

# SWEET MERCY



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For my sisters,  
Martha Shurts and Carol Hodies,  
because you've been my best friends from the beginning



# Prologue



MAY 1981

None has been by this way for years, but as I step up to the porch of the old abandoned lodge I'm certain I hear music. Music and laughter. Footsteps and telephones ringing. And a thousand voices coming not from far away but from long ago, reaching me now the way the light of a burned-out star reaches Earth thousands of years after the star itself is gone.

I turn to Sean. He is gazing at me quizzically, head cocked, fingers kneading the flashlights he holds in each hand. He is eager to get inside.

“What’s the matter, Grandma?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m just listening.”

“To what?”

But of course he doesn’t hear what I hear. He can’t. He doesn’t have the memories.

I turn the key in the lock and open the front door. It was

last closed in 1978 by Stuart Marryat, my first cousin once removed and the final owner of the Marryat Island Ballroom and Lodge. When I told him why I wanted to go back, Stu gave me the key and said I could go in and look around before the wrecker's ball did its work.

Not much has changed in fifty years. When I step into the spacious front hall and breathe deeply of the musty air, time snaps shut like a paper fan and I'm young again. Young and idealistic. And smug, though back then I didn't know it.

My grandson walks through the front hall, head bobbing like a pendulum, looking left and right. On the one side is the vast dining room, still furnished with tables and chairs and the large buffet table from which we served and refreshed drinks during meals. Across the hall is the sitting room, where guests reclined to read, converse, play cards or board games, or simply to rest. Straight ahead is the front desk, the mail slots, the rows of hooks that still hold an odd assortment of room keys.

"Wow," Sean says. "Cool place. Why are they going to tear it down?"

"Too old to pass code," I say.

"Too bad." He shrugs.

"Yes, it is."

"So how old were you when you lived here?"

"Well, I was seventeen when we moved here from Minnesota." Seven years older than Sean is now. He probably thinks I was all grown up. I thought so too, at the time.

"So what are we looking for?"

"Something I left behind when I moved away. I'm pretty sure it got packed up with some of my other things and was stored away in the attic."

“But what is it, Grandma?”

“A wooden box. My parents gave it to me for Christmas one year, when I was very young.”

“Just a box? After all these years, why do you want it now?”

I pause and smile. “I’m a sentimental old fool.”

He laughs lightly. “No you’re not, Grandma.”

“Well, there’s something in the box your grandfather gave me. I’d like to have it again.”

“All right. So how do you get to the attic?”

“Follow me.”

The attic is a large room with a low slanted ceiling and windows across the front and on both sides. With the electricity off in the lodge, the attic is dim and stuffy and smells heavily of must and of things that have been stored for decades. Sean and I go about unlocking and opening the windows to let in both sunlight and fresh air. Then we turn to the task at hand. We are surrounded by an eclectic collection of dusty furniture, old steamer trunks, floor lamps with tasseled shades, wooden crates, and cardboard boxes.

“Where do we start, Grandma?”

I turn on my flashlight; he follows suit. “Well,” I say, “we might as well start with these boxes right here.” I shine my light to indicate the pile.

Sean shrugs. “Okay.” He settles his flashlight on the seat of a ladder-back chair and pulls one of the boxes off the pile. He opens the flaps. “While we’re looking through all this stuff, why don’t you tell me about what happened here?” he says. “You know, the summer you moved in.”

I step to the box and move my flashlight beam over what’s inside. “Do you really want to know?” I ask.

“Yeah. You’ve never told me the story, Grandma. Tell me now.”

I think about that a moment. I suppose it is time for him to know. “All right, let’s see,” I say, searching for the place to begin. “You know we moved here in 1931, right?”

“Yeah. But that’s about all I do know.”

I nod. He pulls another box off the pile. Taking a deep breath, I say, “Well, I’ll tell you what, had I known what was waiting for me in Mercy, Ohio, I might not have been so eager to leave Minnesota. . . .”



## Chapter 1

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**H**ad I known what was waiting for me in Mercy, Ohio, I might not have been so eager to leave Minnesota. But of course I could never have imagined what lay ahead, so for weeks I happily anticipated the sight of St. Paul in the rearview mirror of Daddy's 1929 Ford sedan. It was May 30, 1931, when we finally packed up the car and made our great escape from the Sainly City, refuge of fugitives and gangsters.

