

As a child I had been impressed by the Boerum House. It was fairly new then, and shiny with new paint - a huge Victorian building. Standing in front of it this early Christmas Eve, however, I could find no echo of that youthful impression. It was all a depressing gray now, and the curtains behind the windows were drawn completely so that the house seemed to present blindly staring eyes to the passerby.

When I knocked my stick sharply on the door, Celia opened it. 'There is a doorbell,' she said.

She was still wearing the long unfashionable and badly wrinkled black dress which must have been her mother's, and she looked more than ever like old Katrin had in her later years: the thin bony body, the tight thin line of her lips, the colorless hair pulled back hard enough to remove every wrinkle from her forehead. She reminded me of a steel trap ready to shut down on anyone who touched her incautiously.

I said, 'I am aware that the doorbell is not connected, Celia,' and walked past her into the hall. She banged the door shut, and instantly we were in half-darkness.

I put out my hand for the light switch, but Celia said sharply, 'This is no time for lights! There's been a death in this house, you know that.'

'I have good reason to know,' I said, 'but your manner now does not impress me.'

'She was my brother's wife, and very dear to me.'

I moved towards her and rested my stick on her shoulder. 'Celia,' I said, 'as your family's lawyer, let me give

you a word of advice. The inquest is over, and you've been cleared. But nobody believed you then, and nobody ever will. Remember that.'

She pulled away. 'Is that what you came to tell me?'

'I came because I knew your brother would want to see me today. I suggest you keep away while I talk to him.'

'Keep away from him yourself!' she cried. 'He was at the inquest and saw them clear my name. In a little while he'll forget the terrible things he thinks about me. Keep away from him so that he can forget.'

I started walking cautiously up the dark stairs, but she followed me. 'I prayed,' she said, 'and was told that life is too short for hatred. So when he comes to me, I'll forgive him.'

I reached the top of the stairs and almost fell over something. I swore, then said, 'If you're not going to use lights, you should at least keep the way clear. Why don't you get these things out of here?'

'They are poor Jessie's things,' she said. 'Ready for throwing out. It hurts Charlie to see anything of hers. I knew it would be best to throw them out.' Alarm came into her voice. 'But you won't tell him, will you?'

I went into Charlie's room and closed the door behind me. The curtains were drawn, but the ceiling light showed me that he was lying on his bed with an arm over his eyes. Slowly, he stood up and looked at me.

'Well,' he said at last, nodding towards the door, she didn't give you any light on the way up, did she?'

'No,' I said, 'but I know the way.'

'She gets around better in the dark than I do in the light. She'd rather have it that way, too. Otherwise she might look into a mirror and be frightened of what she saw.' He gave a short laugh. 'All you hear from her now is how she loved Jessie, and how sorry she is. Maybe she thinks if she says it often enough, people will believe it.'

I dropped my hat and stick on the bed and put my overcoat beside them. Then I took out a cigarette and waited until he found a match to light it for me. His hand shook violently. Charlie was five years younger than Celia, but seeing him then I thought he looked ten years older. His hair was so fair that it was difficult to see whether or not he was going gray. He had not shaved for several days, and there were huge blue-black bags under his eyes. He stared at me, pulling uncertainly at his mustache.

'You know why I wanted to see you,' he said.

'I can imagine,' I said, 'but I'd rather you told me.'

'It's Celia,' he said. 'I want her to get what she deserves. Not prison. I want the law to take her and kill her, and I want to be there to watch it.'

'You were at the inquest, Charlie,' I said. 'You saw what happened. Celia's cleared and, unless more evidence can be produced, she stays cleared.'

'What more evidence does anyone need! They were arguing violently at the top of the stairs. Celia threw Jessie down to the bottom and killed her. That's murder, isn't it?'

I was tired, and sat down in the old leather armchair.

'There were no witnesses,' I said.

'I heard Jessie scream and I heard her fall,' he said, 'and when I ran out and found her there, I heard Celia bang her door shut. She pushed Jessie!'

'But you didn't see anything. And Celia says she wasn't there. As you weren't an eyewitness, you can't make a murder out of what might have been an accident.'

He slowly shook his head. 'You don't really believe that,' he said. 'Because if you do, you can get out now and never come near me again.'

'It doesn't matter what I believe. I'm telling you the legal position. What about motive? What did Celia have to gain from Jessie's death? There's no money or property involved.'

Charlie sat down on the edge of his bed. 'No,' he whispered, 'there's no money or property in it. It's me. First, it was the old lady with her heart trouble whenever I tried to do anything for myself. Then when she died and I thought I was free, it was Celia. She never had a husband or a baby - but she had me!'

'She's your sister, Charlie. She loves you.'

He laughed unpleasantly. 'And she can't let me go. When I think back now, I still can't understand how she did it. She would look at me in a certain way and all the strength would go out of me. And it was like that until I met Jessie ... I remember the day I brought Jessie home, and told Celia we were married. There was a look in her eye - the same look that must have been there when she pushed Jessie down

those stairs.'

I said, 'But you admitted at the inquest that you never saw her threaten or do anything to hurt Jessie.'

