

A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK 

Mignon G. Eberhart



Postmark Murder



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O P E N  R O A D

INTEGRATED MEDIA

NEW YORK

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ONE

MATT STOOD AT THE WINDOW, looked out at the gray lake, the gray December sky and talked of fear. "Fear is a virus," he said. "It's a creeping paralysis. It stops thinking. It stops action. In the end it destroys the heart and soul." His rangy figure, his black head were outlined sharply against the gray light beyond him. There was a bitter anger in his voice, anger at the injustice of a world which could make a child its victim.

Laura glanced uneasily at Jonny. The child was listening too. She sat very still in an armchair which was too big for her, so that her feet dangled above the rug. She looked, now, very American in her short white socks and black-strapped pumps, her simple, blue wool dress with its pleated skirt and white round collar. Her smooth brown hair was parted in the middle and two fat braids ended in neat, tied red ribbons. Only her Slav blue eyes and the generous breadth of the cheekbones in her round little face suggested her Polish blood. Her eyes were suddenly very grave, watching Matt. Her lap was full of a tangle of new hair ribbons, yellow and blue and green and red, which Matt had brought her, and her square little hands were quiet, too, holding the ribbons.

The kitten sat beside her, a watchful regard on the ribbons. His eyes were as blue as Jonny's.

Laura said, "Careful. She's beginning to understand more English than we think."

"I know." Matt swung away from the window and came back to them. The slatey look left his eyes when he looked down at Jonny. He gave her a gay, reassuring twinkle. "Everything is all right now, Jonny. Good. Understand? *Dobre*."

Jonny's grave gaze searched his face for a moment. Then some inner secret alarm, which he had heard in her voice when he spoke of fear (rather than the words of which she understood so little) had seemed to be roused, quieted. It was as if she had asked a question and he had answered it promptly and comfortably. Gaiety came back into her face like sunshine. "*Dobre*," she said. "Good." The kitten made a dab at a ribbon, and Jonny laughed.

Matt said, "Well, I've got to be on my way. What do you want for Christmas, Jonny?"

"We mustn't spoil her," Laura said, but knew that she was smiling at the child as fondly as Matt.

"No fear of that," Matt said, rather shortly. And, of course, he was right. They knew very little really of Jonny Stanislawski's short past but they knew that in all probability it had not included gaiety and fun, walks along the lake and visits to the zoo, hair ribbons and Siamese kittens and all the little treats and surprises Matt arranged for her. Matt brought her some sort of present almost every day, and now Jonny seized upon the gaily wrapped box with confidence. It had been that which had brought forth his outburst of anger that afternoon. Jonny had run to the door to meet him. She had flung herself upon him; she had chattered in her own rapid, excited mixture of Polish and English which was as a matter of fact mainly Polish, only studded by the few English words she knew by

lighted by her gay, expressive face and gestures. Then she had gone through his overcoat pocket confidently in search of her present. She had found there the package of ribbons. She had opened laughing and triumphant; it was a game she and Matt understood.

As Matt watched her his mobile Irish face had sobered. "Can you imagine that, Laura, a month ago! She's a different child." And then unexpectedly he had talked of fear, fear which can infect even an eight-year-old child.

Jonny understood about Christmas; she and Laura and Matt had all talked of it, Laura and Matt searching for words in the Polish dictionary with which Laura had supplied herself when Jonny was placed in her care, but baffled as usual by the pronunciation of the mysteriously placed consonants, resorting to English and to what Matt called sign language. Matt had told Jonny Christmas stories with the child listening as intently as if she understood every word of them. He had recited "The Night before Christmas," prompted, when memory failed, by Laura. Jonny had painstakingly recited it after him, a phrase at a time, pronouncing the strange English words with great care. She was delighted with the names of the reindeer and repeated them over and over, slowly and tentatively at first, then more confidently, "Up Donner, up Blitzen—"

She laughed at Matt now. "Saint Nich—o—las—" she said, carefully dividing the syllables.

"Right," said Matt. "Old St. Nicholas is coming down the chimney with a bag full of presents. You wait and see." He touched the child's brown head, tweaked the square little chin, then went into the hall, got his hat and coat. Laura and Jonny followed. Matt said, "If it is a nice day tomorrow we might go to the zoo again. How about it?"

Jonny said clearly, her high childish voice vibrant with confidence and delight, "Bears."

"Okay, honey, the bears it will be. And hot chocolate in the little restaurant in the trees." Matt opened the door of the outside corridor and looked down at Laura. His eyes were suddenly very bright and dancing. He said unexpectedly, "You are a honey, too. Did that ever occur to you? See you tomorrow."

He was off down the corridor toward the bank of elevators. Laura closed the door slowly—and something very gay and yet rather mysterious went out of the day.

She stood for a moment in the small entrance hall watching Jonny who now was making a game with the kitten, dangling a red ribbon and laughing as Suki darted at it with swift, sepia-colored paws.

Matt loved Jonny and Jonny loved Matt. And the moment little Jonny Stanislawski had walked down the gangway of the plane from Vienna, clinging hard to Matt's hand, but with something sturdy and self-reliant about the small figure, too, she had walked also into Laura's heart.

Perhaps she reminded Laura of her own childhood, not too far away, when Conrad Stanley—born Stanislawski—had been her only friend. So it was of course Laura's duty to offer to see to Jonny temporarily, until something could be settled, for Laura, young as she was, had been named by Conrad Stanley as one of the trustees for the perplexing Stanislawski provision in his will. It was also her duty

to take the child into her small apartment, if only to discharge in some small measure the deep debt of gratitude she owed Conrad Stanley and consequently to his little great-niece.

The circumstances in which little Jonny Stanislawski had come so unexpectedly to live with Laura were simple. Conrad Stanley, dying, had left a very large fund to his nephew, Conrad Stanislawski, living in Poland. All efforts to communicate with Conrad Stanislawski had failed, but his child, little Jonny, had been found and brought to America.