Something else I didn't know then was that the furnished apartment we'd just vacated, #205 at the Edgecombe Court, would in two days' time be rented out to bank robber Frank "Jelly" Nash, lately of Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. He'd managed to escape the year before and had taken a circuitous route to Minnesota's notorious haven. Like most criminals, he knew that once he reached the state capital, it was "olly olly oxen free!" That's just the kind of town St. Paul was in those days.

The sun was starting its ascent over the eastern edge of the city as Daddy started the car and pulled away from the

curb. The morning offered enough light to showcase the wondrous array of spring blossoms that had unfolded like a miracle after another harsh winter.

In the passenger seat in front of me, Mother sighed. “We’re leaving at the very best time of the year,” she said.

“It can’t be helped,” Daddy replied. “At any rate,” he added, “there’s spring in Ohio too.”

“Do you suppose they have lilacs there the way we do here?”

“Probably. If not, we’ll have some imported.”

Mother laughed lightly at that before sighing again. Truth be told, Mother and Daddy weren’t happy about leaving St. Paul. I was the only one among us who wanted to go.

I felt a quiet satisfaction as we drove down Lexington Avenue for the last time, winding our way through the otherwise fashionable streets of the city, filled with stately Victorian houses and luxury hotels, among them the Commodore where rich and famous luminaries like F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald had partied away much of the Roaring Twenties. It might have been a nice town, this midwestern metropolis nestled along the banks of the Mississippi River, had its wheels not been oiled by corruption.

We’d lived there seven years, having arrived in 1924 when Daddy got a job as a spot welder at the Ford Assembly Plant. Before that, we’d been living in Detroit, where I was born, and where Daddy also worked for Ford. But Mother and Daddy didn’t like Detroit, and eventually Daddy applied for a transfer to Minnesota.

When we arrived in St. Paul, the city was already rife with criminals, and yet it was a surprisingly safe place to live. This was a result of the layover agreement established by former Police Chief John O’Connor. Gangsters, bootleggers, bank

robbers, money launderers, fugitives—all were welcome as long as they followed the agreement’s three simple rules.

First, upon arrival in St. Paul, they had to check in with “Dapper Dan” Hogan, owner of the Green Lantern speak-easy and supervisor of O’Connor’s system. He was himself a hoodlum, a money launderer, and an expert organizer of crime who was known as the Irish Godfather.

Second, all incoming criminals were to make a donation to Dapper Dan, who distributed it among the lawmen with pockets open to payoffs: police detectives, aldermen, grand jury members, prosecutors, and judges.

Third, once settled in the life of St. Paul, these active felons had to swear never to commit a crime within the city limits. Bank robbers could rob banks, murderers could kill, and gangsters could blow each other to kingdom come without interference from the law, so long as they conducted their business elsewhere.

John O’Connor died the year we moved to Minnesota, but Hogan went on instituting the agreement until he himself was hurled into the hereafter by a car bomb in 1928. After that, without Hogan around to keep the peace, things started going downhill. Harry Sawyer, Dan Hogan’s assistant as well as his probable assassin, took over both the Green Lantern and control of the O’Connor system. Sawyer wasn’t nearly as interested in keeping the peace as he was in making money, and right after Hogan’s death, crime spiked and crested in a five-year wave. Sawyer’s friends from all over the country started rolling in—public enemies like John Dillinger, Alvin Karpis, and Fred and Doc Barker. When we left in 1931, the worst was yet to come, and yet I’d already seen one man gunned down in the streets. That one murder was enough

for me and the reason I was glad to see St. Paul in the rear-view mirror.

Daddy sat behind the wheel, his face wan and pinched. Of the three of us, he was the one who wanted least of all to go back to his home state of Ohio. We were going only because we had no choice. A year and a half after the stock market collapse, more than a third of the country's Ford dealerships had closed, and men were being laid off in droves. Daddy's turn had come a few weeks back. The night Daddy told us the news was the first time I'd ever seen my father cry.

Mother and Daddy prayed to God for help, and God's unforeseen and somewhat bewildering answer came in the form of a call from Cyrus Marryat, Daddy's brother, the one who owned the Marryat Island Ballroom and Lodge. There were plenty of rooms and plenty of work at the lodge, Uncle Cy said. He even sent us the money to make the trip, which was quite remarkable, since Daddy and Uncle Cy hadn't seen each other since 1926 when we went to Ohio for Uncle Cy's wedding to Aunt Cora. Daddy and Uncle Cy had had a disagreement, but I never knew what it was about. It was a wonder Uncle Cy invited him back, since they'd never really gotten along since childhood. But blood was blood, and in desperate times, family took care of family no matter what.

