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School of Humanities and Sciences
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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by John Wentworth Chapin entitled *The Pursuit of Happiness* has been approved by his committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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The Pursuit of Happiness

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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This is for Bambi, because everything I do is.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	29
Chapter 4	37
Chapter 5	45
Chapter 6	54
Chapter 7	69
Chapter 8	76
Chapter 9	98
Chapter 10	107
Chapter 11	122
Chapter 12	132
Chapter 13	150
Chapter 14	165
Chapter 15	180
Chapter 16	198
Chapter 17	214
Chapter 18	226
Chapter 19	240
Chapter 20	260

Chapter 21	272
Chapter 22	283
Chapter 23	302
Chapter 24	308
Chapter 25	326
Chapter 26	338
Chapter 27	352
Chapter 28	363
Chapter 29	370
Chapter 30	388
Chapter 31	401
Chapter 32	415
Chapter 33	428
Chapter 34	438
Chapter 35	445
Chapter 36	456

Chapter 1

Elaine started developing the idea for the Farm at her older brother George's funeral. George drowned while white-water rafting in Colorado. According to the rafting guide and George's business associates (he had gone west on a corporate trust- and teamwork-building retreat weekend, Fresh Perspectives), George shot out of the raft into a water chute, was sucked under for a couple of minutes, and had shattered his skull and neck on a big rock when they found him. He felt no pain, they assured his parents and other relatives. I never met him.

When her mother called from Boston to give Elaine the news, we were on the balcony of our two-bedroom apartment spraying the fourth and final polyurethane coat on an 8'x6' panel of posterboard. It was our graffiti wall, Elaine's idea, a big white blank space for us to deface or decorate as we saw fit. She got the idea at Uncle Buddy's, the bar where we met and used to work, after they let her decorate the chalk board of specials with these insane drawings of bees and crickets. She wanted to do the same with our living room, in paint. Our landlord, Mr. Vereker, nixed our proposal to repaint the apartment. "The lease," he had said, twirling his mustache. He said that a lot. "No crazy paint, no dogs, no loud music." Crazy is pretty darn subjective; we just wanted to add some color, really.

Elaine said, "Thank you for your compassion. We'll keep this in mind when it comes time to renew the lease." We had already moved three times in the three years since college.

So Elaine came up with the graffiti wall. She'd already gotten some spray cans of chalk paint and a box of fat water color markers in shades they didn't have when I was a kid. I was smoking a cigarette and exhaling away from the graffiti wall while Elaine picked hairs and dirt out of the finish with tweezers. She wanted to make certain that there was a smooth coat for our art work. The chemical smell was almost dizzying, even on the balcony in the cool September evening air, and I was glad that Elaine had insisted that we do the spraying outside. I wondered if I was drawing any toxins into my lungs from standing too close to the drying polyurethane. At least tobacco is *grown*.

"I don't see anything else to pick off," Elaine said, pacing in front of the board and tilting her head to catch the light at different angles. A slightly chilly wind flung Elaine's blackish red hair to the side, almost perpendicular to her shoulders. Her hair made it look like she was falling sideways, or like motion lines in a cartoon drawing. The wind also blew some grit and unidentifiable stuff into the sticky polyurethane. Elaine groaned and dropped the tweezers onto the single white resin chair on the balcony. "Oh well. I guess we'll be going with a textured medium."

"Mmm, yah," I said, imitating Elaine's German boss. "Gritty. Raw vurk. Vitt our thumbs on ze pulse of urban America, I tink."

"Yes, Siegfried," she said. My name's Luke. "But you're sounding a little francophone."

"Can it, liebchen. Your noise, she distracts me." I pulled on my cigarette and blew it in the direction of the posterboard.

"Now it's going to smell," Elaine said.

"So much ze grittier," I said.

"I hope this thing dries soon. I'm itching to get some color into that living room. I want to paint a big yellow sun and an apple tree first." Elaine had Paul Klee prints all

over her room.

"I want to paint a masterpiece. People will come from miles around to marvel at my wurk."

"You may wish to learn to draw first, Siegfried," she said.

"Ach, fraulein. You doubt ze master." I couldn't draw at all. My pen and ink usage was pretty limited to writing and my job copy-editing tax law documents at Kushman, Kushman & Walters.

"And I want to paint a house and a big brown dog."

The phone rang and Elaine got it, because few of the phone calls to our apartment are for me. I stayed on the balcony but became concerned when I noticed Elaine slump into a chair by the card table in the kitchen. Her back was to me, but I knew it was bad news. I sat quietly on the balcony and waited for her to get off the phone. She hung it up and then sat at our card table with her face resting propped in her right hand.

"What's wrong?" I asked, coming through the door. Elaine didn't answer, and that really worried me. I walked around the table so I could see her face, blank, numb, and devastated. "What is it," I said.

"My brother George died," she whispered, not looking at me.

"Oh my God, Elaine, I am so sorry," I said. I leaned down and hugged her, and she didn't respond. I'm awful in situations like that. She wasn't crying yet.

"I can't believe it," she said.

"What happened," I asked and immediately wished that I hadn't.

"He drowned." She told me the story, quietly and calmly. I was impressed with her control, but it also scared me. Weren't you supposed to cry? I tried to remember the twelve steps of grief, or however many it was that they had told us about in high school when this guy I never knew was killed in a car accident, but I couldn't remember. It

wouldn't have helped anyway, but I wanted to do something to help. I just sat there and hugged her.

Elaine pulled back and looked at me, her hair fallen over her face. "My dad always teased George about being a weak swimmer. Said he couldn't even do deadman's float." She didn't mean it as a joke. Then she started crying, hard, wailing really, and I hugged her again, and we stayed like that for twenty minutes.

