

THE BROWNSTONE HOUSE

by Rae Foley

A RED BADGE NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

Dodd, Mead & Company • New York

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Also by Rae Foley

ONE O'CLOCK AT THE GOTHAM
RECKLESS LADY
TRUST A WOMAN?
THE FIRST MRS. WINSTON
SLEEP WITHOUT MORNING
OMINOUS STAR
THIS WOMAN WANTED
A CALCULATED RISK
GIRL ON A HIGH WIRE
NO HIDING PLACE
NIGHTMARE HOUSE
MALICE DOMESTIC
THE SHELTON CONSPIRACY
FEAR OF A STRANGER
SCARED TO DEATH
WILD NIGHT
CALL IT ACCIDENT
SUFFER A WITCH
FATAL LADY
REPENT AT LEISURE
BACK DOOR TO DEATH
IT'S MURDER, MR. POTTER
DANGEROUS TO ME
WHERE IS MARY BOSTWICK?
RUN FOR YOUR LIFE
THE LAST GAMBLE
DEATH AND MR. POTTER
DARK INTENT
THE MAN IN THE SHADOW
WAKE THE SLEEPING WOLF
AN APE IN VELVET
THE HUNDREDTH DOOR
BONES OF CONTENTION

*For Jane and Mildred
With warm affection*

Prologue

On a day in July, shortly before the opening of the nominating convention in which he was the leading candidate for the Presidency, as well as the most popular and highly regarded of the younger leaders to emerge in the country, Graham Woods died in his election headquarters with a bullet in his brain.

There was no question about his death. It was suicide. His prints were found on the gun that lay on the floor beside his limp hand. There were two notes on the desk at which he had been sitting. One of them was addressed to his wife and its contents were never disclosed. Their mutual devotion had been well known. After the police had finished with the body and she had attended the funeral service—alone, by request—she walked into the river that wound past his country estate and drowned.

The second letter was addressed to the police and was given full play:

I am taking my life because—call it pride or vanity or shame or despair—I cannot face the exposure with which I am threatened, and which, in any case, would destroy my effectiveness as a leader of the people. Once in my life I made a bad mistake, due to youth and inexperience. This action has now been unearthed and fully documented and will be used against me if I let my name stand as a candidate for the Presidency. This is the work of men who have found it profitable to

destroy my credibility and my value as a trustworthy public servant.

This country is weary of dishonesty on the part of its public servants, whether those whom they have elected or those who work behind the scenes; weary of lies and treachery; weary of chicanery and evasion of the truth. God knows it deserves something better. I believe with all my heart that, in spite of my past error, or perhaps even because of it, I would have been a useful President, with the best interests of the people at heart, but the men who have attacked me are not interested in the integrity of their public officials, only in their willingness to serve private interests.

My beloved wife knows nothing of my past transaction. She has always believed in me. Spare her as much as you can.

The shot that killed Graham Woods may not have been heard round the world but, like a pebble in a still pool, it caused ripples that spread and spread, not only leaving the public stunned and shocked but affecting the lives of a number of individuals. It led, directly or indirectly, to three deaths and, for one, the living death of a life sentence in a penitentiary. It led to the revelation of an organization so corrupt and so widespread that its eventual exposure and the resultant collapse of the whole rotten structure raised a dust like the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima.

It led to the involvement of innocent people who had never exchanged a word with Graham Woods but who, to their own bewilderment, found themselves caught up in the chain reaction that followed his suicide.

It even involved me in a painful and humiliating scandal, repercussions of which I still feel occasionally when someone looks at me on the street, laughs, and says, "Did anyone ever tell you that you resemble the model who was found naked in a bathtub?"

Chapter 1

People don't really change. Not fundamentally. When they surprise us, it is because we failed to recognize their potentialities. The most terrible statement I know is that what happens to us is like us, that we shape our characters and our destinies by the choices we make.

It was when I entered college that I became a part, almost unwittingly, of what Hope Phelps called "The Inseparables." How it came about, I did not know. The three of us were unlike in every possible way: in appearance, in character, in background, in potential future.

Even then Winifred Winston was too stout, too anxious to assure herself that she was getting her fair share out of life. Even then she revealed an almost obsessive curiosity about her fellowmen. Nothing was too trivial to escape her attention, that tireless prying until every detail had been revealed and explained. Even then she ended most of her statements with an "Isn't it?" that demanded an answer.