Doris Stanley was the obvious person to see to Jonny; she was Conrad's young and lovely widow. Doris quite frankly had not wanted her. Charlie Stedman, who was Laura's co-trustee and an old friend of Conrad Stanley's, lived a comfortable bachelor existence at his club; clearly it was impossible for him to undertake Jonny's care. Matt would have liked to take Jonny, but again it was not practicable.

Matt was not married; he was a lawyer, his office in the Loop; he was young, he had a small but growing practice; he lived in a hotel apartment. If he had taken Jonny it would have involved the troublesome business of finding a housekeeper and, indeed, a different and larger apartment. The practical problems of undertaking a child's care were difficult to solve. But it had been Matt who found Jonny and brought her to America, for he was Doris Stanley's lawyer.

He had once been engaged to Doris, before her marriage to Conrad; he had known Doris for many years, but he was her lawyer, too. When Conrad Stanley died, three years before, Doris had instantly turned all her affairs over to Matt. And that of course had involved Matt in the chore of carrying out the provisions of Conrad Stanley's will. It had proved to be, in fact, a rather onerous chore for all of them, Laura and Charlie Stedman and Matt, that is. Doris, quite comprehensibly, had not been much interested in finding Jonny's father, Conrad's nephew, and certainly not much interested in Jonny.

But they had all met the plane, Laura, Charlie and Doris, riding to the airport in Doris' luxurious chauffeur-driven car. There had been a little discussion as to what to do with the child. Doris had said flatly that Jonny should be put straight into a boarding school; she had indeed made some preliminary arrangements. Charlie had debated it, as he always debated anything, and then said that that might be the best solution. Laura had thought of her own small apartment and the tiny extra bedroom across the hall from her own; it would be easy to transform that room into a child's room with gay chintz on the bed and at the windows, a small chair, a little table, shelves for toys—her thoughts swept irresistibly on. However, she told herself firmly, it wasn't possible for her to take Jonny.

Laura was a secretary for a law firm; she had got the job immediately after Conrad Stanley's death. She worked for no particular member of the firm or staff; her services and those of several other trained secretaries were called upon as and when needed. It was consequently a busy and exacting sort of job, interesting in its variations and rewarding as a challenge. But the hours were long. She was away from home all day, leaving shortly after eight in the morning, coming home in the crowded bus which stopped eventually at the corner of Lake Shore Drive, a half-block from the towering apartment house. She reached her own apartment if she were lucky at about five-thirty. She

was proud of her little apartment; it was small and inexpensive but it had light and air and sunshine and a wide view of Lake Michigan, and more than anything it was home, the only real home Laura had had since she was a child, almost as young as this strange little girl they were going to meet. But there was no place in it for a housekeeper as well as Jonny; besides, it would be almost impossible to find exactly the right kind of housekeeper, a motherly, sensible woman they could trust with the child. No, she couldn't take Jonny.

The three of them stood in a little group, watching the plane land. It was a bright, windy day. Doris' exquisite profile was almost buried in her furs; her smart black hat hugged her blond hair. Even there, in the windy, chill space at the gate, the scent of a perfume like carnations in a summer garden drifted like a fragrant little cloud from the handkerchief in Doris' handbag as she took out a compact and scrutinized her lovely face in the tiny mirror. She moistened her pink lips and smiled, closed her handbag and watched the incoming plane.

Charlie stood beside her, watching the plane, too, as it came in to a landing. His head was bent against the wind; he held on his dignified gray homburg with one neatly gloved hand; the other was tucked under Doris' elbow. And then the plane moved slowly toward the gate and stopped. At last figures began to descend the gangway, hats and coats and skirts swirled by the wind, and Matt's tall figure was among them. He saw them and waved and pointed them out to Jonny, who gave them a grave look and clung to Matt's hand.

Doris flashed into vivacity when she saw Matt; her pansy-brown eyes and her pink lips smiled. She ran to meet the two figures; she kissed Matt; she greeted the lonely little figure beside Matt briefly and it seemed to Laura perfunctorily. Jonny eyed Doris soberly and clung to Matt's hand.

Doris was not at all pleased with the fact that there was a Jonny Stanislawski. And she liked a child to be attractive, well mannered and well dressed; Jonny was neither. Her little face was so almost stolid in its immobility. She wore a faded, purplish coat which was too small for her, a round sailor hat which was too old for her, long black stockings and awkward, ugly shoes. Only her blue eyes, meeting Laura's, betrayed the fact that she was frightened. Laura, unexpectedly, had bent and kissed Jonny. Matt then had kissed Laura, too, lightly, on the cheek, before he spoke to Charlie.

Afterwards in the car they talked of Jonny while the child sat, still and rather frightened, trying not to show it, close beside Matt. "I'll take her to my apartment tonight," Doris said. "But the place for her is Harthing. You know, the Harthing School for girls. I've already talked to Miss Harthing on the telephone. I am sure she will take Jonny."

Charlie agreed. "It seems a good plan, at least until the estate is settled. Then we'll have to make some permanent arrangement for her."

But Laura looked at Matt and he was looking at her; then she said quite suddenly, "No, I'll take her—I'll give up my job. I can get another one later, when we decide what to do about her. I'd like to take her now."

Doris bit her lip, but looked relieved. Charlie said after a moment, thoughtfully, that was very kind of Laura. Matt said, his eyes flashing blue, that it was splendid. “—It’s the perfect solution. I don’t want her to be put in school among strangers.”

“Laura is a stranger,” Doris said quickly. “We are all strangers, even you, Matt.”

He had Jonny’s hand close in his own big one. “Not I. We got acquainted. She’s a good little traveler.”

Charlie said sensibly that there was a matter of expense to consider; if Laura were serious in her offer to give up her job to look after Jonny, she must be reimbursed from the estate. “Don’t you agree, Matt? Doris?”