* * * * *

What could I say to her? I thought she might ask me to go the funeral with her. We pretty much did everything together. It flattered me to think that she wanted me around, but she called for train reservations and only made one, leaving that night for New York and getting to Boston early the next morning. I was eager to meet her family and to be with her. I had spoken to her mother on the phone before when she called our apartment, but I'd never met any of Elaine's relatives. I was curious. Elaine packed her bags behind the closed door to her bedroom, and it felt intrusive doing anything more than mooning around the hallway, waiting for her to come out and possibly cry on my shoulder. It was awful, waiting like that.

That was just one point in a history full of similar incidents when I wanted to endear myself to Elaine. Getting some acknowledgement from her that I mattered, that I was more than just a convenient roommate, weighed heavily on me. It was probably overkill. To an outside observer, Elaine and I did everything together—lived together, ate together, talked constantly, went out drinking. People assumed that we were also sleeping together, but we had never done anything more than brush our teeth at the same time in our little bathroom. It wasn't that I really wanted to sleep with her, either. That desire, while still there (on my part at least), was long since suppressed. I wanted some kind of formal acknowledgement that I was more than a friend, that our relationship

transcended amiability. I worried about it too much, but it wasn't something I could talk about to Elaine. And I was too jealous of her other friendships to have that conversation with any of them. I didn't have many friends of my own, at least not good friends. My mother assumed that we were a couple because of our living situation, so I couldn't talk to her, not that I would have done so anyway. I was more interested in keeping my mother out of my life than cluing her in deeper.

I stood outside Elaine's door eating an apple, nibbling the crunchy flesh absurdly close to the core while I waited. I had a half-empty bag of Granny Smiths in the kitchen, but I wasn't hungry. I gnawed the core down to stem, seeds, and corolla without breaking the skeleton in half. People usually eat about two-thirds of an apple. They leave this enormous core with perfectly edible apple all over it, when the only inedibly bitter part of the core is the seed hull and the cord of little apple-strings running from top to bottom. That is how I spend time waiting. Minutia. I try not to let it run over into the rest of my life. If I'd only known how sick I was going to be of apples.

Elaine darted out of her room and bumped into me in the hall, her head down low on the way to the bathroom. She mumbled an apology to me, and then I heard her rattling around the medicine cabinet. I needed to say something to her. The sympathetic eyebrows and mouth that I had flashed her before she disappeared into her room were just not enough for someone who wanted to be superfriend and confidante supreme. I chipped away the flange of green skin sticking to the apple stem base and tried to imagine what it would be like to have a brother, or even a sister, especially a dead one. I was an only child, and I'd never wanted a sibling, except for an identical twin. I had a hypothetical identical twin named Oscar when I was little, someone to be punished when I was caught bouncing on my parents bed or getting into my dad's desk, someone who I could complain to about my parents, someone to go to school for me when I just wasn't up to

it. I didn't imagine Oscar, think that he was my invisible friend or anything. I just wondered about him, about what he could do for me in certain situations. If Oscar died . . . well, he really couldn't, because I'd never imagined him as anything more than my scapegoat. If I died, however . . . Oscar would assume my identity and make sure that the rent got paid on time that month. So thinking about Oscar was no help in trying to figure out what it would be like to lose a brother. And it didn't seem the same to wonder what it would be like to have one of my parents die. Parents and siblings seem to be in completely different leagues.

Elaine walked out of the bathroom with toothpaste and deodorant in the crook of her arm. Her eyes didn't look red or puffy. They looked blank.

"Are you doing okay?" I asked her. It was a stupid question, but it was my only choice other than condolences.

Elaine stopped and smiled thinly at me. "I'm fine, Luke. Honest."

"I just wish there was something I could do."

"Thanks. Actually, there is. Can you take me to the train station around seven?"

"Sure, of course. Elaine, I am so sorry about your brother."

"I know. I am too." She then asked me for a few small favors like calling her work and feeding her parakeet Baloo. I told her that I'd be happy to. She was so calm about everything, after those first few minutes at the table; if she'd been screaming and crying, then I would at least have been able to take control of the situation. As it was, I was left empty handed. All I could think to tell her was that she should cry to get it out of her system, that she should go ahead and let go, that she should do something, anything, other than what she was doing. The only reason I would have told her those things is because that's what I've heard you're supposed to do. I'm glad I didn't. I couldn't have pulled it off anyway.

"What was George like?" I asked.

Elaine looked at me from hollow eyes. "Luke . . . I really can't talk right now."

"Okay."

"It's nothing personal. I just need to see to my parents and the rest of my family."

I nodded, though a little confused. Elaine seemed to like her family, but she wasn't ultra-reliant on them for anything. She'd go home for Christmas or Thanksgiving and come back with stories about how she wouldn't do it again the next year. But she always did.

* * * * *

Waiting at the Shifflettsburg train station, I told her that if she wanted to talk to someone, she could call me at any time. She said she knew that and then thanked me for being such a pal. She said I didn't have to wait around for the train, but I did anyway. Elaine was silent at the train station, and I spent most of an hour watching an old black lady jerk herself awake and hold her bags in close to her body. She was wearing a blue suit and a little black hat with tiny flowers on it. The suit was well worn, pulled tight at the seams around her waist, but she looked sharp in it. I imagined it was her best suit, her church clothes, and I assumed that she was mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother to a family that should have been there to watch her bags for her and let her rest, instead of deserting her to the community of her church, old ladies and gentlemen waiting for a better life elsewhere. I don't know why I am so envious of people who have something valid to complain about.

While I was thinking about this, Elaine leaned over to the old lady when she was awake for a moment. "I'll watch your bags for you so you can get some rest," Elaine said.

The woman smiled at her and said, "You don't have to do that."

"I'd like to," Elaine said.

"Well, God bless you, angel," she said, and she settled back into her bench, closing her eyes and putting her purse on the seat beside her.

