leave Mom alone!" she screamed after she flung her parents' bedroom door open and saw her mother sitting on the bed end with her head down.

"Get out! This is none of your business." growled Derek Fernhill while his wife Jennifer blew her nose and glanced up. There was a bright red mark across her left cheek.

"It's okay, dear," she said quietly. "I'm okay. Go back to bed."

Gail glared at her father. "You're a beast of a man," she said quietly, "and I, for one will not put up with your behavior for very much longer." Before either of her parents could reply she slammed the door and returned to the comparative security of her own room.

But even that wasn't secure any longer. Tears built in the teenager's eyes as she hugged the teddy bear and slipped under her blankets. She glared at the rectangular shape of the window and gritted her teeth. Why did her mother put up with him for all these years? As far back as she could remember he had been violent towards them both. The slaps and even punches her mother received were at times also aimed in her direction. She knew her father would now be getting his way with her mother. The bastard! It wasn't love any more, just pure lust and violence.

Tears rolled down her eyes as she lay and hugged the teddy bear tighter. For two years he had been doing the same thing to her. At school they called it rape or incest but they didn't know what it was really like. She had told nobody; not even her mother although she was sure Mom knew. However, a cocoon of silence hung over the Fernhill household. Just like the savage beatings her mother tried to cover with make up or by wearing long sleeve blouses even on the hottest days.

"No more, Chubby Bear," she said to the teddy she had owned for as long as she could remember. "I will take no more."

At least Mom was home tonight so her father would stay away but tomorrow was Thursday.

After school on Thursday Gail arrived home early and changed into slacks and a sloppy sweater in a futile attempt to hide her quite well developed figure. If she looked a wreck perhaps her father would stay out. Sometimes he left and went downtown for a few hours and came back

without sex on his mind. Mostly though, he didn't. Thursday was the time her mother had to work late at the shop where she was manager. By the time she arrived home by ten, it was all over, her father had removed himself from her room and was asleep in his own bed.

But it was not going to happen tonight!

Gail walked into the back shed and found the bunch of keys hanging above the bench. With shaking hands, she undid the padlock on the tall cupboard in the corner and ignoring a larger shotgun, withdrew a small .22 rifle. The bullets and bolt were missing but Gail knew where these were. From inside another cupboard she took out the mechanism wrapped in a greased rag and slipped it into the rifle. In her younger days she'd often seen it done by her father. He was so careful with firearms.

She took a handful of bullets and clipped them carefully into the rectangular magazine. To load all she needed to do was pull back the bolt, a shell would enter the firing chamber, and the safety catch released and.. She grimaced and re-locked the cupboards.

A strange tranquility came over her when she walked into her bedroom and placed the weapon under the bed on the side furthest away from the door. Everything was ready. She walked out and began preparing the evening meal, which she always did on Thursday.

At quarter to six her father arrived home, grunted a casual greeting to her and sat down to read the evening paper in front of the television. She handed him his meal on a tray and retreated to the living room table to do math homework. However, the pages were a blur as she sat waiting for the time to tick by. Outside, the rain was falling. It was, perhaps, an ominous sign.

Usually it was about eight thirty when her father made his advances. At times they were violent but more recently she had co-operated and saved herself a savage beating as well as sexual violation.

At eight she went into her room and sat under her blankets with her knees up and waited. She heard the shower going and knew what would happen soon. The corridor light switched on and the door opened.

"You're early," the man said as he walked in. All pretence had long since gone. "I hope you'll co-operate with your Dad tonight."

Gail reached her right hand down the side of the bed and felt the cold steel of the rifle.

"You will not do it tonight, Father," she said defiantly. "Never again will you rape me."

The man's face turned black. This had happened before but by using sheer force and strength he had still violated her. Suddenly he grinned as if he enjoyed the challenge.

"You've been warned, Father," Gail said in a voice, so determined and quiet the man barely heard it. "Get out of my room. Understand!"

For a second Derek hesitated before he shrugged and stepped forward.

Gail flung the blankets forward and leaped, fully dressed out the side of the bed. The rifle was in her hand pointing at the advancing man.

"One step and I fire," she whispered and her finger clicked off the safety catch. She knew a bullet was already in the chamber.

Derek stopped still. His eyes widened when he saw the weapon in her hand. He looked up and perhaps realized she wasn't bluffing for he backed up a step.

"Now, Gail," he said quietly. "There's no need for the rifle. You know I love you. That's why..."

"Get out!" screamed Gail. Her calmness was beginning to evaporate and her trigger finger shook.