In the end it was settled without much discussion. Doris’ big car deposited Laura and Jonny and one of Matt’s big leather suitcases at the apartment house. The suitcase held an odd assortment of clothing—two dark woolen dresses which had obviously been passed on to Jonny as they were outgrown by other children, a woman’s sweater, darned, a heavy flannel petticoat, more long black stockings neatly rolled together, and a Paris doll, which Matt had given Jonny, wrapped tenderly in paper. The next day Laura and Jonny had gone shopping. That night Matt came to tell Laura the wonderful amazing story of finding her, of cutting through red tape, and of bringing her home. He had come nearly every day since then—to see Jonny of course, but Laura had seen him, too. But the daily visits would end in January; by then, three years after Conrad Stanley’s death, the estate would be settled. The permanent arrangement for Jonny would be made. And Matt’s daily visits would end, for almost certainly he and Doris Stanley would then be married.

So then, too, this curiously happy interlude for Laura would come to an end. Jonny would no longer provide a gay and warm focus; Laura would go back to work; the routine of her life would reestablish itself. It had been a pleasant routine, well flavored by her sense of independence. But it wouldn’t be so pleasant now and Laura knew why. She would miss Jonny—but she would also, too much, too constantly, too deeply and too hopelessly, miss Matt.

Jonny drew the red ribbon teasingly across the rug and the kitten sprang upon it furiously, its little black tail lashing in pretended anger. Just then someone knocked softly on the door. It was so unexpected that it startled her. It wasn’t Matt returning; he wouldn’t knock like that. The soft, almost furtive knock came again. She opened the door.

A man stood outside. He was rather small and thin, too small somehow for his clothes, which looked bulky and clumsy—foreign, Laura thought. He had a slender, pale face, a high, narrow forehead and sharp features, an intellectual face but a rather weak one. His eyes were pale blue, and looked washed out yet very intent. He said, “I am Conrad Stanislawski.”

TWO

“CONRAD—” LAURA STARED AT him incredulously. “But we tried to find you! For nearly three years we’ve tried to find you!”

“I was in Poland. May I come in?”

“Oh—oh, yes! Please come in.”

He slid instantly into the hall and closed the door behind him. There was something furtive, too, in his quick movements and in the way he closed the door. Suddenly Laura thought, he’s frightened. He said, however, quickly, “I’ve come to see my child. She’s here, isn’t she?”

Laura’s impulse was to say, certainly; she is in the next room. But in the very instant of speaking she remembered her responsibility as trustee. From his position directly before the door he could not see the living room, but she moved a few steps down the hall and closed the door into the living room. His eyes flickered; she was sure that he knew why she closed the door but he did not move. She said, “We didn’t expect you. We had given up trying to find you. We wrote you—so many times, but we didn’t hear from you. Two of our letters came back. They had been opened. They were marked ‘address unknown.’ ”

“Naturally. Probably your letters only made it harder for me to escape.”

“You speak English very well,” she said unexpectedly.

He shrugged. “Of course. That’s my job. Languages. Didn’t you know that?”

“As a matter of fact we could discover very little about you, only that you were born in Poland and were living there for a time after the war. Conrad—your uncle, Conrad Stanley, knew that although he did not know exactly where you were. We assumed that you were still in Poland up to the time when Jonny arrived at the orphanage two years ago.”

“And I suppose you also assumed that I was dead. Well, I’m not. Now may I see my child?”

Again Laura’s impulse was to let him see Jonny at once. Instead she put her hand apologetically but firmly on Conrad Stanislawski’s bony wrist. “I’m sorry. But as you know I am one of the trustees for the Stanley will. I must tell the others that you are here.”

“Before you let me see my child?”

“You must understand. It’s only a matter of identification. Formalities. Routine. I believe you know—”

“But there’s all that money,” he said, with a tinge of bitterness.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “But Jonny is in my care. The others gave me that responsibility and I—”

He interrupted. “The others?”

“Yes—you must know. It was all in the letter which was left at the orphanage in Vienna?”

“Oh, the letter. Yes. Yes, I have it.”

“Then you know all about Conrad Stanley’s will.”

“Oh, yes. My uncle.”

“Matt told you about it in the letter. That’s Matt Cosden. He brought Jonny here. He is—” he explained it all in the letter. He is Mrs. Stanley’s lawyer. And then, of course, there is another trustee, Charlie Stedman. All of them will be very interested to know that you have arrived. I will telephone Matt and—”

“Wait, please!” he said, suddenly and peremptorily. “I would like to see my child first. Can’t a father do this—this formality wait?”

Laura hesitated. “I think I should let them know that you are here as soon as possible. And then, as you see—well, they will expect you to give some proof of your identity.”

“I understand. There’s all that money!”

“Well, yes. They told me, Matt and Charlie Stedman, that when you came, *if* you came, we would have to be sure—”

“You want my dossier. Very well. I was born in Cracow.”

“Yes, we knew that.” Cracow: the cradle of culture, the begetter of scholars for one-time sturdy and self-reliant Poland. A Poland which for much of its life had suffered invasion, division and redivision, but somehow always had retained a stubborn flame of life, so it gathered itself together again, piece by piece, and limb by limb. Who can say, Laura thought, that this country is now dead, lost, forever surrendered? Poland had always somehow, sometime, asserted its own stubborn independence. Battered and bleeding after the German invasion in World War II, and then again made captive, still, somewhere, a secret flame of liberty might smolder. The man standing before her was a symbol of that.

He had not followed the swift course of her thoughts. He said slowly, as if merely reciting facts that were completely objective and impersonal, “I studied languages. I was going to teach. I went to England to study, and just before the war, when I knew the war was inevitable, I came to Poland again. I was there that September.”

His voice took on an even more impersonal and chilly quality, as if those terrible September days had killed feelings as they had destroyed cities and people. “Eventually I joined a Polish brigade. We were sent to Russia and then to Africa. After the war was over I returned. There were some difficulties; I need not go into that. However, I managed to live. I was married. Jonny was born. My wife—” He checked himself almost imperceptibly; his eyes seemed suddenly very bleak and guarded, his face more closed in on itself. He went on rather quickly. “I was left to see to Jonny who was then two years old. I did my best but—that was not good enough. I wished to leave Poland, escape, but meantime I had to live and support Jonny. I became—that is, I joined the government party. I was a language expert.” He shrugged. “I was useful. Eventually I became a member of a minor commission. Two

years ago I had a chance to send Jonny to Vienna. I intended to follow her as soon as possible and escape to England or America. However, it took a long time, two years in fact, before I contrived an errand to Vienna and had an opportunity to do so. When I went to the home where I expected to find Jonny, I found instead your letter.” He paused and looked at her steadily. “Now may I see my child?”