Even then Hope Phelps was small and blond and very pretty in a delicate way. Some quality about her made an irresistible appeal to sympathy and one wanted instinctively to protect her, though under her gentleness and her softness there was a vein of iron. Where Winnie looked at life with insatiable curiosity, Hope regarded it with a kind of ironic

detachment that sat oddly on her slight shoulders. Even then she betrayed a kind of innate insecurity. She clung to her friends. It was she who had created the bond, or whatever it was, among the three of us, shaping us into a close-knit group.

Hope had a background of money and, through her father, a wide acquaintance with distinguished people. She had the protection of wealth and an assured future, not only because of her father's position but because of Hart Adams, her father's assistant or secretary, or whatever he was, who was her devoted escort and whom, in time, she would marry. It was Hart who escorted her to dances at college or, when in New York, to theaters and night clubs. It was Hart who kept her room filled with flowers and who remembered holidays, not just Christmas and birthdays, but Columbus Day and Halloween and even Veterans Day. Anything was an excuse for Hart to reveal his unshakable devotion.

Hope received all this lavish homage with her usual gentle irony, but she was so accustomed to it that none of us who knew her well believed she could endure having it withdrawn.

Winnie was constantly trying to find out just how serious Hart's devotion was and whether Hope would marry him. As usual, when she wished to probe a situation, her questions were interminable, with a maddening sort of insistence that was completely impervious to rebuff.

Only once did Hope's patience snap under that constant prod, prod, prod that was Winnie's idea of conversation. "Did you ever hear that curiosity killed the cat?"

Winnie looked at her in wide-eyed surprise, taken aback by the sharpness in the usually gentle voice. "Well, I just like to know. Don't you? That's natural, isn't it?"

"I don't," Hope said dryly, "carry it to the point of listening to other people's phone calls or reading any stray letters one happens to leave lying around."

"Well, I'm sure I didn't think the letter was private or you wouldn't have left it right out on your desk."

I choked and Hope flicked a quick, amused glance at me.

"And as for that telephone call—honestly, you were talking so loud I couldn't have helped hearing unless I'd gone right out of the room."

"People have been known to do that," Hope informed her, "when someone is having a private conversation."

"I must say I don't see why if there's nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of, I mean. And I knew, from the way you spoke, it was your father, so it couldn't be private. Well, could it? So naturally I was interested because he's really an important man. Everyone says so. But why they call him the Gray Eminence I never could find out. His hair is dark, no silver threads."

"Silver threads," Hope said, and she began to laugh.

Winnie was being educated by two uncles who were more dutiful than affectionate and who had made clear to her that after her graduation she was to be on her own and to expect no further assistance from them.

I had an excellent scholarship and a generous check given me by a wealthy and rather silly woman who had bought a portrait I had done of her daughter. As I recall now, it was not a very good painting, though it was the best work I had done up to then. At least it was a faithful likeness and, as the girl died shortly after I had finished it, her mother valued it more highly than it deserved. But even a generous check cannot last forever, and I too was to be on my own when I graduated. It did not occur to me to fear the future. I was

young and eager and confident that the world was my oyster. Never having suffered any serious rebuff or disappointment up to that time, this was understandable enough.

Hope never referred to the tremendous difference in our circumstances, but when we visited her father's huge Fifth Avenue apartment, an eighteen-room duplex, her background was necessarily impressed on us. Her father, Marshall Phelps, was an impressive-looking man, tall, well-built, with a fine speaking voice and attractive manners. Like Hope he seemed to take genuine pleasure in making Winnie and me feel at home. He behaved as though it were Hope and not we who should be grateful for our friendship.

We saw more of him during those four long Christmas vacations than might be expected, because he conducted his business, whatever it was, from the huge library on the first floor of the duplex. This, like the rest of the apartment, was impressive in its size and luxury but, unlike the rest, it had a separate entrance to the outside corridor, opening directly on the elevator. People came and went through that door and were not seen in the rest of the apartment. One got the kind of impression that I suppose one has on entering the White House, that great matters were being resolved in that library *cum* office.