As we headed east on Grand Avenue, Mother said, "Pull over onto Victoria one last time, will you, Drew?"

"Oh now, darling—"

"Please, Drew, for me."

Sighing, Daddy turned left onto Victoria Avenue. In another moment, we approached a familiar house. "Stop just for a minute," Mother said.

"Now Rose . . ."

“Please.”

Daddy reluctantly eased the car to a stop in front of the clapboard house where my sister lived with her husband and their two little girls. Mother pulled a handkerchief out of her pocketbook and brushed away tears. “Oh, Cassandra,” she moaned.

I moaned too and rolled my eyes.

Daddy patted Mother’s arm. “She’s a big girl. She’ll be all right.”

“I can’t help thinking she still needs me.”

“She’s made her bed, Rose, and so far she’s adjusted pretty well to lying in it. You worry too much.”

I knew Mother was thinking about all the years that had brought Cassandra to where she was now. All the tumultuous and heartbreaking years.

I crossed my arms and slunk down impatiently in the back seat. All I wanted was to be on our way.

Mother reached for the door handle, but Daddy stopped her. “We said good-bye last night, Rose. And anyway, they’re probably still asleep.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Mother dabbed at her eyes again.

“And just think, we’ll be seeing them in a couple months,” Daddy reminded her. “August, they said. They’ll take their vacation in August and come on down and see us.”

Mother turned to Daddy and tried to smile, but it was little more than a ripple of sorrow passing over her lips.

Daddy put the car in gear and we moved on down the road. Finally. I would miss my brother-in-law and two young nieces but, like Uncle Cy and Daddy, Cassandra and I didn’t get along. She was the older sister I had never admired and

never wanted to be like. I was just as content to leave her behind with the criminals and gangsters in St. Paul.

The sun had fully risen by the time we reached the eastern edge of the city. An equal measure of anticipation rose in my heart. *Good-bye, St. Paul! Good-bye and good riddance!* The town of Mercy lay ahead of us, the place I had loved as a child but hadn't visited in years.

"Daddy?" I asked.

"Yes, darling?" He glanced at me in the rearview mirror. His brown eyes looked weary, and his narrow handsome face was still without color.

"What did you and Uncle Cy fight about?"

His brows went up. "When?"

"The last time we were in Mercy. You know, when we went down for the wedding. Whatever it was, it's kept us from going back for five years."

Daddy was quiet a moment. He looked at Mother, who shrugged. Then he gave another glance at me in the mirror. "Did we fight about something? I honestly can't remember."

"Then why haven't we gone back? To visit in the summer like we did when I was little?"

Daddy sniffed and scratched at the cowlick on the crown of his head. His brown hair was thick and unruly. "That's a good question, Eve," he said. "I'm not sure I have an answer."

"I do think you argued about something." Mother pulled one corner of her mouth back and shook her head. "Though for the life of me I can't remember what."

"Well," Daddy said, "it's water under the bridge. And you know what I always say, right?"

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me guess. First Peter 4:8. Right?"

“That’s it.” Daddy nodded. “For love shall cover the multitude of sins.”

“That’s *charity*, Drew,” Mother said. “For charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”

Daddy chuckled. “You correct me every time, Rose, but you know very well I say love because it made more sense to the girls when they were little. And anyway, charity, love—same thing pretty much, don’t you think?”

“So, Daddy,” I interrupted, wanting to get us back on track, “whatever you and Uncle Cy fought about, we’ll forgive him and love him anyway.”

Daddy hesitated just a moment before saying, “That’s right, darling.”

“Well, that’s easy,” I said. “It’s easy to love Uncle Cy.” After all, he was my ticket out. He was my ticket to a new life. We were leaving the city of sin behind. No more bootleggers, brothel-keepers, gangsters, corrupt lawmen, kidnappers, or murderers. We were on our way to Marryat Island Ballroom and Lodge in Mercy, Ohio, on the Little Miami River. We were on our way to the Promised Land.

Daddy gave me one more glance in the rearview mirror before settling his eyes on the road for the long haul ahead. Mother wiped at tears one last time before resignedly stuffing her handkerchief back into her pocketbook. She turned her face to the window, her features delicate and gentle in profile, her soft brown hair pulled into its usual knot at the back of her head.