I'd always been jealous of black faith, but belief like that was just not in me. *Faith* just seems like God saying pull my finger. My mother claimed we were Presbyterian, which means you believe you really should go to church but you're too busy. My parents dropped me off at Sunday School for two years straight starting in third grade. I went a couple of times, but all they had us do was make nativity scenes using a peanut for the baby Jesus or drop spare change and single dollars in a basket. I stopped going inside the church, and I wandered around for that hour looking in windows of stores closed by blue laws. There was nowhere to spend my dollar, so I learned how to save money. They never found out. My parents never went inside the church. Religion is one thing, they told me, but too much of it is just as bad as none at all. I guess they were afraid of being swept up in the glory of it, terrified of infusion by the Holy Ghost that would have them leaping in the aisles praising the Lord one moment, then depleting their life's savings and drinking cyanide-laced Kool Aid the next. I really don't think they were in any danger. When they die, they won't know the minister. When the lady in the blue suit dies, the whole congregation will be there mourning her passing and celebrating her life. Sometimes that almost seems worth going to church for.

The voice over the loudspeaker announced the boarding for Washington, Baltimore, and New York. Elaine got up from her seat and tapped the woman on the shoulder, asking her if this was her train. She nodded, and Elaine carried the woman's bags to the train while I followed with Elaine's bags. Elaine helped her onto the train and then came back out a minute later for her own things. I hugged her onto the train, a nice friendly hug that I initiated.

"I'm worried about you," I said.

"I'll be fine, Luke." Elaine sounded encouraging; she managed enough energy to convince me that she would be fine. I wanted to hug her again, but she obviously just wanted to get on that train and get lost in herself.

"Call me," I said, and Elaine nodded. She turned and walked toward her train, suitcase in one hand and garment bag in the other. I wondered if Elaine would sit near the old lady in the blue suit. She'd know what to say about George's death. The thought comforted me and made me wish I could just talk to people without that tug of fear that keeps me silent. I sat on a bench and watched the porters drift around the platform. Groans from the train, volume and speed increasing slowly, deafened me as the cars sped past faster and faster. I scanned the windows for a glimpse of Elaine, but the last car streaked by while I craned to look, and I didn't see her. While she was gone, I think that's when the Farm took shape in her mind. It was either George's death or the funeral itself that started the whole thing.

I went home and brought in the tweezers and the graffiti board. I put it up on the wall facing the couch, and I painted a big yellow sun glowing over a simple house with an apple tree and a brown dog, green grass spikes poking up as a bottom border.

* * * * *

My life story up to that point is not all that important to the story of the Farm and what happened there, but it helps me understand why I went along with it. Up until the time Elaine suggested it—rather, up until the time I realized what Elaine was doing, because she never actually suggested the whole thing as such—up until that time, my notion of a good idea was usually along the lines of figuring out driving short cuts or ways to re-use film containers.

Actually, I had this one great idea when I was in the second grade: I wanted to

run a hose through one of the upstairs windows and fill up the elementary school with water, basement to roof. Close all the windows and doors and crank the faucet on full blast overnight, and then in the morning we could all swim through our classrooms. Imagine all those desks and books trapped in a gauzy swirl of blue water, long hallways that you could swim through, hang a right and go into the cafeteria or media center, glide through the lunch line or past a film strip station. Or hang a left and go upstairs. What could be better than swimming up a flight of stairs? An educational aquarium. I knew there would be some kinks about getting in and out without spilling all the water, but I had it worked out. The skylights. As long as no one tried to open the front doors, the place would remain watertight. I wonder if I'd have been able to concentrate on my Language Arts when, with a simple dolphin kick, I could be floating over my desk and doing somersaults. And breathing wouldn't be a problem, because you'd just bring a milk jug full of air with you to school instead of milk money. Never need to come up for air. I dreamed of my water school privately, guessing uncomfortably that there were a few things that I wasn't taking into account. I never mentioned it to my parents. When I was in fourth grade, our neighbors' kitchen caught on fire, and when the firemen left, Mrs Klockman complained more about the water damage than the fire. I was glad I hadn't said anything about my idea out loud.

The school I wanted to experiment with was Bellarmine Elementary School, a two story open-space school in Atlanta, where I'm from. Actually it's Smyrna, but my mother always said to tell people we were from the Atlanta suburbs, because no one knew where Smyrna was. If they asked which suburb, I was to tell them Buckhead, because apparently, families like ours didn't live in godawful places like Smyrna. But we did, though. My father wasn't too adept with money or jobs. He was always trying to figure out how to tap into instantaneous wealth. His life's savings often disappeared into

vitamin-sales business start-up costs, or aluminum siding, or some such crap (although he did it with such frequency that I don't see how all those piles of money lost could have all been "life's savings," unless there was something they weren't telling me, which is wholly possible). My mother never bothered to align her spending with their income, and she steadfastly refused to work. Ladies, apparently, from families such as ours, simply do not work. This was the same mother who spoke accentless English in Atlanta/Smyrna, but when we went someplace else, her handy southern accent got thicker in direct proportion to our distance from home, especially if we were up north. Ah rally couldn't tell you who exactly mah mutha was, and Ah'm not inclahned tuh believe she could, aytha.

I have plenty to complain about, as does anyone who ever had parents, less than some people and more than others. I don't particularly like complaining. It never seems to do much good. Actually, I do like it, but it's ineffectual. Those complaints, as ludicrous or well-founded as they may be, were partially why I decided not to move back to Atlanta during summers in school. I was tired of hearing my mother's advice about going into the military when I graduated. "Respect, service, and a regular paycheck," were her reasons. I'd have sooner become a car salesman. She was disappointed that I wasn't in an undergraduate business program, and more disappointed when I settled on a History major. I couldn't take listening to her complaints or watching my parents lead their lives.