It was a reasonable and a factual account of himself. Laura forced herself to question it. She said, “You will have your passport, of course. Or the letter from Matt. Perhaps some means of identification.”

Again his face seemed to withdraw warily into itself. “I do have these things,” he said. His thin shoulders seemed to brace themselves under the awkwardly tailored coat. His rather weak chin lifted. There was a thin edge of defiance in his voice. “I have everything which you will need or any of the others will need to convince you that I am really the man I say I am. I do not have them with me. I do not intend to show them to you at this time.”

The defiance was as surprising as his flat statement. Laura said, “But—but I don’t understand. You must see that—”

He interrupted, “I only know that I want to see my child now. Only let me look at her, Miss March. I will not talk to her. I will not touch her. I will not speak to her. But I must see her—only for a moment.” He put a thin and shaking hand on the door.

And Laura thought, but Jonny will recognize him! That will be proof of his identity. She opened the door to the living room.

He took a quick step or two inside. Laura began “Jonny—” and stopped, for then she saw that Jonny had retreated swiftly as a bird into a thicket, to the cautious stillness and silence which had characterized her first few days with Laura, in a strange home, in a strange country.

She must have heard their voices in the hall, for she was standing now behind an armchair as if it were a bulwark. The kitten stood on the arm of the chair, humped up and gazing with serious blue eyes at this intruder. But Jonny’s face was completely still. She made no movement, she made no cry of recognition, she simply stood there, her eyes blue and fixed and perfectly blank.

The stillness and silence lasted for perhaps a few seconds. Then Conrad Stanislawski said to Laura, “Thank you,” and turned abruptly back into the hall.

“But you—please wait—where are you going?”

“I told you I would only look at her and be sure she was here.” He was already at the door to the corridor.

She cried, “But you can’t leave now. Let me phone the others—”

“No” he said sharply. “Don’t do that.” He took a long breath and said, “Miss March, I must ask you to do something—it is extremely important, otherwise I would not ask you to do it. You won’t understand—only believe me. I must ask you not to tell the others of my arrival. Not yet.”

“But I must tell them!” she cried. “I have to tell them. They will want to see you. Besides, Jonny

—”

“That will wait,” he said. “Please promise me now, to keep my arrival a secret? I realize this is an extraordinary request. I must make it.”

Suddenly there was something desperate and beseeching in his face and his thin body. He opened the door.

“But—but I can’t let you go like this! Where are you going?”

He turned back. “I’ll tell you that. I got to a rooming house— 3936 Koska Street. I trust you, Miss March. I believe you will keep a promise. In a few days—only a few days, I’ll come back. I’ll do everything that’s required of me. I’ll show you all my credentials, all my cards of identification, everything. But until—” He stopped, gave her one long intent look and unexpectedly, as if she had yielded to his appeal, said, “Thank you.” His thin figure with its bulky overcoat turned into the corridor and disappeared.

For a moment Laura did not move. Then she went to the door; he had already reached the bank of elevators. He did not look back; the door closed after him. Somehow she knew that it would have been useless to pursue him, useless to question him. But she stood for a moment staring at the blank, closed doors of the elevators, halfway down the corridor. They were as blank and in a way as baffling as the unexpected and extraordinary encounter.

Why had she let him leave, like that?

How could she have stopped him!

And when after some time she turned back into the hall again, Jonny also had disappeared and with her the kitten.

Jonny had not gone far. There was nowhere to go in Laura’s small apartment. She found the child back in her own small bedroom, bending over a book of drawings to be filled in with colored crayons. The kitten sat on the low play table beside the book, watching with deep concentration, for sometimes a crayon could be transformed into a moving object; Suki greatly interfered with the accuracy of Jonny’s drawing. But the child was apparently engrossed in study over the book of pictures. So that was all right, Laura thought, and returned to the living room.

For a long time she walked up and down the room, pausing to stare out the window, thinking of the curious affair of Conrad Stanislawski’s appearance. She had entirely mismanaged the interview.

Intending to do what she thought was right, she had only wounded him—and perhaps Jonny—by interfering with their reunion. And then she had let him go, not only with very few facts in his possession but with a tacit promise on her part to keep his arrival a secret.

Yes, she had mismanaged that curious but important interview. She had failed in her duty as trustee. Certainly she should not have allowed him to leave believing that she would keep his arrival a secret.

Her obvious duty was to go straight to the telephone—tell Matt, tell Charlie, tell Doris of Conrad Stanislawski's amazing appearance and of his still more amazing request to keep his arrival a secret.

Yet there was the pleading in his eyes, in his voice. There was something intangible, indescribable that touched her heart, and made her believe at least for the moment in him and in the validity of his request. Whatever the reasons for it were, just there and just then she had believed that there were reasons.

She thought unexpectedly, he doesn't look like Conrad Stanley; there ought to be some family resemblance.

There was none. Conrad Stanley had been a stocky, strongly built man with a fresh color, wide cheekbones and a broad forehead, a firm and determined nose and chin, massive and blunt. He had had light, Slav blue eyes, but they were intelligent and determined, clear and sparkling—never a bleak and faded blue.

And Conrad had never been nervous, uncertain, desperate; he had always known exactly where he was going, and why, and how he was going to get there.

Laura had known Conrad Stanley and loved him since she was a very small child. She could not remember when Conrad Stanley had not been a part of her life.

THREE

CONRAD STANLEY'S STORY HAD been the success story of many Americans. He, too, was born in Cracow. Laura had often heard the details of his early life, for Conrad as he grew older, like many self-made men, liked to talk. He did not boast; there was only a kind of candid surprise and pleasure about him when he talked of his life, which was almost naïve except that Conrad was in no sense naïve; he was instead remarkably worldly-wise, understanding of human frailties as well as human strength, and deeply compassionate about the whole.