I too settled back for the ride. As the newly awakened Minnesota landscape rolled by, I noticed the morning edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on the seat beside me. Clear of the city limits and facing the long stretch of open road toward

Wisconsin, I picked up the paper to pass the time. When I saw an advertisement on page six for Wilson Tailors, I shook my head and clicked my tongue softly. Even the tailors were making money from the fallout of St. Paul's sleazy underworld. In bold type the proprietor, Mr. Edmund Wilson, boasted: *Bullet holes rewoven perfectly in damaged clothes.*



## Chapter 2



Late in the afternoon of the third day of our journey, we arrived in Mercy. We climbed out of the car stiff and weary, our clothes sticky with sweat, our ears ringing from the churning of the engine and the rattling of the tires over the roads. But even as I stepped into that sweet Ohio air, I felt at once refreshed.

I breathed deeply, glad to have arrived. As we moved from the graveled parking lot to the lodge, I listened to the happy cries coming up from the river, from the dozens of people swimming, boating, and picnicking on Marryat Island. Even the grounds around the lodge were bustling with visitors, some moving to or from the island, some strolling along the riverbank, others taking part in a game of croquet on the expanse of green lawn. I stopped just a moment to watch the game. The women looked stylish in linen chemises with matching cloches pulled low over their ears. The men wore neatly pressed slacks, cotton shirts, and straw hats or caps; one of them was pulling on a pipe. Their laughter and chatter

rose and fell like winged creatures at play. I wanted to join them, to be part of this simple pleasure.

But smiling, I turned away and moved on to the lodge. It was much the same as I remembered, though even more beautiful now because it was home. Far larger than any Victorian mansion in St. Paul, it was a mammoth two-story affair, probably the largest structure in town aside from the Mercy Milling Company up on the north side. Part fieldstone, part clapboard siding, Marryat Island Ballroom and Lodge sat enthroned on the banks of the Little Miami like the fortress I wanted it to be.

I fairly floated up to the porch where vacationers reclined in a neat row of rocking chairs. I was hardly aware of Mother's and Daddy's heavy footfalls behind me as I stepped into the expansive front hall and looked around, trying to take it all in. To the right was the dining room. Even now dinner was being served on linen tablecloths. To the left, the spacious sitting room, filled with comfortable chairs and couches, walls of books, a phonograph, a fireplace. Straight ahead was the front desk and behind that the large circular staircase leading up to the twenty or so guest rooms on the second floor.

Uncle Cy was behind the desk, facing away from the door. With the telephone handset pressed against his right ear, he spoke loudly into the mouthpiece while his left hand stayed busy hanging up room keys on the rack and sliding letters into the myriad mail slots lining the wall. I walked to the desk and waited. And listened, as he was unaware that I was there.

"That's right, Charlie, he's done it again. Plowed up Williams Street and planted oats. Four neat rows, straight as six o'clock, all the way from Third to Fifth. What's that? Another warning. Naw, that's not good enough. It's time

to talk to the solicitor. I'm telling you, Ralph has got to be prosecuted. For what? Defacing public property, for one. Ignoring the law, for another. Yeah, that's right. I know it's not a main thoroughfare, but people have got to drive their cars down that street, and that's hard to do when you've got oats growing under your wheels. If we could just get that stretch paved, this wouldn't happen."

Uncle Cy sighed. I remembered then how, as a very young child, I thought his name was Uncle Sigh because he sighed so often. It was as though at regular intervals all the worries in the world squeezed the air right out of his chest.

"And then there's the matter of his wife's chickens," he went on. "Yeah, the neighbors are complaining again. What? Well, how would you like it if you woke up and found Trudy Mae's chickens pecking their way through your flower bed?"

At that point, Uncle Cy turned around and saw me. He looked at me quizzically a moment as though he didn't know who I was, and I don't believe he did, till he saw Mother and Daddy standing a ways off behind me. "Listen, Charlie," he said, the flash of recognition lighting up his eyes, "I've got to go. Yeah, we'll bring it up at the meeting tonight. All right, yeah. See you then."

He settled the handset back in the cradle and leaned forward on the front desk with both palms down. "Drew, Rose," he said. "And this can't be . . ." He stopped and shook his head.

I laughed. "Yes, it's me, Uncle Cy. Eve."

"Well, I'd have never known. Listen, sorry about that." He nodded toward the desk phone. "Town council business. I'm president this year. So hey, welcome, huh?"