During the first of those three summers, I met Elaine at the bar where we both worked as waiters. Uncle Buddy's was really a restaurant; there are no bars in the Commonwealth of Virginia—you have to serve food. But no one ate much of the food there: cheap beer and free peanuts and pretzels were the main attraction, situated as it was across the street from the hallowed halls of Monroe State University. Harrisonburg had

James Madison, Charlottesville had Thomas Jefferson, and Shifflettsburg got a xenophobe.

Our work shifts were from late afternoon until the two a.m. closing, but it was only from ten or eleven to closing that it was very busy. The whole staff had a lot of down time together, and it was a blast. During the summer, we stayed around drinking all night before stumbling outside into the dawn to either pass out on our couches or find an all night diner with a twenty-four hour breakfast menu. Elaine always had the most energy of all of us, organizing four a.m. skinny dipping trips to the river or an apartment complex pool, taking us back to her sublet apartment for microwaved burritos and shots of bourbon, packing a picnic basket (usually a cardboard tomato box) of beer and left-over cheesecake or brownie pie from the restaurant and driving a half an hour west to the Blue Ridge Parkway to watch the sun rise. One night she had us sculpt a two-foot tall sculpture of an imagined Uncle Buddy out of vegetables held together with toothpicks. The owner liked it so much that it stayed on the bar until it started to rot.

Elaine and I became friends during those early mornings; the people she brought along with her on those outings always ended up disappearing to sleep with each other, leaving Elaine and me to finish off the beer and talk until we couldn't make any sense. I'd never met anyone who could take charge without being officious, or anyone who made such a concerted effort to have as much fun as possible. I guess that's why I liked her, at first. The rest came later.

We stopped being able to have those long nights regularly when school started up again, but the people who worked Uncle Buddy's became my friends rather than the people from my dorm or my classes. The next summer, Elaine and I sublet together with Diane, the bartender. We all got along so well together as roommates that for the last two years of school, we ended up getting an apartment together to save the hassle of moving each summer out of the dorms.

When I graduated from MSU, I quit Uncle Buddy's, but I stuck around for three years. Diane moved out to live with her boyfriend, Geoff, who started law school immediately after college. I couldn't imagine going right back into school. I worked at the hospital information desk for six months, and then I got a nifty job copy-editing the driest, most tedious legal documents imaginable. Tax law. Elaine worked for a small catering business after an additional year at Uncle Buddy's, and the two of us lived together for three years of unmarital bliss before George died and Elaine bought the Farm.

Chapter 2

The Amtrak train from Washington pulled into the Shifflettsburg station just before 9 p.m., only eight minutes late. It was only four miles from our apartment, but I had been waiting there for half an hour, writing in my journal about Elaine and me, basically repeating what I had been writing for the past five or six years (usually: Dear Diary, I love Elaine but she thinks of me more like a favorite pet. Or some such crap.).

At least this time I had something to write about rather than vaguely neurotic worries concerning me and Elaine. I'd spoken to her only twice since she'd left, and one of those conversations was just a quickie to get her arrival time at the station. The other phone call had been brief but had set me to worrying. Elaine was audibly depressed, and I wanted to ease the weary grief in her voice. It was the morning after I'd dropped her off, and she had been up all night talking to relatives at her parents' house. She sounded better the next time I talked to her, five days later, when she asked me to meet her at the train station. I didn't know what to expect from her when she got back.

I saw her coming off the train before she saw me, her bags swinging around her knees. Although she did not look as good as she can, Elaine walked cheerfully down the platform toward me, a spring in her step, and she smiled when she caught sight of my hand waving for her attention.

"Hey there bud!" she shouted. Elaine didn't mind raising her voice in crowded places.

"Welcome home," I said as I got up to take one of her bags.

Elaine laughed a little bit. "That's what my Uncle Lou said when I got to Boston." She hugged me and kissed my cheek, and I was immediately in a better mood and less worried. "You know, while I was up there, I was thinking how much some of my family members remind me of you."

Elaine came from a large Italian family in Boston. I pictured dark hair and skin covering short bodies, furry backs and arms, beer bellies, loud angry voices, requisite gold crosses around thick stubbled necks, perhaps a cigar, maybe some attractive younger cousins who would swell and wrinkle with age. I'm about as unethnic as they come: an even six feet tall, straight brown hair, two eyebrows, green eyes, the right amount of body hair, thin lips, a chin that screams Anglo-Saxon descent, trained never to raise my voice in public, with cousins that grow into distinguished Southern Democrats. My mother would have a heart attack if someone mistook me for a yankee eye-talian. "They do?" I said.

"Yup." Moving slowly so we didn't have to dodge the other passengers and their bags, we walked down the platform toward the station.

"How so? My Mediterranean complexion?"

Grinning, Elaine said, "Hardly. I don't know. You seem like them."

I didn't say anything. It didn't bother me that she thought that; I liked knowing that she'd been thinking about me, but I didn't want her considering me her a cousin or anything too closely related for possible courtship. Courtship. What a word. Even my non-existent romantic life is haunted by my mother.

In the car, Elaine asked me how things had been going at the apartment and if Baloo, the parakeet, was doing okay, before she really talked about George's funeral and how she and her family were doing with his death.

"Luke, it was so horrible. The whole week. Everyone's going to be fine though,

except maybe my dad. Mom was on sedatives for the first two days, until the funeral. Dad shuffled around the house without talking to anyone, and everyone was afraid to talk to him. Never in my life have I seen anyone so changed. It was more than depression or grief. He was a different person."

Elaine stared out the windshield of my '83 Escort, not meeting my eyes when I looked in her direction. Looking at her in profile, I made out darkened bags of exhaustion under her eyes, layered on top of each other. Straight on, she looked tired, but from the side, she looked sick. When I used to work at the hospital, I saw eyes like that on chemo patients or people with those disturbing blue lines on their faces that guide the surgeon's knife behind closed doors. "Do you think it's anything permanent?" I asked, because I really couldn't say "Gee, Elaine, I'm really worried because you look like hell."