Without warning, the man launched himself forward. One arm swung over to knock the weapon away while the other reached for her throat. But Gail anticipated the move. In that split second she brought the barrel up and squeezed the trigger. You always squeezed the trigger if you didn't want the rifle to jump up and spoil your aim.

The explosion made the distraught girl's ears ring, her father was propelled back across the bedroom and staggered against the far wall. Gail pulled back the bolt to reload and aimed once more at her father. Blood began to spurt out of his chest. The smell of cordite filled the air.

"Don't Gail!" he managed to scream with an expression of terror frozen on his face. He attempted, without success, to hold his arms up.

"It's too late," she cried in what was almost a whimper, raised the rifle ever so slightly and fired again.

This shot entered the man's neck. He crashed onto the floor, thrashed around moaning for several seconds before the eyes glazed over.

Gail stared at the still form of her father for a full two minutes without remorse. In an artificial calm, she stood up, leaned the rifle in the corner and reached for Chubby Bear.

"No man will ever touch me again, Chubby Bear," she said quietly, "and Mom will never be beaten either."

She stared at the still man. He must be dead.

Finally the heart rendering sobs came!

As Jennifer drove home through the misty rain reflected in the orange streetlights, her stomach tightened as it did every Thursday night. She knew Derek was committing incest with Gail but subconsciously put it out of her mind when she was at work. However, on the way home the thoughts of the foul deed rushed back at her. She knew she should do something but couldn't. It was the same with the assaults on herself. They were now more frequent and violent and always concluded with brutal sex.

"I'm a damn coward," she said orally.

Usually when she arrived home, the house was in darkness and, more recently, there wasn't even the sobbing coming from her daughter's room, only the breakfast silence when the air could be cut with a knife. Gail would avoid her eyes, grab the extra, especially made lunch Jennifer had cut and disappear out the door. Her daughter's usual bright personality had digressed into a solemn silence over the previous few months. They seldom discussed things anymore but Jennifer knew her daughter's schoolwork was falling behind. Everything was connected. Jennifer swallowed. It wasn't a home now. It was hell and she guessed she was as much to blame as Derek was. If she had tried harder he may have succeeded more in his life. She sighed and turned the last corner. The lights of their house were all on. What was wrong? She drove into the garage and shut the remote door before walking inside, only to gasped in horror.

Gail was standing in the corridor staring at her mother with sheer terror reflected in her eyes. Her normally well brushed hair hung down around a chalk white, tear stained face and her blouse was covered in blood. Worse, though, was the girl's body, which was shaking uncontrollably, as huge sobs rent the air.

"My Dear. What's wrong?" Jennifer grabbed her daughter and hugged her close. "What has he done to you?"

Gail clung to her mother but the hysterical sobs prevented words being formed. "It's okay, I'm here," was all Jennifer could say. She was certain Gail had been attacked.

Finally Gail's sobbing subsided enough for her to stutter a few words.

"I couldn't take it any more, Mom," she wept. "No more. Nobody should be allowed..." Her voice trailed off and the teenager took her mother's hand and lead her to her bedroom.

"Oh, My God!" gasped Jennifer and felt violently sick.

Lying on the floor in a crumpled mass of blood was her husband; his head tilted sideways and vacant eyes staring at the wall. A mouth hung open like some obscene mask.

It was as if he'd never been human. Further down, Jennifer saw a small hole in his neck with dark bloodstains around it. Below was a blood stained shirt.

"The bastard's dead," stated Gail with her voice now controlled. "He came in to rape me again, Mom."

Her eyes turned and met the shocked ones of her mother. "I knew he did it to you all the time but I couldn't take it any longer." She turned. "I'll go and call the police."

Jennifer was numb. Her eyes darted around the room but, except for the blood splattered doorway, it was normal. Even Gail's teddy bear was sitting on the bed. She swallowed, felt bile in her throat and ran to the bathroom where she emptied her stomach contents into the wash

basin. The room stunk of vomit. Obviously Gail had had the same reaction. She stared at her reflection in the mirror; that of a terrified middle age woman before Gail's last words jogged her memory. She turned, wiped a towel over her mouth and ran into the kitchen just as Gail reached for the phone.

"No! Stop!" she screamed and grabbed the instrument off her daughter. "Don't!" She slammed the receiver down.

Her eyes found Gail's and once more she grabbed her in close. "Don't call the police, My Dear. We'll work something out." For perhaps the first time, her voice had a determined streak in it. She guided Gail over to the kitchen table and sat her down, reached for the cupboard and took out one of Derek's whisky bottles.