“Rags to riches,” he would say and chuckle. “I came up the hard way. I was younger than you are now, Laura, when my mother brought me to America.”

There had been then a brother, Paul, older than Conrad. A still older brother, Stefan, remained in Poland. Conrad, his mother and Paul had landed in America with only a few dollars. Laura had faintly dimly that their reason for emigrating to America was not only poverty and a desire to better themselves—but that there might have been some distant but then operative political reason for their departure. In any event, they had landed in New York among its teeming emigrants from other shores and had tried to make for themselves a new life. When Conrad was twelve he got a job in a machine shop.

He had native ingenuity and, as became increasingly evident, great intelligence. He also had the drive of a pressing need for money. Nothing was too hard for him to do; no hours were too long. His brother Paul, working in a steel mill in Pittsburgh where so many Polish laborers drifted about the time, was killed in an accident. Conrad worked harder, in order to care for his mother.

Somehow he found time to go to a trade school at night. But necessity was the forcing house for the quality of genius he possessed. After his mother's rather early death, when he was relieved of the pressing need for money, he turned that quality of genius toward invention. In the end he went to Chicago in the hope of buying a small manufacturing plant with the small savings he had by then accumulated. At the same time he was working nights with various ideas for inventions. It was about that time that he became acquainted with Laura's father. He also, by then, had legally changed his name from Stanislawski to Stanley; long ago he had become an American citizen.

Laura's father was an assistant vice-president in a small suburban bank near Chicago. Conrad, needing more money to buy his factory and money to promote the invention he was then working on, had gone to the bank in the hope of negotiating a loan. Laura's father had believed in him. He had advised the loan.

The factory Conrad bought prospered; he both manufactured and sold the invention which then engrossed his attention. This first project was a kind of slide fastener with a mechanical clip and bolt. It was a gadget in the beginning; it blossomed into a sizable business. Conrad then extended his

patents to cover all sorts of by-products and variations; in the end he developed a very big business and accumulated a very large fortune.

It was from the beginning a one-man business; it remained so to the end, with Conrad not only keeping his own hands on the helm but a close and minute observation upon every detail.

It was like Conrad to look upon Peter March's belief in him not as an impersonal matter of sheer business intelligence but as a personal favor. So Conrad himself pursued and made a friendship of the business relationship. Laura as a child became accustomed to the regular appearance of this dynamic, sturdy, strong-featured man with his Polish accent, his keen mind and his never-failing kindness to her. Perhaps Conrad's warm heart rejoiced in the taste of family life his friendship with Peter March gave him. In those days Conrad was too busy and too engrossed to think of marriage—that or he did not meet the kind of woman he wished to marry. But he liked Peter March and showed it, and he was always devoted to Laura's mother, a quiet, slim, lovely young woman whom Laura only dimly remembered.

Peter March was a hard-working, imaginative and contradictory man. He liked books, he liked music; he had no gift for money-making and very little interest in it as such, yet he was efficient in his work at the bank. He looked upon Conrad Stanley, this rock of a man who had so determinedly and resolutely become his close and intimate friend, with a kind of amused awe. But Peter was idealistic too.

When World War II began and the Germans marched into Poland, Peter had already seen the handwriting on the wall and had quietly made his plans. Probably to the surprise of everyone except Laura's mother and Conrad, Peter March gave up his job at the bank, said good-bye to his wife and small daughter and Conrad Stanley and went to England to enlist.

He knew, or at least believed, that America would sooner or later get into the war but he would not wait for that. He was overage; he would never have been drafted. He had only a strong feeling of individual duty and he was idealistic. Somewhere he had learned the rudiments of flying; probably that was one of his unexpectedly adventurous, out-of-the-ordinary diversions. In any event, fliers or mechanics who knew anything at all about flying were then desperately needed. And in a bombing run over Germany during the first days of spring, when the Germans made their seemingly irresistible sweep down through Belgium and into France, Peter March was in a plane which never returned.

Laura, even now that she was older, still had very little idea of how her mother felt about Peter's enlistment. She did remember that after the cable came to the effect that Peter had not returned, all her mother's interest in life seemed to fade; she died scarcely a year later and Laura, at very nearly Jonny's age, was alone in the world.

There were of course distant relatives, none of whom showed any particular interest in taking care of Peter March's orphaned child; probably they felt that Peter March would have done better to 'stay at home' and see to his own family. There were a few rather cold and tentative offers but the

were not needed for Conrad Stanley stepped firmly and promptly into the situation.

There was very little money; an assistant vice-president of a suburban bank does not have a salary which permits of much saving or investment. Laura's mother's small annuity died with her. Conrad Stanley saw to all the small business affairs resulting from Peter March's and then Margaret March's death. What money could be saved he put in a savings account in Laura's name. He then found a school for Laura.

He did not touch any of the modest savings account. Laura knew later that it would not have been adequate in any event to see to her education, but mainly Conrad wished her to keep the small fund intact. He paid, himself, for all her school expenses. And even more important, in a definite way, it was Conrad who arranged little treats for Laura; it was Conrad who came to see her; it was Conrad who took her with him on carefully planned trips during her vacations. It was Conrad in fact who tried and in many ways succeeded in taking the place of a father and mother whose images gradually retreated into the past. Conrad had been more than a father to her; he had been a guardian, a teacher and a bulwark against the world.

As she grew older, she began to realize the great debt of her gratitude to Conrad. She could not pay him back in any way for the generosity and affection his great warm heart had so willingly given her, but she could, sometime, pay him for her school expenses; when she was seventeen she made a stand: she wished to go to a school which would teach her a profession. Then when she could work she would pay back to Conrad, at least in money, some of the debt she owed him.

It was like Conrad to agree to this. He didn't want the money, that was clear, but it was equally clear that he liked and wished to encourage her sense of independence. He agreed; when Laura could work she could pay him; he had kept an account of all the money he had spent on her.

