



Susan Perry, a young real estate agent, turned onto a wide street lined with newly planted trees. “This new subdivision has some very fine homes in your price range, Mr. Johnson,” she said. “I think you’ll like what you see.”

“Please, just call me Devin,” her passenger said shyly.

“Certainly. Then Devin it is. And I’m Susan,” she said.

Devin tried to hide it, but he was uncomfortable. He hated being around people he didn’t know well. Only solitude suited him—until he’d met his wife Sarita. For the first time in his life, he no longer wanted

to be alone. He wished his young bride was with him now, but she hadn't been feeling well. They had both agreed that Devin should go ahead and at least get things rolling with the real estate agent. He hadn't intended to actually look at any houses today—just meet with the agent. But Susan had convinced him to go out with her just to “get the lay of the land.”

Now Susan pulled up in front of a two-story house—so new that it hadn't even been painted.

“This is a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath model,” she said. “There's lots of room for your future family—and yard space for pets, if you want.”

Devin wasn't listening. He was staring at the big old house on the hilltop overlooking the town. The rambling Victorian stood alone—no other house was close by.

“*That* house—” Devin said, pointing toward the hilltop. “I'd like to take a look at that one.”

Susan blinked in surprise. “But—I don't

think it's available," she said.

"It won't hurt to look. I'd like to drive up there, please," Devin said.

"Why don't you just check out this new place while we're here?" Susan suggested. But her new client was already climbing back in the car.

When they reached the house on the hill, they saw a young man and woman loading a chair into a rental truck. Devin was out of the car before Susan turned off the engine. After introducing himself to Ed and Clara Baines, he asked if the house was theirs.

"No. It was my sister's," the woman said. Her face was grim.

"Is it possibly for sale?" Devin asked.

"Oh, goodness," said the woman. "We haven't even thought—"

"Yes it is," the man interrupted, putting his hand on the woman's arm. "May I look inside?" Devin responded.

The man seemed hesitant. "We—uh—haven't cleaned up yet," he said.

The woman's lips trembled. "My sister

and her children were *murdered* here,” she said in a shaky voice.

Devin didn’t react at all to this startling news. He turned away from the woman’s tight face and crossed the porch. When he stepped through the doorway, he felt something like a hot wind rush through him. To stay on his feet, he had to grab hold of the doorknob.

“Are you all right?” Susan asked.

But the strange feeling had passed, and Devin didn’t answer. He eagerly hurried down the dim hallway and started walking from room to room, as if he knew the place. In the living room, the others in the group stood waiting for him by the big bay window. Susan was trying not to stare at the great dark stains on the carpet.

Finally, Devin rushed up to them. “I’ll take it!” he said, his voice tight with excitement.

“Well, if you’re really serious,” Mr. Baines said, “I guess we could have the place ready in a month or two.”