"Yes," she said. "But that's not what bothered me so much."

"What is it?" I turned onto our street and considered driving around town so we could keep talking, but I pulled into a space across from our building, an old blue house divided into three apartments where we had the second floor, sandwiched between people we didn't see much.

Elaine chewed on her lip silently as I adjusted the Escort beside the curb. Shutting off the car, I turned to her and she said, "It's me more than them." I continued looking at her without talking. I couldn't stop worrying about whatever was causing those eyes, and I wondered whether home for Elaine was here or Boston and whether she'd looked chipper at the train station for my sake or because she'd actually felt good.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I've always had this big loud family in the background, aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins. They've always felt like family because they were around all

the time. Do you know what I mean?"

I thought for a moment. "No," I said.

Elaine turned and sat with her back against the car door. "They're not just my family because they're related to me. That's why they're family, but that's not what makes them feel like family. It's the being around them all the time that makes them feel like family, and the growing up with them that makes them family for life." Elaine gestured wildly with her hands while she spoke, a sure sign that she wanted me to understand completely. "Sharing grandparents or blood doesn't make them real family, for me at least. It's the Sunday dinners together and vacations and Christmases and Thanksgivings and cookouts that makes them family. All that time. But I really haven't seen any of them for seven years now, not really." She stopped gesturing and looked at me, her hands wrestling on her lap. "I'm not making any sense, am I?" I thought she might cry for a moment.

"Sure you are," I lied. "But why are you upset about it?"

"Because this was different! Luke, it was horrible seeing all of those people, my parents included, walking around the house for the week stuffing themselves on our neighbor's lasagnas and tossed salads when they weren't crying. And I wasn't any better than the rest of them." Elaine stopped and stared down at her hands. She looked wild and heartsick, like an old nun who's lost her faith, too early for ecstasy and too late to relish sins of the flesh. "After the first day, it had already set in: people started avoiding mentioning George, and when I did, they didn't want to talk to me. I found myself alone in this house full of people. So I stopped bringing him up. I guess I feel like I lost them, too," Now I was sure she was going to start crying full force; her hands would fling out in a gesture and she would start weeping, and then she'd reign them in to get herself under control, but they'd soon start back. "Oh I'm sorry, Luke," she said and her control

slipped out of the half-opened window.

"Please, it's okay," I said, soothingly. I didn't know if this was about George, general sadness, family tension, or travel fatigue. I also wondered if it was PMS, just so you know, but I knew at the time that it wasn't a fair guess. Don't get me wrong. I went to hug her but the gear shift and her legs were in the way, and we both had to be satisfied with ineffectual knee-pats and hand-rubs.

"It's not okay," she wept. "Because what I wanted to say to them was . . ."

"What?"

Elaine caught her breath. "I'm a hideous bad person."

"No you're not," I said.

"Yes I am. I didn't miss George as much as I should have. I didn't even like him! But I didn't want him to die!" She lost it.

We stayed in the car for another twenty minutes, Elaine crying and stopping and starting, me trying to be a good friend but also being scared because I really didn't understand what was troubling Elaine.

* * * * *

I came home from work two weeks later to find three foot tall red letters covering the graffiti board:

BOY DO I HAVE
NEWS FOR YOU!

Elaine had been unwilling to use the graffiti board after she saw my picture of a sun beaming over a house, tree, and dog. She said it was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever done for her. I had had to erase the painting behind her back, because I was tired at looking at my drawings. "Aw, Luke! I loved that," she said when she saw what I'd done. I shrugged; after she'd been back for a few days, the drawing had just gotten

embarrassing. It screamed "You have a ridiculous crush on Elaine and are doing nothing about it" to me.

I was naturally curious about the big red message now on the board, so I called Margitte's to find Elaine. Margitte was Elaine's boss, a German woman I was fond of imitating who ran a catering business out of her house. I found her unbearably pretentious. She hugged and double-kissed you on first meetings and smoked filterless brown cigarettes. Worse, her house was full of her own artwork, these gargantuan self-portrait nudes painted in day-glo pinks and greens, both the subject and colors making me wince, onto which bits of yarn or Spaghetti-O's labels were artlessly glued. Collage. "Thiss iss my American vurk," she'd told me, winkingly adding, "my Cherman vurk, that iss much darker and painful." Margitte was one of those cultured professional volunteer ladies who seem to have but two possible career paths after the inevitable divorce when the children have moved out: real estate or catering. The ones with enough smart expensive suits and accessories go into real estate, while the ones who decide they have artistic flair start catering businesses and flirt with lesbianism.

Margitte's girlfriend was this sour young dyke named Paige, an employee/lover who didn't show up for functions when she felt like punishing Margitte, and on these occasions I would sub for her, more to save Elaine the hassle of being slammed than for the extra cash. Elaine said Margitte could be sweet when she's relaxed, but she was always frazzled on the job, and those were almost the only times I'd ever seen her. She yelled at Elaine once on the job in front of a client, and I was furious about it. Elaine said she felt sorry for her because Paige was being evil and that I didn't know Margitte like she knew Margitte. No big loss.

Paige answered the phone, volunteering less information and warmth than directory assistance. "I haven't seen her," she told me.

"Do you know if she's out on a job or something?"

"No."

I waited a moment. I'm always flabbergasted by people who make no effort to be polite. I wondered what Margitte saw in her; I would think that if you were going to be a lesbian you'd be looking for the best qualities in a woman rather than the surliness of a grounded fourteen year-old girl in the clothes of a twenty year-old heroin addict. I guess it was beyond me.

"Is Margitte there?" I asked.

"Nope," Paige said.

"And you don't know if the two of them are out together?"

"Uh-uh."

"Will you ask her to call me?" I said super-politely, hoping that would improve my chance of having the message relayed. I'm not sure if she turned on the charm for me specifically or whether she was like that with everyone. She practically threw hors d'oeuvres at people from what Elaine said.