When Mr. Phelps appeared among us, he was always affable and he took pains to see that we enjoyed our vacation and seemed eager to oblige us in any possible way. He watched complacently Hart's attentions to his daughter and it was obvious that he approved of them.

Hart never seemed to take his eyes off Hope. He was an attractive young man, the kind who, a couple of generations ago, would have gone from his college football team to selling bonds to his prosperous friends. An early friendship be-

tween his father and Mr. Phelps had led the latter to offer him a job, and he had soon become a trusted assistant. Whatever devotion Hart had left from Hope he expended on her father.

On the last Christmas that Winnie and Hope and I spent together, Marshall Phelps gave his daughter an unusual Christmas present—a run-down old brownstone house in the mid-Fifties on the fashionable West Side.

When he saw that she was more surprised than elated, he smiled. "I don't expect you to live in it; I trust that you will live here as long as I am around. But I know what is going on. Practically that whole block has been sold and a thirty-story building is to be erected. This house is the only holdout and as it is in the very middle of the block, it is extremely important. Don't sell it now, Hope. Keep it for two years and you'll get your own price."

"What shall I do with it? Rent it?"

"The cost of necessary repairs and decoration would make that impractical. No, let it stand as it is. Believe me, it will prove to be more valuable than you know." And he laughed.

That was the last Christmas, as I have said, that Winnie and Hope and I had spent in the Fifth Avenue apartment, and even by then our friendship was becoming a trifle frayed, though none of us seemed to be aware of it. During our last college year we had all enrolled for an art seminar conducted by Lawrence Garland, one of the most popular young instructors on the faculty.

I'd seen him on the campus, of course, walking with his long, swift strides, apparently unaware of the admiring and wistful glances cast at him by his students. I say *apparently* because he must, in his thirty years, have become aware that he had a quality that made him attractive to women, though

he wasn't particularly good-looking, a big and rangy man with a slightly crooked nose and a delightful smile.

At that time he was, in an unstressed way, mildly pleased with himself and his world. He gave the impression of being superbly confident that he could cope with any situation that might arise. A saving grace was his nice sense of humor, an ability to laugh at himself, and a deprecating manner that was very winning when he caught himself being pontifical, a trap into which even the best of lecturers are bound to fall from time to time.

Where the women students were concerned, he had developed a policy of noninvolvement. He was careful to display no personal interest in them; he always managed to wedge himself into a table filled with faculty members in the cafeteria; and he went striding through the campus, looking neither to right nor to left.

It was not, however, Lawrence Garland's legendary charm that attracted me to the seminar. I was an art student, studying to become an illustrator. Actually I was the only serious art student in the seminar, the others being equally divided between those with a desire for culture and those with a desire to meet the young instructor.

Winnie signed up for the course because she was hell-bent on getting the most out of her college education, and that included a heavy dose of culture. No man ever had a more tractable pupil. She admired what he admired, she sneered at what he disliked. She studied each painting with painstaking care but without delight, accepting or rejecting in accordance with the dictates of the master.

Why Hope was taking the course, she did not say. Hope did not often explain herself. Whether, even then, she was attracted to Lawrence Garland I do not know. She seemed to

view the paintings as she did her fellowmen—with ironic detachment.

I suppose it was inevitable that all three of us should fall in love with Lawrence Garland. As this was par for the course I did not, for a moment, dream that anything serious could come of the situation. He was an inevitable part of our education.

My first meeting with him outside the classroom was a head-on collision when we were caught in a sudden, torrential rainstorm and ran into each other as both of us were trying to seek the shelter of a narrow doorway. After I had pulled my face out of his coat and he had steadied me, we laughed and then he held the door open for me. We found ourselves in a little Italian restaurant with steam rising from kettles of boiling spaghetti and from our wet clothing. There were only a dozen tables in the little family-run business. As the storm showed no indication of letting up and we couldn't go on standing there, dripping on the floor, he suggested, "It's a bit early to eat, but we might as well stay here, don't you think? Anyhow, the food is good and ample and cheap, which is a consideration."