'Of course I never saw! But Jessie would go around sick to her heart every day without saying a Word, and would cry in bed every night and not tell me why. I knew what was going on. I talked to her and I talked to Celia, and both of them just shook their heads. But when I saw Jessie lying there, it didn't surprise me at all.'

'I don't think it surprised anyone who knows Celia,' I said, 'but that isn't evidence.'

He beat his hand against his knee. 'What can I do? That's what I need you to tell me. All my life I've never done anything because of her. And that's what she expects now - that I won't do anything, and that she'll get away with it.' He stood up and stared at the door, then at me. 'But I can do something,' he whispered. 'Do you know what?'

I stood up facing him and shook my head. 'Whatever you're thinking, put it out of your mind,' I said.

'Don't confuse me,' he said. 'You know you can get away with murder if you're as clever as Celia. Don't you think I'm as clever as Celia?'

I held his shoulders. 'Don't talk like that, Charlie!'

He pulled away. His eyes were bright and his teeth showed behind his lips. 'What should I do?' he cried. 'Forget everything now Jessie is dead and buried? Sit here until Celia gets tired of being afraid of me and kills me too?'

'You haven't been out of this house since the inquest,' I said. 'It's about time you went out.'

'And have everybody laugh at me!' he said.

'Al Sharp said that some of your friends would be at his bar tonight, and he'd like to see you there,' I said. 'That's my advice - for whatever it's worth.'

'It's not worth anything,' said Celia. The door had opened and she stood there, her eyes narrowed against the light in the room. Charlie turned towards her.

'I told you never to come into this room!' he said.

Her face remained calm. 'I'm not in it. I came to tell you that your dinner is ready.'

He took a threatening step towards her. 'Did you have your ear at the door long enough to hear everything I said?' he asked. 'Or shall I repeat it for you?'

'I heard an invitation to go drinking while this house is still in mourning,' she said, 'and I object to that.'

He looked at her, amazed. 'Celia, tell me you don't mean that! Only the blackest hypocrite alive or someone mad could say what you've just said, and mean it.'

'Mad!' she cried. 'You dare use that word? Locked in your room, talking to yourself.' She turned to me suddenly. 'You've talked to him. Is it possible-?'

'He's as sane as you, Celia,' I said.

'Then he knows he shouldn't drink in bars at a time like this. How could you ask him to do it?'

'If you weren't preparing to throw out Jessie's things, Celia,' I said, 'I would take that question seriously.' It was a dangerous thing to say, and I immediately regretted it. Before I could move, Charlie was past me and was holding Celia's arms tightly.

'Did you dare go into her room?' he shouted, shaking her. And getting an immediate answer from her face, he dropped her arms as if they were red hot, and stood there with his head down. 'Where are her things?'

'By the stairs, Charlie. Everything is there.'

He walked out of the room, and Celia turned to look at me. There was such terrible hatred in her face that I desperately wanted to get out of that house. I took my things from the bed, but she stood in front of the door.

'Do you see what you've done?' she said in a rough whisper. 'Now I will have to pack them all again - just because of you. You old fool! It should have been you with her when I-'

I dropped my stick sharply on her shoulder. 'As your lawyer, Celia,' I said, 'I advise you to speak only during your sleep, when you can't be made responsible for what you say.'

She said no more, but I made sure she stayed safely in front of me until I was out in the street again.

It was only a few minutes walk to Al Sharp's bar, and I was grateful for the clear winter air in my face. Al was alone behind the bar, polishing glasses.

'Merry Christmas,' he said, and put a comfortable-looking bottle and two glasses on the bar. 'I was

expecting you.' Al poured two drinks. We drank, and he leaned across the bar. 'Just come from there?'

'Yes,' I said.

'See Charlie?'

'And Celia,' I said.

'I've seen her too when she goes by to do some shopping,' he said. 'Runs along with her head down, as if she's being chased by something. And I guess she is.'

'I guess she is, too,' I said.

'Did you tell Charlie I'd like to see him some time?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I told him!'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing. Celia said it Was wrong for him to come here while he was in mourning.'

Al whistled softly, and moved a finger in circles at his forehead in a silent, 'crazy!'. 'Tell me,' he said, 'do you think it's safe for them to be alone together? The way things are, the way Charlie feels, there could be more trouble there.'

'It looked like that for a while tonight,' I said. 'But then it calmed down.'

'Until the next time,' said Al.

'I'll be there,' I said.

Al looked at me and shook his head. 'Nothing changes in that house,' he said. 'That's how you can work out all the answers. That's how I knew you'd be standing here now talking to me about it.'



I could still smell the dampness of the house, and I knew it would take days to get it out of my clothes.

'This is one day I'd like to take out of the year permanently,' I said.

'And leave them alone with their problems,' agreed Al.

'They're not alone,' I said. 'Jessie is with them. Jessie will always be with them until that house and everything in it is gone.'

Al frowned.

'It's the strangest thing that ever happened in this town. The house all black, her running through the streets like something hunted, him lying there in that room with only the walls to look at, for -how long? When was it Jessie had that fall?'

By moving my eyes a little I could see my face in the mirror behind Al: red, deeply lined, a little amazed. 'Twenty years,' I heard myself saying. 'Just twenty years ago tonight.'