"Sure."

I wanted to slam the phone down on her. I said, "Thanks Paige. Nice talking to you. Say hi to Margitte for me."

During the beat in which nice people say "Okay, bye," Paige hung up the phone. That kind of thing makes me crazy.

Unable to think of any other places to check for Elaine, I paced the apartment for half an hour, wondering about Elaine's news. In the two weeks since she'd gotten back from Boston, she had steadily approached the old Elaine, her routine slowly edging out her unhappiness, I guess. After our talk in the car, I'd been worried that Elaine was considering moving back to Boston to be closer to her family. I knew I'd follow if I had

to, if she'd let me, but I wouldn't like it up there, sharing her with all those loud swarthy catholics. She'd been talking to her mom more frequently since she'd been back, and it was taking her less and less time to recover herself after those calls. "My parents want to give me George's car," she told me one day after hanging up the phone. It was about two weeks after the funeral.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked.

"Bad," she said. "I don't want it."

"That's got to be weird, feeling like you're profiting from his death."

"Yeah, that too," Elaine said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's puke green." Her increasing good humor put my fears to rest, and I figured she was getting over George's death. A smart mouth is a sign of either recovery or good old-fashioned repression.

When I couldn't pace anymore waiting for Elaine, I watched TV and flipped the channels, taking notes on the commercials. I wanted to get published in the *Alternative Times*, a freebie arts/culture newspaper that was inconsistently readable, and I had this idea about doing tongue-in-cheek but highly perceptive reviews/commentary of television commercials. There were enough good and bad commercials out there for it to become a biweekly column, at least, and I thought the paper would go for it. One time a handful of laundry detergent ads, the next an assortment of painfully homegrown car dealer commercials, then some zesty chewing gum spots, and so on. Or I could zero in on common themes like irritatingly over-zealous jingles or messy children. Endless possibilities lay before me, ripe for the picking, and I was trying to figure out what my approach to the whole thing would be. The hardest part was zipping through the channels fast enough to catch all the ads without getting stuck watching a game show while trying

to second-guess when they'd go to break.

I heard the apartment door open, but I lingered to watch the end of a big budget corn chip ad. A capable effort, well-cast and cheery without verging on maudlin. Pumped up by a snappy background rhythm and vibrant colors, marred by overamplified chip-crunching and vertigo-inducing zoom shots, the corn chip becomes a symbol of all that we think we've lost, and that satisfying crunch allows us to maintain our hold on an ever-changing world. B minus/B. I needed to get more specific.

"Elaine?" I called after I switched off the set.

"Hold on," she said. "Stay in there for a minute." I heard her walk down the hall, and as I looked back at the graffiti wall,

BOY DO I HAVE

NEWS FOR YOU!

I remembered my curiosity.

"Tell me!" I yelled.

"Good things come to those who wait," she called back. "You're gonna freak!"

"It's too late for that." I grinned like a Boy Scout in a basement full of swimsuit issues. Judging from Elaine's tone, she had finally reached her old self again.

She ran into the living room and then stopped in front of me, a huge carefree child's smile on her face. She put her hands on her hips and didn't say anything. "Guess," she said.

I normally hate when people say that, but Elaine was about to burst, and it was contagious. "You backed the van over Paige."

"Ha! Not yet."

"You . . . were discovered by Tim Burton at a catering function."

"Better."

"Better than being discovered by Tim Burton? Tell me!"

"Guess."

"Elaine!" I groaned, but she was not breaking yet. "You won the lottery."

"Sort of," she said, raising her eyebrows. Elaine smiled at me, and I'm sure I must have bugged my eyes out and opened my mouth into a gaping O. I leapt off the couch, and she screamed, "AAAAHHHH!!!" Elaine's face dropped all expression, and she sat nonchalantly on the arm of the couch. "I got a phone call this morning," she said, in a tone that told me she was going to start a long story. I was going to protest, but she looked so happy that I couldn't bear to stop her, so I plopped on the coffee table and listened. "It had me depressed and confused—"

"Was it my mother?" I asked, hoping to at least speed Elaine up a little. But digressions don't tend to do that. Maybe I was entertaining me.

"No, mine. After I hung up, I had to go to work, but I just wanted to go crash in my bed and hide all day. Then I went to work, and Margitte and I made hundreds of crab-cheese puffs and gallons of that bow-tie pasta salad with the capers in it." Elaine slumped a little on the couch arm, and her voice dropped to a monotone. "After four hours of that, I was going crazy. Plus, Margitte was rattling on about her and Paige. I couldn't even listen to her, but there was this constant annoying buzz in my ears from Margitte complaining about Paige."

"If this is good news, let me in on it, because you're depressing me."

Elaine ignored me. "I thought to myself that it was insane for me to have to sit there and listen. First of all, I'm getting paid by Margitte to work, not play Dear Abby. Second, I'm not getting paid half enough for the amount of money she pulls in."

This was true; once Margitte had the contract in hand, she left most of the preparation work to Elaine, complaining that "all these details, they svurl in my head."

Elaine practically managed the business.

Elaine continued. "Third, if she'd hire someone who knew what they were doing rather than Paige, we'd both have a lot less work to do. Fourth, I really can't stand doing that any more."

"I thought you liked catering," I said.

"I thought I did too," Elaine said. "But I don't. Then, Paige called, and Margitte got on the phone with her. It's bad enough listening to her ramble on to me, but it's another thing to hear her crying and pleading on the phone with that beast."

Beast. I liked that. Paige the beast.

"Margitte had to go coddle Paige about something, so she left me there with a bowl full of crab-cheese dough, racks of little greasy puff balls in the oven, and eighteen pounds of peppers and tomatoes and cucumbers to cut up for the salad. I wanted to cry, Luke. Why do I always have to do everything? I thought about leaving a note that I was sick and taking off for the rest of the day, but that wouldn't be fair. Margitte could never get all that food done by herself. But if I *quit*, I wouldn't be responsible for any of that crap any more—puff balls, bow-tie pasta, Margitte, or Paige."