He didn't wait for my consent but selected a table and ordered for both of us, including a bottle of red wine. His manner was a shade dictatorial for my taste, but he did not seem to be aware of it. He was, I thought, so accustomed to having his own way that he took it for granted, and though this annoyed me, I was in no position to cavil, not only because I could not go out in the rain without being soaked to the skin but because I lacked the confidence that comes with knowing one looks one's best. I definitely did not. My hair hung in wet strands over my forehead and dripped down the back of my neck. My dress began to shrink as soon as it got wet and

clung more and more revealingly to my body. My shoes oozed wetness. I couldn't have looked worse, which put me at a disadvantage.

While the papa set breadsticks and a carafe of red wine on the table, his daughter, with an admiring look at Lawrence—what was it about the man?—put bowls of minestrone before us, and the son, busy stirring the spaghetti, gave us a beaming smile, while the mamma, her watchful eye on chickens revolving on the rotisserie, seemed to join in the general aura of welcome that surrounded us.

"You're Susan Lockwood."

I nodded, taken aback that Dr. Garland had remembered me.

"You're the only one in that seminar who knows what I am talking about—or cares really. You're studying art, aren't you? Well, actually, I know you are. And very good, too, according to old Waldron. Developing a style of your own."

"I want to be an illustrator," and I gave him a half-defiant look. "Commercial art, of course."

"Well," he said mildly, "it's nice to be able to eat regularly and it needn't preclude doing other work, need it?"

"I'll never be first-rate as a painter; I haven't anything beyond a certain facility."

"That's not what Waldron said. A good eye and a style of your own."

"Slick," I said gloomily.

He grinned. "In spite of all the efforts of all the critics people still prefer to recognize what's in a painting. Stupid of them, no doubt, but there it is."

With the exception of another couple taking refuge, like us, from the storm, and a large family party well known to the management and welcomed vociferously, we had the

place to ourselves. The rain continued to fall in buckets, the streets were wet and windswept, with the gutters already overflowing into treacherous pools at street crossings, so we lingered on. Lawrence ordered brandy with our coffee and we sat talking idly, looking now and then at the table with the Italians, who seemed more vividly alive than other people, enjoying themselves immensely.

It was all so easy and natural that I forgot how awful I must look, though I knew that when my hair dried it curled up as tightly as Topsy's unless firmly controlled, and that thrice-accursed dress—Hope had warned me that it was poor economy to buy cheap material—was shrinking by the minute. Just my luck that we were in a brightly lighted restaurant so that every line of my body was revealed almost as clearly as though I had worn no dress at all. Lawrence did not observe this phenomenon, which relieved me. At least it should have.

He told me that he liked teaching; there was nothing he would rather do.

“Except paint?”

“I do some work on the side, big stuff mostly, murals. Don't ask my why. I don't know. I seem to need a lot of space in which to say anything.”

“But there's so little market for murals!”

“Which is why it's a damned good thing I like teaching. This is your last year, isn't it? Why did you bother with the seminar? You must know most of that stuff. We hold it chiefly for people who want an easy course or want to be taught what to say about art. Not think, you understand. Just say.”

I laughed. “Like Winnie Winston?”

“Is she the stout little number with an echo instead of a

voice? And that infuriating way of following up every comment with 'Isn't it?' So damned insistent."

"Poor Winnie! How unkind of you to make fun of your most docile pupil."

"Winnie the Pooh. Don't worry about her. She'll always come out, one way or another."

As I raised inquiring eyebrows, he said lightly, "Our Winnie the Pooh has some very unengaging traits. Looks at other people's notes. Picks up letters. Pawed over some papers on my desk the other afternoon after the seminar. I went back to collect my notes and there was our Winnie looking at everything in sight."

"Oh, dear! But she doesn't mean any harm, you know. She simply has an overwhelming sense of curiosity."

"If she doesn't learn to curb it, she is going to find herself in trouble one of these days." He sounded unexpectedly tart.

"But she's harmless."

"Why you should be defending the indefensible, I can't imagine. She's hardly your type."

"Actually we are very good friends."

"I can't figure out why."

Neither had I until then. I realized now for the first time that it was Hope who had drawn us both into her orbit. "I hardly know," I admitted, "but somehow the three of us, Winnie and Hope and I—"

"Hope?"

"She's in the seminar too. Hope Phelps. A pretty girl with blond hair."

"Oh, the lass with the delicate air."

"Well, yes. The three of us usually sit together."

"I hadn't noticed her especially. It's a big group. Too big."