"He won't be needing it now," she muttered and poured them both a small amount of the liquid. "Take a tiny sip, Dear."

Gail nodded sipped the potent liquid and spluttered. "Yuk!" she cried. "It tastes vile."

Jennifer sat across the tiny kitchen table from Gail and grabbed both her hands. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "It was all my fault," she sobbed. "I was too cowardly to do anything about it. I'm so sorry, Gail." Her eyes glanced at the table. "He was violent with me for years and did some terrible things." Her eyes found Gail's again. "I know that is no excuse. I should have done something years ago." Her body shuddered as she broke down.

"Oh Mom," cried back Gail. "Don't blame yourself. We were both victims."

For several moments they consoled each other before Gail spoke. In a quiet modulated voice, she described everything that had happened and also the months of abuse suffered in the hands of her father. Jennifer listened without interruption. It was worse, much worse than she had thought. The man deserved what happened to him but she was the one who should have done it, not Gail. In no way was she going to allow her daughter to take any blame for this act of self-defense.

"What now, Mom?" Gail asked.

Jennifer bit on her lip before replying. "We get rid of the body, Gail. I am not going to have you suffer any more. I want you to have a good hot shower and put on your nightie. You can sleep with me tonight. Okay?"

"Yes, Mom," replied Gail and walked the long way to the bathroom to avoid her own room. Jennifer swallowed and plucked up enough courage to revisit the bedroom. The area around her husband's body was a mess with bloodstains over the wallpaper and floor. There was no way it could be washed off. The carpet and wallpaper would need to be replaced. She gave the corpse a tiny shove and it plopped over like a puppet. The woman felt no remorse at all. She glanced up and saw a tiny round hole in the ceiling. One bullet must have gone right through. This was another problem.

The next few hours would not be too bad. It would be easy enough to phone Derek in as being sick from work. Occasionally he'd taken Friday off to go hunting and the firm he worked for was fairly liberal in granting leave. Gail and herself needed to get through Friday as if nothing was wrong. That, she was certain of. Nobody visited the house during the week and usually only Gail's friends came during the weekend. Derek always went out for his company and her friends usually only came into the kitchen. But what of the body! Jennifer walked out to the garage. She searched around and found a roll of black polythene they'd used in the garden and carried it back to the bedroom. She pushed the bed out of the way and lay the polythene on the floor.

"You beast," she whimpered. "You vile animal."

She pulled the outstretched arms down the side and rolled the body onto the polythene. Next, avoiding the horrible white face, she brought up the edges of the sheet and tucked it around until the body was covered.

With a grimace, Jennifer went back to the garage and took down the inside rope clothesline. The nylon rope was wrapped around the polythene covered body until every loose piece was tied down. Finally, using strength she never knew she had, she dragged the corpse down the corridor, into the garage and across to the jeep wagon parked next to her car.

It was impossible to lift the body up the two feet or so to reach the decking of the rear of the vehicle so she dropped the body in despair and searched around the room until she found a

short plank by the bench. She leaned it against the back of the Jeep before, using as much strength as she could muster, dragged the body up into the vehicle. With a little more maneuvering it was turned so the back door could be closed. Jennifer heaved and found a pile of sacks to cover it with. The body was now hidden from any casual looks through the jeep's windows. She returned and began cleaning the blood off the carpet and walls. It was impossible to remove it all but, in the short term this was all she could do.

"Mom," interrupted Gail when she had just about completed the cleaning. "Thank you. I thought I'd be in jail by now. I thought..." Her voice trailed off as emotion again shook her frail body.

"Come on, Dear. To bed now." Jennifer led Gail into the bathroom and found some sleeping pills left over from an old prescription and gave her daughter one. "Take these." Gail smiled faintly and obeyed.

It was six in the morning and the jeep's headlights shone through misty rain. In front was yet another bend on the windy gravel road. Gail was asleep in the passenger seat while her mother changed down another gear and peered through the sweeping windshield wipers. They'd left home late that Friday night with Gail following the jeep in the car. After driving southeast for two hours, Gail parked their car in the main street of a small deserted town next to half a dozen other vehicles so it wouldn't look conspicuous and continued the journey in the jeep.

They were now well off the main highway in remote back country, a land of forested hills and deep valleys intersected by mountain streams and rivers. The road Jennifer and Gail were now traveling on was surrounded by a thick fir forest that grew above and below the road cut into the steep hillside. Water could be heard. Somewhere way below, was a stream. Jennifer pulled into a turn off built beside the narrow road and reached across to study an opened map shoved between the front seats. i

Immediately Gail awoke. Jennifer glanced at her daughter.