"That's a bizarre distinction," I told her.

"It makes sense to me," she said. "I don't like doing things half way. So I took the grease balls out of the oven, left a Dear Margitte letter, and quit."

"You quit?"

"Yup, and with an enormous smile on my face, too."

"That's probably why Paige was so pleasant on the phone."

"Shit! You called over there?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, I . . . oh, never mind. It doesn't matter. I'm not working for Margitte

anymore."

"What are you going to do then?"

Elaine rose from the couch and walked to the graffiti wall, tilting her head to better read her over-sized Post-It note. "That," she said, "is my good news. Guess what my mother told me today?"

"I don't want to guess again. Is this the depressing part or the exclamation point part?"

Elaine turned to me and beamed. "George had an insurance policy. Apparently, it makes better sense to leave a sibling as a beneficiary than your parents if you aren't married, some kind of tax thing. I don't know." She stopped and looked at me.

"And . . . ?" I said.

"Did you know that insurance proceeds aren't taxable?" she said and began nonchalantly examining the ends of her hair. She was drawing this out as much as possible.

"Elaine!"

"Okay. Basically, I get two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

After we were both done screaming and jumping around in circles, I couldn't speak, couldn't do more than sputter and gape. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars may not be that much to some people (people I don't know and probably never will), but to a caterer it's almost twenty years' salary. I'd quit Kushman, Kushman & Walters in a heartbeat.

"You're rich," I said, once I'd found my voice.

"I know!"

"What're you going to do with it?"

"I don't know!"

We were both silent again, looking at each other and grinning.

"Is the whole thing yours?" I asked, "or are you going to split it up with your parents or something?"

"That's actually what had me depressed this morning," Elaine said. "It's all mine, which just doesn't seem right. I got this feeling that my mother was angry about it."

"Like how?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe this means to her that George liked me best or was punishing them. Maybe she's jealous of it, just for the money."

"Would you think about giving it to your parents?"

Elaine said, "That's what I tried to do at first, once I could stop saying 'Mom, you're kidding!' But she said no, George had left it to me and that was that. I think she's trying to respect his last wishes, since he didn't have a will."

"Do you want to give it to your parents?"

Elaine sat on the floor and leaned back on her arms. "Yeah. I mean, what would I do with it, honestly? It's not like I really need anything. I told Mom that of course I was going to at least split it with them, but she said she and my dad didn't want any part of it."

"Why?"

"You know how my mother always wants me to get married or get a more stable job?"

I nodded. Every time Elaine got off the phone with her mother, especially before George died, she always laughed at how hard her mother was trying to push her into getting married and moving back to Boston. Elaine would giggle, "Can you see me married?" I actually sort of hoped she'd take her mother up on it and pick me.

Elaine continued. "Well, she said that after talking it over with my father, they

decided that I should have the money. She said 'It's security, Elaine, and you don't go giving away security.'"

"You're welcome to give it to me," I said.

"She warned me about that, too. She's afraid that the money will attract leeches out of the woodwork."

"Your mother called me a leech?"

"No, Luke! Well, actually, I guess she did. I told her I'm a big girl. You know, I think she and Dad are relieved that the money is mine, sort of. They can stop worrying about me, at least financially."

"If I had that kind of money," I told her, "my mother would move in with me and have it spent in a week. She's the kind of person your mother was warning you about." We were both quiet for a minute. I think that when I complained about my parents Elaine thought I was being overly negative without cause. She didn't seem to believe me when I told her stories about them.

"It's still hard to be too excited about the money," Elaine said. "It sort of seems tainted."

"Because of George?"

"Because of George, because I didn't earn it. Because it really should be my parents."

"Why should it be theirs?"

"Oh, it just feels like it should. They're the ones who raised him. I'm just the one who tattled on him when we were little. You know? God, this makes me feel guilty."

I gave her a sympathetic look, because no, I didn't know.

Elaine brightened. "But enough of all this. I quit my job, I have a quarter of a

million dollars on its way, and I'm not planning on sitting around here moaning about my parents and George. I'm just going to have to learn to like it."

We went out and put an itty-bitty dent in her inheritance with a number of extravagant bar tabs that night.

Chapter 3

The insurance company hated letting go of the money, and for two weeks straight, its agents pestered Elaine daily to set up sales meetings with her about annuities, investment portfolios, and whole life policies. I have never met a cheesier, more desperate class of people in my life. Appallingly friendly, with capped teeth and large, maroon American cars, a parade of these men and women in suits called on the phone or knocked on the door. I think they even followed us to the grocery store one afternoon. I've heard that when you win the lottery, the first thing you have to do is get a lawyer for defense against all the frivolous suits that people will slap on you. Apparently, if an insurance company has to actually make a large payment to you, you need to get a dead bolt and an answering machine. They wanted her to buy something, to convert that cash into security, they said. Elaine calmly said no, she wanted it in a lump sum payment. We both waited for the check.

The worst part was that they wouldn't tell us who they were at first; it was always a few minutes into the phone conversation or visit before we realized what was happening. At that point, it was harder to be rude. I guess they know that. It took us four different visits before we caught on, and endless phone calls. Elaine discovered the trick of asking them at the door for their card. They were always flustered and wanted to come inside to get a card out of their briefcases. Elaine politely refused, and when they had a card, she read it and then slammed the door on them. I don't like people in suits knocking at my door. They also left a lot of messages that we stopped listening to,

mixed with messages from Margitte that Elaine didn't answer.