He smiled and walked around the counter with one beefy

arm extended. He went to Daddy first and shook his hand, then gave Mother a hug. Turning back, he leaned forward, and I stood on tiptoe so we could exchange pecks on the cheek. He was a tall man, the tallest of the three brothers and big as a linebacker. Though he was somewhere over fifty years old, he still had a full head of hair that he combed straight back from his ruddy face. His hair was streaked with gray now, though, and he was beginning to lose his chin and gain jowls instead. Crow's feet fanned out from his eyes, and even his brows had turned gray. Time was catching up with Uncle Cy.

"Well, you made it," he said, and while he waited for one of us to respond, the air was filled with an awkward silence. I looked at Daddy who, after three days, still held that same pinched expression I had seen reflected in the rearview mirror as we headed out of St. Paul. He didn't want to be here.

"Looks like business is good, Cy," Daddy said at last, feigning an interested glance around the place.

"Nothing like a couple years ago," Uncle Cy said. "Or even a year ago. People have been hit hard. But we have enough of a crowd to keep us afloat."

While Daddy nodded, Mother asked, "How's Cora, Cy?"

Uncle Cy sighed again. "She's about the same. I've got her at the best place in the country, though. If they can't get her better, nobody can."

"She'll get better," Mother assured him.

"Yes." He nodded, but his dark eyes said he wasn't sure at all. "She's been there only a month. I don't expect her back before Christmas."

Another awkward moment followed in which I thought about Aunt Cora. I'd met her only once, at the wedding. She

was Uncle Cy's second wife, his first having died in 1919 in the final days of the great flu epidemic. They'd had no children. Uncle Cy met Cora some years later and married her in 1926. Now Aunt Cora was convalescing in a tuberculosis sanitarium at Saranac Lake in upstate New York.

I shivered at the thought of the dread disease and hoped none of the tainted air from Aunt Cora's lungs still lingered in the nooks and crannies of the lodge. Consumption would be an unwelcome guest in Paradise, and I wanted nothing of it.

"Well," Uncle Cy rubbed his large hands together. "Let's get you settled. Have you eaten supper?"

Daddy looked toward the dining room with reluctant eyes. I knew what he was thinking, that eating Uncle Cy's food was as good as taking a handout. And that meant, to Daddy, that he was little better now than the drunks and the prostitutes down at the St. Paul Mission where he'd spent so many years helping out. I'd heard him say as much to Mother when he thought I wasn't listening, back during one of their late-night talks about whether or not to come down here after Daddy lost his job.

Before Daddy could respond to Uncle Cy's question, I jumped in and said, "We're starving, Uncle Cy. What's cooking?"

He smiled at me. "All your favorites, I bet. We'll go see, soon as we get you settled in your rooms. Where's your luggage?"

"Out in the car," Daddy said.

"I'll have someone help you carry it in."



We were given adjoining rooms, connected by a bath. The rooms were at the very end of a long hall. Mine was a corner

room with windows overlooking both the river in front and the side yard where the croquet game was still under way. The only true apartment in the lodge was on the ground floor in the back. That was where Uncle Cy lived, and Cora too, when she was there.

Having no kitchen of our own, we would take all our meals in the dining room, which is what we did that evening. It was a brief and solemn meal, punctuated by the small talk of two brothers who hadn't seen each other in years, and Mother, who in her own quiet way always tried to make everything right. I said little and instead satisfied my hunger with huge helpings of roast beef, boiled new potatoes, and corn on the cob. Other guests came and ate and left; their chatter merged and mingled with our own. A couple of waitresses bustled about, carrying trays of food and pouring glasses of tea and water. I knew then that all our meals would be taken in the midst of constant motion, and yet, the busyness of the room was tempered by the lazy flow of air from the open windows and the slow churning of ceiling fans overhead.

Shortly, Uncle Cy excused himself to go to his town council meeting, and when he left, I did too, called out to the island by the breeze wafting up from the river. A small steel bridge, humped like the back of a frightened cat, extended from the riverbank over the tributary to the island. I walked across, and a rush of childhood days came at me like a giant wave cresting and rolling over the shore. I welcomed them—welcomed the remembrance of that innocent time when life's greatest wonders were as simple as a shovel and a pail of pebbly sand, an hour of splashing with Mother in the cool clear water, an afternoon of rowing on the river with Daddy. Even Cassandra was friendly toward me then. She'd play with me, keeping me

entertained by twirling me around on the dance floor when the bands played in the pavilion on summer nights. Those were good days, and I embraced them now like long-lost friends. Words could not describe how glad I was to be there, where neighbors weren't fugitives, nor the local drugstore a front for a money-laundering business, where the greatest problems to be dealt with were ill-planted oats and wayward chickens, and where I wouldn't have to worry about seeing anyone sliced up by a hail of bullets the way we saw the man murdered near the St. Paul Mission.

