

THREE'S A FAMILY  
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just a happy coincidence, resulting in frequent visits from Melissa.

Two or three times a week the child came trotting down the road to "see Aunt Emma." But somehow she managed to spend most of her visiting time with him, helping him mow the lawn or take leaves or just discussing with him the solemn problems of her seven-year-old world. He and she were pals, no doubt of it.

Now as he braked his car at Ruth's door, his heart was furiously pounding. Not that there was anything between himself and the child's widowed mother. There couldn't be. He had been burned too badly before. But Ruth was Lissa's mother. Nothing must happen to her!

He saw her at once as he came through the door. She lay on her back at the foot of the long, carpeted staircase. In her blue pajamas she looked too young to be the mother of a seven-year-old.

With a sudden lengthening of stride Barry reached her before Lissa did, and dropped to one knee beside her. But she was not unconscious now. Her dark eyes searched his face and she smiled faintly in recognition. "Hi," she whispered.

"Hi, yourself?" He touched her hand. "Where are you hurt?"

"My head. He hit me with his flashlight."

"Hit you? Who hit you? Lissa said you fell on the stairs!"

"Uh-uh." She tried to shake her head, but the effort made her wince. "I heard someone moving around down here and came down to— to investigate. There were two of them. Teen-agers. Young, anyway."

Gently probing her short, dark hair, Barry's fingers found a swelling. She winced again. "Doc's on his way here," he told her then. "I don't think we'd better move you. Lissa, do you think you could find a blanket to cover your mother?"

"Get the afghan on the sofa, honey."

Lissa ran and got the afghan and Barry tucked it around Ruth. He shifted himself into a sitting position beside her on the floor, and then, not knowing what else to do, he took her hand and held it. After all, she worked with him and her daughter was a pal of his. And anyway, she probably knew all about him from the piece in *Newsbeat Magazine*, which had contained all the painful details of his ill-fated romance. He could hold her hand and she would know he meant nothing by it.

Barry was still holding her hand when Doc Creighton arrived, followed by the ambulance. While Doc examined his patient, Barry tried to call the police, but the phone was still out of order.

"Going to take her to hospital for tests," Doc announced in his gravelly voice when Barry returned from the phone. A huge, shaggy bear of a man, he had been the town's doctor for years, and no Edgeland citizen ever dreamed of disputing his decisions. "You taking Melissa home with you?"

Barry had to blink. "Me?"

"Well, she can't stay here alone, and Ruth's aunt lives with you. Of course, if you're allergic to small girl-children—"

"No, no. Of course she can stay with me."

"It may be a few days."

"Now wait, both of you," Ruth protested. "I'm sure if you'll call Doc Walker or Peggy Hall, Lissa can stay with one of them." These were two of her fellow teachers at school. "I can't be for more than a night or two."

"Could be longer," Doc growled. "Depends on what shows up."

"I'd rather stay with the doctor," Lissa said.

"Well, fine. That's settled." Doc dismissed the problem with a flip of his hand and nodded to the two men who had come with the ambulance. Before Barry really knew what was happening, Ruth was gone and he was alone with her daughter.

It was quarter to six by the grandfather clock in the Andrews' hall; daylight outside and still raining. Barry

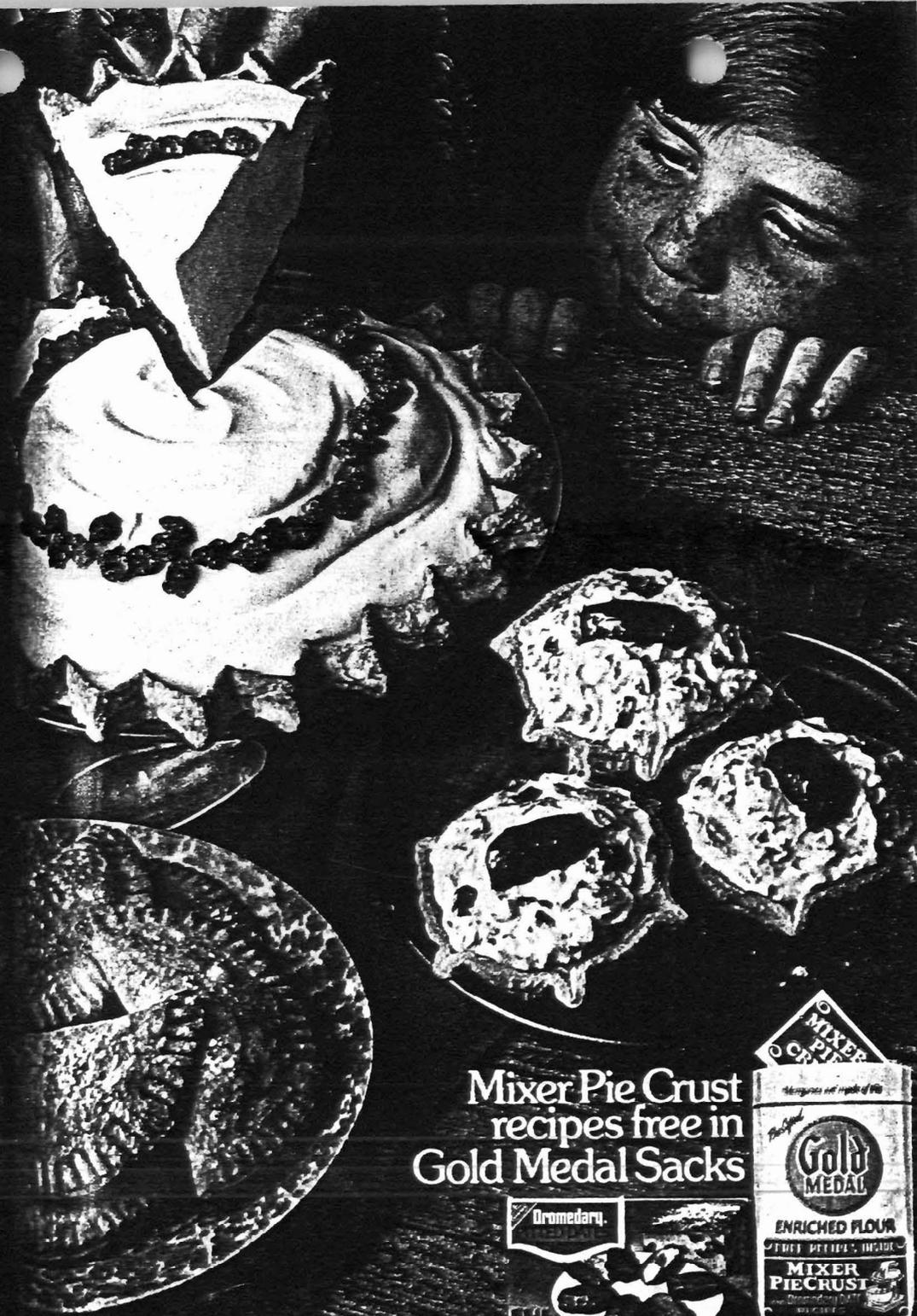
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