So she went to a secretarial school. She worked hard, driven by her deep affection and her sense of gratitude for Conrad and also by that growing independence which perhaps Conrad himself had taught her. When she emerged from the secretarial school, Conrad had taken her into his own office and she was to be his secretary.

Spurred by her deep affection for Conrad, she learned at least some of the ins-and-outs of his business, and Conrad not only helped her in her new task, he taught her many general but sensible and forceful business precepts.

When Conrad died he made her a trustee for the Stanislawski fund for his will.

There were reasons for this. He trusted Laura, perhaps that was the first reason, another reason was the training he had given her. He knew that he had taught her the fundamentals of business; he knew that he had inculcated in her certain character traits. He also knew that she loved him and would be loyal to his wishes no matter how unusual they seemed to be.

And, of course, the Stanislawski fund was unusual, yet it was exactly like Conrad.

Laura had finished school, and was at work in Conrad's office, when he met Doris and married

her.

He was old to marry by then and Doris was young; she was, in fact, only a few years older than Laura.

It was a shipboard romance; Conrad was making one of his more and more frequent trips to Europe in connection with his increasing European markets. Doris, then Doris Fitz-Green and engaged to marry Matt Cosden, and her mother were on their way to Paris.

Doris, in a frank yet perhaps purposeful moment, had been candid about that. "We couldn't afford the trip. We didn't have a bean. But my mother wanted to get me away from Matt. He didn't have a bean either." That was after Conrad's death, when Doris had begun to see Matt often. She had given Laura a thoughtful look, and then smiled sweetly. "Of course, Matt was in Chicago then, starting a practice. We were going to be married as soon as he made enough money. But I met Conrad—"

Conrad was by then a very important man and obviously a very rich man. Perhaps Mrs. Fitz-Green, Doris' mother, had encouraged their acquaintance. In any event by the time the short voyage was over the three of them were close friends. They saw each other in Paris, in Rome, and then in Madrid. Six weeks later when they returned to New York Doris and Conrad were married. They came to live in Chicago, in the vast apartment Doris wanted. What Matt's feelings were when his one-time fiancée turned up in the same city where he had chosen to live, married to another and a very rich man, no one, certainly not Laura, knew. She saw him once or twice at dinner; he was friendly and polite with Doris; he was also friendly and polite with Conrad— and, Laura thought, began to like and respect the older man.

Laura had been prepared to find in Conrad's wife a close and intimate friend; she had been certainly prepared to welcome her. Doris astonished her. She was too young, too beautiful, too glamorous; she was not at all the sensible, settled and matured kind of woman whom Laura would automatically have expected Conrad to marry. Conrad, however, was obviously and indulgently in love with her.

He had spent all his life in business amassing a fortune; he knew, he must have known, that he had not many years yet to live. He took what the gods gave him and was very happy with his young wife. Whether or not Doris was happy was not certain. But certainly she enjoyed her life as the rich young Mrs. Stanley.

By unspoken but probably mutual agreement, Doris and Laura achieved a cordial relation; they were never intimate friends. Perhaps the closeness of their ages in contrast to their very different relationships to Conrad forbade an intimate friendship. Laura was like a daughter, a dearly loved ward of Conrad's. Doris was his wife, a lovely and cherished gift life had brought him for which indulgently yet philosophically, he paid generously; Doris was from the beginning reckless and extravagant.

Laura began to know Matt Cosden only after Conrad's death. That had occurred suddenly, thro

years before, yet Conrad had had intimations of its occurrence; his will was found to be completely thought out in every detail, although, typically, he had drawn it up himself with only the most cursory legal aid. It was a simple enough will in its main provisions. He canceled Laura's debt in money to him; he could never have canceled her debt in gratitude. He divided his very large fortune among his young wife, Doris, and his Polish nephew, Conrad Stanislawski, whom Conrad Stanley had never seen. The Stanislawski provision was the problem.

It was a gesture of family loyalty. It may have been due to a wish to preserve and carry on his name; it came also from Conrad's deep and intense patriotism. He felt that everything he had done, everything he owned, every happy day in his life which certainly included his relationship to Laura, her father and mother and his late, but on Conrad's part, very happy marriage to Doris—all of it was due directly to his emigration to America, his becoming an American citizen and his taking advantage of the rich opportunities America had offered him. He wished to pass on this gift to one of his own blood and name. And there lay the perplexities of the Stanislawski fund.

Conrad Stanislawski, his nephew who lived in Poland, was to receive half of Conrad's fortune only if he also came to America, became an American citizen and made his life in America. And they could not even find Conrad Stanislawski, let alone inform him of the fund set aside for him.

They had made every effort to do so. Their letters vanished into space, except for the two which were returned and had been opened and were marked "address unknown." Matt, by then Doris' lawyer, had said that there was a spot censorship and perhaps it was sheer accident that the letters to Conrad Stanislawski had undergone that. There was, however, an alternative—which was that Conrad Stanislawski had either died or disappeared in the confusion after the war.

Many Poles had been placed in camps; there was a terrific shifting of population. Eventually they began to feel that looking for Conrad Stanislawski over the face of the earth was not only like looking for a needle in a haystack, it was like looking for a needle which had disappeared long before it had been lost in the haystack.

Time went on. Gradually they were beginning to admit failure. Then in August, by way of combing the relief organizations again, Matt had discovered that there was a child, named Jonny Stanislawski, living in a home for children in Vienna. She had been there for two years. After much correspondence he was convinced that she was in fact the child of Conrad Stanislawski, Conrad Stanley's nephew.

In October Matt flew to Vienna. There was red tape to cut but the American Army Headquarters and the relief organizations helped him; in November he came back from Vienna with little Jonny.