That was the thing that haunted me most—that murder. Mother, Daddy, and I were walking downtown, on our way to serve soup at the mission, when a Lincoln sedan drove past us and slowed down. In the next moment the long black barrel of a Thompson submachine gun appeared in an open window. Shots rang out, and little sparks of flame, and a man not half a block ahead of us rose up from the sidewalk like a rag doll tossed by a child, his arms upraised as though in surrender. He seemed to hang in the air a moment in a shower of his own blood before he crumpled in a lifeless tangle on the front steps of a Jewish deli. The next moments were pandemonium—women screaming, tires squealing, two men rushing to the body to feel for a pulse and, finding none, removing their hats and shaking their heads. And I . . . I stood speechless while the final moments of my childhood slipped away. The next day, after reading about the killing in the paper, Cassandra told me that's what happened to hijackers who interfered with another man's bootleg business. I'd had nightmares about that murder ever since.

Taking a deep breath to clear my mind, I strolled along the path leading to the picnic tables and the small pebbled beach

where a section of the river was cordoned off for swimming. Dusk was settling and families were beginning to pack up their picnic baskets and head out for the night. As it wasn't the weekend, I doubted that a band would play, but that was all right; the air was filled with the night songs of crickets and tree frogs, and when I put my head back I could see the faint glow of Venus and the pale wafer of a full moon.

I was finally here and I was safe. I knew this was a safe place because the temperance movement had begun right here in Ohio. It was Ohioans who wanted the drinking to stop, all the dreadful drinking that ruined so many lives, tore apart so many families, left so many destitute. It was here in small towns that bands of women gathered and prayed in front of saloons until the owners agreed to close. Maybe something of those prayers remained, making Ohio a sacred place of sorts, protected from the evils of drink.

I'd read all about the temperance movement for the essay contest sponsored by the St. Paul chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. My essay was awarded first prize for the year 1930. By then, Prohibition in America was ten years old. I spoke glowingly of Prohibition and firmly believed everyone should keep all its laws.

What I didn't include in my essay was how badly Prohibition had failed, how as soon as it was signed into law, the law began to be broken, how it had opened the floodgates to illegal liquor distribution and organized crime, ruining perfectly good cities like St. Paul. I'm sure I was unwilling to admit it, even to myself.

But none of that mattered now. Kicking off my canvas shoes, I stepped barefoot into the river, just up to my ankles. The water was cold and tingly. A few people were swimming



farther out; one of them, a girl about my age, rose up out of the water and moved toward shore.

“Hello,” she called to me in passing as she ran to grab a towel. She lifted it to her head and began vigorously rubbing her short curls.

“Hi,” I said. “Nice swim?”

“Yes,” she said, “but now I’m freezing.” She shivered as she wrapped the towel around her shoulders. “You going in?”

“No.” I laughed lightly. “Not right now. Maybe tomorrow. You staying at the lodge?”

She shook her head. “No, we live in town. We just came over for a few hours. How about you? You up from Cincinnati?”

“No. Actually I live here now. I live in the lodge.” I suppose I sounded proud, but I couldn’t help it. “My uncle owns it.”

“Lucky you!” she said, wide eyed, and I was pleased that she was impressed. “How long have you lived here?”

“We’ve only just arrived. Just this evening. We moved down from Minnesota.”

“Lucky you,” she said again.

“Marlene!” A woman at one of the picnic tables raised a hand and waved. “We’re packed and ready to go. We’re waiting on you.”

“Coming, Ma!” The girl turned back to me. “Well, maybe I’ll see you here again sometime.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “We could go swimming or rent a boat or something.”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “Now that summer’s starting we’ll be here a lot. Not much else to do in Mercy.”

“Marlene!”

“I said I’m coming!”

“Well,” I said, “nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too. Oh, and welcome to Ohio, I guess. But listen, just watch out for the red-eyed devil.”

“The what?”

“Marlene!”

“I said I’m coming!” She started to go, and then turned back. “But don’t worry. You’re pretty safe as long as it’s daylight. He mostly comes out at night.”

I wanted to ask her what she was talking about, but before I could say another word she had run off, laughing, to join her family.