"Almost there, Dear," she said with her voice sounding unnaturally loud. "How are you?"

"Fine, Mom," the girl replied, " but let's get on with it."

"Last step!" Jennifer muttered and drove forward.

Several moments later as dawn was just beginning to lighten the eastern sky, they arrived at their destination. The bridge seemed narrower than they had expected and disappeared into the distant darkness. Even though it was pitch dark below, Jennifer knew a deep canyon was beneath them with a stream trickling over rocks way below. It was so narrow at this point she doubted if any hikers would ever walk through. Beyond the bridge, a side road, marked only as an earth trail on the map, disappeared through the firs. Once across the bridge Jennifer turned the jeep into the trail, engaged low ratio four wheel drive and the powerful vehicle crawled forward at a walker's pace. The trail, which was now black in the semi-light, zigzagged down through the trees and back under the bridge to the canyon floor. With eyes strained, she drove on until there was no trail at all. To their right, the stream tumbled over rocks. A strip of thick undergrowth covered the bank before the firs took over, while above, the sky had turned from black to gray.

The two stared at each other for a moment before Jennifer nodded. They climbed out and walked around to the vehicle's rear door. Jennifer opened it, took a large spade and pushed her way through the undergrowth, found a spot free of tree roots and began to dig a shallow grave. It was difficult. Stones, roots or just heavy soil all competed to hinder the woman's progress. Gail took over from her mother for a few moments without making any impression on the hole. Jennifer smiled at her daughter's valiant attempt, took the spade back and continued digging.

"You lift the stones out, Dear," she panted as she shoveled another load of dirt aside.

Gail nodded, jumped into the shallow hole, dragged a persistent rock from the soil and heaved it aside. She glanced up in a poignant way and scooped some soil out of the hole. It took another twenty minutes before Jennifer stopped and leaned, panting on the spade handle.

"That'll do, Sweetheart," she gasped. " We can't go any deeper. We've hit a solid slab of rocks. It will have to do."

With trembling hands, the pair dragged the corpse from the jeep and lay it beside the

make shift grave. Jennifer took a pair of scissors and cut through the polythene surrounding her husband's body. Gail helped but her eyes were averted as the black sheet was gathered up. Together, they rolled the corpse into the hole, straightened it and replaced the soil.

"Are you okay, Sweetheart?" whispered Jennifer when they had finished trampling the soil down and tossed rocks and bundles of dried needles over it. It was a crude attempt to cover their terrible secret but, with luck, nobody would pass the area for weeks. By then, the wind and rain would have covered all signs of the earth being disturbed,

"I am, Mom," replied Gail in a hoarse whisper but her frightened eyes told a different story.

Jennifer placed the polythene back in the Jeep and walked down to the stream where she washed the spade, her arms and face. The icy water over her skin and somehow helped.

The stream tumbled by, an animal cried in the distance and rain dripped through the foliage. Jennifer only now realized it had been raining the whole time and they were both soaking wet.

"Come on," she said and squeeze her daughter's hand arm. "It's time to go."

It took at least six maneuvers to turn the jeep around but they managed and headed back to the main highway.

"Thank you, Mom," Gail whispered.

"It is our secret," Jennifer replied. "Tell nobody. Not a soul. Understand?"

"I do," replied the girl.

They returned to the town where their car was parked and, for another two hours, Gail followed Jennifer up another remote road that led to a forest park. At the end was a tiny but well kept turn off area with a tiny mown lawn and toilet block. The place was empty. A sign had a map of the walking trails ahead and a warning that proper hiking equipment was needed if persons were going to hike or hunt through the area.

"Five hours to High Ridge Hut," read another sign.

With gloves on, Jennifer took out a notebook page written on a previous occasion by her late husband. He often went hunting in the wilderness so when the Jeep was discovered here it wouldn't seem unusual. On the paper was written, 'Heading in for a three day tramp. Be out by...'
' Jennifer had already methodically changed to date to read the following Monday.

She placed the note on the inside of the windshield so it could be read from the outside, took a quick look around the vehicle and climbed out. The polythene had already been disposed of many miles away, along with the offending rifle that had been heaved down another deep canyon. They had even stopped earlier and brushed mud and soil off the vehicle.

Gail waited in the car and grimaced as her mother climbed in behind the driver's seat.

"Let's go home," Jennifer whispered.

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