

thought—"the site empty, I could sell the lot for an apartment building if I could get it rezoned, and I probably could." He grinned at me; everybody likes Doug Blaisdel; he insists on it. "But don't worry," he said. "I didn't start the fire. If I had, I'd have done a better job."

He glanced up at the blackened strip of wall again, then down at the ground around us, and I looked, too. We were standing on what had been the old graveled carriage drive, though the white gravel had long since washed away and it was just dirt now; it was trampled and soggy.

"Somebody put the fire out," Doug said, nodding at the damp ground, "but I can't find out who. Wasn't the fire department; they never got a call and don't know a thing about it. Neither do any of the neighbors. Nobody seems to have seen it."

"I heard the fire bell," one of the kids said. "It woke me up, but then I fell asleep again."

"You did not! You're crazy! You were dreamin'!" another boy answered, and they began wrestling, not serious but laughing.

Doug turned toward the street. "Well, back to work!" he said brightly. "See you around, Oscar. You going to put this in the paper?"

I glanced up at the house again and shrugged. "I don't know; not much of a story. We'll see."

The kids left, too, chasing each other through the weeds, horsing around, no longer interested; but I stood in the old driveway beside the house for a few moments longer. Old Man Nordstrum, as he's been called since he was thirty, I guess, lived in the house next door; and whoever had put

this fire out, he'd heard it and seen it, maybe done it himself, no matter what he'd told Doug Blaisdel. I looked over suddenly at the side windows of his place, and he was standing watching me. When he saw that I'd seen him, he grinned. Doug was in his car now, the motor started; he flicked a hand at me, then glanced over his shoulder at the street, and pulled out. Smiling a little, I beckoned Nordstrum to come out.

He came out his front door, buttoning an old tan-and-brown sweater, walked to his front gate, then turned into the old Pollard driveway toward me. He's about seventy-one, a retired lawyer with a reputation for grouchiness. But it's less grouchiness, I think, than a simple unwillingness to put up with anyone who doesn't interest him. He's rich, one of the best lawyers in the state; he's bald and has a lined face with smart brown eyes; a shrewd man.

"Doug Blaisdel tells me you didn't see the fire last night," I said as he walked toward me.

Nordstrum shook his head. "Blaisdel is inaccurate, as usual; that's only what I told him. I saw it; of course I saw it. How could I sleep through a fire right outside my bedroom window?"

"Why didn't you tell Doug about it, Mr. Nordstrum?"

"Because he's a fool. Has it all figured out what he's going to believe for the rest of his life; it takes a fool to do that. But I don't think you're a fool, Oscar, not that kind, so I'll tell you; glad to tell somebody. What wakened me—this was just at three-fourteen this morning; I looked at my luminous alarm clock—was a sound." Eyes narrowing, choosing his words carefully, he said, "It was a combined sound