There was still no news of Conrad Stanislawski. It was not even certain that he had been alive at the time when Jonny arrived at the orphanage; indeed, the more than probable explanation was that he was not alive and that Jonny, somehow, like so many hundreds of other little waifs, had drifted into the orphanage. The circumstances of her arrival were mysterious and so far as Matt could discover

Conrad Stanislawski himself had had nothing to do with it. However, there was no doubt about Jonny's identity; there was her own birth certificate; there was also, in the thin little file labeled Stanislawski, Jonny, a photostatic copy of Conrad Stanislawski's birth certificate. It was not at all unusual, the head of the orphanage assured Matt—rather wearily, as if nothing that developed in the post-war melee of displaced persons, of homeless children, was really unusual; people took the greatest care to establish their own and their children's identity with whatever means they could employ. It was tragically, terribly important. Jonny was the child of Conrad Stanislawski, who was the child of Stefan Stanislawski, Conrad Stanley's older brother; there was no doubt about that.

Matt had taken time in Vienna to explore every possibility of getting in touch with Conrad Stanislawski; his attempt at communication came to nothing.

There were, of course, several reasons to account for Jonny's presence in the orphanage. The logical conclusion was that her father was dead. Yet there were alternatives; perhaps he was sick; perhaps he was unable to care for her and in some way had contrived a way to get Jonny to Vienna. There was even, Matt had suggested, the possibility that Conrad himself intended to escape Poland and had sent Jonny ahead of him. And then for some reason Conrad had failed to get to Vienna.

That, according to Conrad Stanislawski himself, was the truth.

It had grown later as she stood at the window, staring out at the lake and the sky, thinking of Conrad Stanislawski, of all the circumstances surrounding him and surrounding her long association with Conrad Stanley; trying to discover exactly what Conrad Stanley would have told her to do. Suddenly and reassuringly it occurred to her that Conrad Stanley was a man who believed the best of his fellow beings and acted on that faith. He would have granted Conrad Stanislawski's request for secrecy; he would have followed his own instinct, as she had done. Yet what did Stanislawski intend to do during those few days?

And why had Laura felt that he was frightened?

It was only then that it struck Laura that Jonny's reaction was not all right; it was all wrong.

FOUR

THE CHILD HAD SHOWN no recognition at all of the man who stood in the doorway looking at her. There had not been a smile, a cry of greeting; she had not flung herself joyfully upon him as she flung herself upon Matt, when he arrived. In two years' time, even though two years is a long time in the life of a child, Jonny could not have forgotten her father. Yet there had not been so much as a flicker of recognition in the still little face, the rigid, sturdy body; her Slav blue eyes had been completely blank and without expression. So then if Jonny had not recognized the man, he was not her father!

He was an impostor! Charlie and Doris and Matt had talked of that possibility; they had warned Laura. There was so much money involved that there might be impostors claiming it. The man of the afternoon with his mysterious request, with his refusal to show any kind of identification, asking her only to see Jonny (which in itself had a certain curious and questionable implication as if perhaps he only wanted to make sure that Jonny was there), calling himself Conrad Stanislawski, was an impostor! She would telephone to Matt at once.

The room had grown darker. Away below, along Lake Shore Drive, the homeward traffic rush had long ago begun; lights from cars swept by in constant four-lane streams. The long two-noted whistle of the traffic policeman came clearly to her ears. She turned on lamps in the room and went into the hall. But with her hand on the telephone she saw the little red Polish dictionary which she had supplied herself with when Jonny came to live with her. Why not question Jonny?

The child understood some English, and Laura had trained herself to find Polish words and painstakingly labored over their pronunciation until there was some current of understanding between her and Jonny. They made, in fact, a game of it, she and Jonny. She snatched up the Polish dictionary and went to Jonny's room.

It, too, was dark. She turned on the light. Jonny was huddled at the low table, her head in her arms, sobbing convulsively. It was the more touching because Jonny was crying with such desperate silence, as if she must control even the sound of her sobs. Laura ran to her. She took her in her arms. Jonny pressed her hot face against Laura's shoulder and allowed herself the luxury of sobbing aloud in great, strangling gulps.

So Conrad Stanislawski was really Conrad Stanislawski and Jonny's father.

A wave of compunction swept Laura. She had been overconscientious, overanxious about her responsibility as trustee, overcautious. She ought to have let father and daughter meet, freely and happily, without question. Even the kitten seemed to eye Laura with disapproval.

She held Jonny in her arms and talked to her. "We'll see your father, we'll telephone to him, we'll have him here right away. We'll see him, Jonny, he's not gone, he'll come back." She didn't know how much Jonny understood of the words, but perhaps her tone was comforting, for gradual

Jonny quieted. But her sobs had been the heartbroken sobs of a child perplexed by the ways of a world in which a father could appear and then disappear in a matter of moments.

The telephone rang.

It rang and rang again, jabbing insistently, before Laura at last disengaged Jonny's arm from around her neck and went to answer it.

If it was Matt she was going to make an exception to her resolution and tell him the truth about Conrad Stanislawski. She owed it to Jonny, and no matter what Conrad Stanislawski had said, no matter what the reasons for his request for secrecy were, it was more important to restore the confidence of Jonny's heart which she and Matt had been at such loving pains to build.

She took down the telephone. A woman's voice said, "Is this Miss Laura March?"

It was a strange voice, flat and toneless, with a heavy foreign accent. Laura said in surprise, "Why, yes. I am Laura March."

"Come at once. It is Conrad Stanislawski. Come to 3936 Koska Street. Bring a doctor."

"But who—*what do you mean? What has happened?*" Laura stopped. There was an unmistakable click of the telephone and then nothing but silence.

"Come at once," the woman had said—what woman, who was she, what did she know of Conrad Stanislawski? But the address was right, 3936 Koska Street. "Come at once. Bring a doctor."

Conrad Stanislawski had been in an accident! He had had a heart attack—something! Hurriedly she telephoned for her own doctor, Doctor Stevens; he was out on a call, his nurse said; she didn't know when he would return; however, she took the Koska Street address and the message. Laura then telephoned to Matt.

She had already decided to tell Matt of Conrad Stanislawski and, certainly, in an emergency a broken implied promise to Conrad Stanislawski meant nothing. Matt was not in his office; she tried his apartment, he was not there. In desperation she tried Charlie Stedman's office; there was no answer. She tried his club and he was out. There was no use phoning to Doris. "Come at once. Bring a doctor."

She could not leave Jonny alone. Besides, if Conrad Stanislawski were seriously sick, the circumstances might be such that she ought to let him see the child, she thought swiftly. If not—well, if not, she could protect Jonny. Certainly she could not leave the child alone in the apartment. She hurried back to Jonny and washed the tear stains from the child's little face. Jonny was tired now and weary; when Laura got out Jonny's little red coat and red hat, Jonny put them on and asked no questions. Laura caught up her own gray coat, full and swinging free from the shoulders, light and soft as fur; she snatched up a white silk scarf with her initials embroidered in red upon it, a scarf Matt had given her, and her big red handbag. Five minutes later Laura hailed a taxi at the entrance of the building apartment house.

It was then around five o'clock and foggy. The streets were jammed with cars and taxis and heavily laden buses. Already, with the early December dusk, it was growing dark. She gave the taxi

driver the address and saw his faint look of surprise. "That's in the Polish section," he said.

It would be in the Polish section, of course. Laura had not thought of that. She said, yes, and settled back in the taxicab with Jonny beside her. The taxi drew away from the curb and plunged into the streams of traffic. They went along Lake Shore Drive with all its lights and its crowded buses along Michigan Boulevard with its gay glimpses of shop windows already decorated for Christmas. The Wrigley Tower loomed up white and clear at their right and across from it the massive, lighted bulk of the Tribune Tower where brilliant ranks of windows glimmered through the fog; there were always lights in the Tribune Tower, night and day. The bridge luckily was down, although as they crept across it amid the slow traffic Laura could hear the dismal hooting of a barge somewhere in the river below. Away off now at the right a rosy radiance in the fog marked the great bulk of the Merchandise Mart. Immediately after they had crossed the bridge, they turned right again and onto Wacker Drive which slanted crosswise, following the path of the river which was lower and hidden by dusk and fog.

Again, at the bridge westward, they crept slowly along, wedged in with other homeward-bound traffic. The fog here was heavier. Eventually they turned into one of the great business streets which go directly westward. This, too, was lined with stores. The street lights, red and green, were haloed by the fog. They went west and still west, slowly because of the heavy traffic. All at once the names and signs in the stores changed, became bristling and indecipherable consonants. They were in the Polish section. Laura's heart quickened. It seemed to Laura a long time; the December twilight had turned almost to night when they turned off the business street on to a quieter residential street. She saw a sign suddenly: Koska Street.

There was a drug store on the corner, and a lighted grocery store with a Christmas wreath in one window. Immediately, then, it became a street of houses, and two- or three-flat apartment houses. There were few pedestrians here. It was perhaps at the deserted hour of the night when workers had not yet returned home. Lights glimmered only dimly from windows here and there. They drew up suddenly and the taxi driver peered through the gloom. "I think this is it," he said.

It was a narrow, two-storied house, painted brown. There was about it a look of neatness and cleanliness yet it was sparse, too, and a little forbidding. There was only a dim light in the hall, behind the high, old-fashioned transom on which were painted very clearly, in large letters, 3936. The house and the street before it seemed singularly deserted. There were no pedestrians, no cars parked at the curb. The doctor, then, had not yet arrived.

For an instant Laura was tempted to stay in the taxi and wait for the doctor's arrival. The memory of the urgency in the strange woman's voice over the telephone forbade it. She got out of the taxi and Jonny followed her. Jonny was puzzled; she looked at the house and then at Laura, questioningly. Laura paid the taxi driver, who was curious, too, and lingered a moment, watching them. She led Jonny across the damp sidewalk and up a narrow flight of white stone steps, scrubbed to a state

pristine cleanliness, but which somehow were grim and uninviting. At the top of the steps Laura looked in perplexity at the brown-painted door. There was no bell. What was she to do? And where was Conrad Stanislawski?

Obviously the thing to do was to open the door and walk in. As she was about to do so, however, the door was flung suddenly open.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was outlined dimly against the light from behind. Laura had only a swift and hazy impression of a loose brown coat, a dark beret pulled anyhow over dark hair, and a rather broad and very pale face which looked haggard in that eerie light, and deeply lined. The woman came with a rush out on the step, tugging a battered, canvas carryall after her, and then stopped and stared at Jonny.

Laura cried, "I am Laura March. Did you phone to me? Where is he?"

For a second or two the woman only stared at Jonny, and did not reply. She wore no lipstick; her mouth looked strangely colorless and stiff.

Laura said, "Please answer me. Did you phone to me? I'm Laura March."

"Go away," the woman said at last, flatly, scarcely moving her pale lips. "I should not have done it." Her eyes shifted then from Jonny in a curious, swift, yet controlled glance along the street. She saw the yellow taxicab, and clutching her canvas carryall, ran suddenly down the white steps, across the sidewalk, and scrambled into the taxi.

"Wait," Laura cried and started after her, but she was already in the taxicab. It started up with a roar and went down the street. Its yellow gleam passed under the street light, turned the corner, and vanished.

Laura stood for a moment transfixed, clasping Jonny's hand. She was bewildered and indeed rather frightened by the odd encounter. She was sure that it was the woman who had phoned her, for she had the same flat and toneless voice, the same heavy foreign accent. Now, she said, "Go away."

Laura couldn't go away. Conrad was somewhere in that house, awaiting the doctor, needing help.

The door was still open, revealing a narrow hall, painted brown, and a narrow flight of stairs going upward. Laura took Jonny's hand and entered the house.

There was a rank of doors along the hall, all of them closed. The only light came from a small unshaded bulb above the transom. Again she looked for a bell and found none. But there must be a landlady somewhere. There must be lodgers.

She knocked on one door, and then another. No one answered, no one came to inquire. There was the heavy, rather ominous silence of complete emptiness in the house. The sound of her hand on the door only emphasized it.

But Conrad Stanislawski must be there, somewhere. Laura and Jonny went upstairs—slowly and on Laura's part, and perhaps Jonny's, too, uncertainly and cautiously. The treads creaked under their footsteps, yet no one came to inquire. They emerged in the second-story hall which was almost a

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