I worked during that month, as usual. I hadn't come into any windfall money. I assumed that Elaine was getting up late, drinking a pot of coffee with the newspaper in front of her, and lounging in front of the television for a few hours before heading downtown to read novels in coffee shops and look in the windows of furniture stores. I wasn't sure what she did, but I was jealous of her time. We used to spend a lot of time bumming around together in college, time we had only occasionally on weekends when we both had jobs, and that was the time spent with Elaine that I valued most. I hoped that she would tell me to quit my job and that she would support me for a year or so; we could just pal around together. But we weren't in college anymore, and again, it wasn't my money.

That money worried me, when I thought about it. Elaine's mother had inadvertently alerted me to the problem of leeches. I didn't like the idea of charming or attractive guys hanging around Elaine and flashing their muscles at her. She was never the toy-boy type, so I shouldn't have worried, but I had no idea what happened to people when they came into money. I'd never been around it before.

It wasn't just fear of Elaine being swept of her feet by some lughead that worried me. Elaine could pretty much do anything she wanted to now. She could travel; hell, she could disappear for years, with that much money in the bank. Or she could move back to Boston to be with her family. She could move to LA or New York or any place where she could find other people with large sums of disposable cash. Boston was one thing; I could follow her there and hopefully ingratiate myself to her family. But those big cities, the really huge ones, intimidate me. When we talked about the money, Elaine said she still didn't know what she was going to do with it. I knew that if I followed her to one of those places I'd end up shot or stabbed one late night on some type of public

transportation. I also knew that I'd probably go anyway.

* * * * *

One evening we got a knock on the door while we were eating dinner. Elaine answered the door.

"Hello, I'm looking for Elaine Riccio," a pleasant male voice called through the crack in the door. I craned my neck to see what he looked like, but Elaine only had the door open enough for his voice to pass through unmuffled. Definitely an insurance agent.

"I'm Elaine," she said. She managed to be brusque without seeming too rude.

"I'm Teddy Peterson with Mutual Life of Connecticut," he said. This was odd, because normally, they didn't introduce themselves fully. I could smell his pin-striped suit.

"Can I see your card?" Elaine said.

"I've been leaving messages for you all week on your machine," the man said.

"May I come in?"

"Could you show me your card first?" Elaine asked. She waited and then extracted a cream-colored business card from the crack in the door. After examining it, she said "Thank you, but I'm not interested" and closed the door. She'd gotten good at it. She walked back to the kitchen table, but there was another knock at the door before she could sit down.

Elaine walked back to the door and didn't open it. "Thank you, Teddy," she spoke loudly to the door, winking at me, "but I really don't need to buy anything."

"Miss Riccio," he called. "If you'll just let me in. . . ."

"Persistent little bastard," I whispered to Elaine.

"Really," she said.

"What?" the man shouted.

"Teddy, I'm sorry, but you're just wasting your time. Goodbye." Elaine hovered at the door for a moment, straining to hear if he was leaving or not.

"But I have a check for you!" he yelled.

We both froze for a moment. Elaine flashed me a whoops look and hurried to unbolt the door. "I am so sorry," she said. "I've had so many insurance agents bothering me lately that I—. Please come in."

Teddy Peterson walked into our apartment; I was right about the pin-striped suit, but it was charcoal rather than the blue I'd imagined. He was older than most of the agents we'd seen, probably in his mid-fifties, but I couldn't be sure, because I'd venture a guess that all that selling ages them prematurely. The end of his slightly bulbous nose was scored with broken blood vessels.

"Hi," I said.

"Good evening," he said. "I hope I haven't interrupted your dinner." It was fairly obvious that he had.

"Not at all," Elaine said. "Are you hungry?"

Teddy Peterson shook his head politely. I can't imagine cruising near sixty and still going by Teddy Peterson. "I just dropped by to deliver this check," he said. "I've had a devil of a time reaching you."

"I know," Elaine said, "and please accept my apologies. This place has been crawling with people trying to sell me things for the past month. Please, sit down."

Teddy Peterson stared doubtfully at our card table with three unmatched chairs; in the center was a saucepan, resting on a pot-holder, with the remains of a box of macaroni and cheese with hot-dog chunks cut up into it. My specialty. Elaine sat, and he followed suit, resting the briefcase on his lap.

"I've had this check for about three weeks now," he said. "Usually we have

trouble getting money from people, not giving it!" Teddy Peterson laughed; he'd shared this little witticism before, probably dozens of times. Elaine smiled at him, and I kicked her under the table. She glared at me. I poked around at my dinner.

"I don't know what I was thinking not returning your calls," she said. "Do you have the check with you?"

"I do. It needs to be cashed in by the end of next month, or else the company will have to cut a new one. They don't like having large amounts of capital floating around."

"Sure," Elaine said. We were both looking at his briefcase, eager for the check.

"Life of Connecticut is a small company, but we pride ourselves on customer service, stability, and rates of return far exceeding the competition. Our Standard and Poor rating for the past sixty years has been double-A."

"Nifty, but I don't think I'm interested," Elaine said, losing her smile.

Teddy Peterson snapped open his briefcase and pulled out a wad of pamphlets. "I think you'll want to consider investigating our product line as a secure place for your principal. For retirement planning, college funds, or other individual needs, Life of Connecticut is the smart choice. We—"

"Are you trying to sell me something?" Elaine interrupted.

Teddy Peterson relaxed back into the chair. "Heavens, no. At Life of Connecticut, we believe that all buying decisions should be made by the customer. You know what's best for you, right?"

"Right. Could I please have the check?"

Teddy Peterson knew he was losing it; his face downshifted a few peppy gears, but he kept on going. "Of course, Miss Riccio! But I'd be remiss in my responsibilities if I didn't offer you a glance through our products. For example, universal life. With rates of return attached to—"

"Didn't I tell you I'm not interested?"

"Yeeessss, but—" Teddy Peterson winced a little.

"But what? I'm not buying anything."

"You really should take a look at—"

"You really should give me my check! I am so sick of people trying to sell me insurance and other crap. What is wrong with you people?" Elaine was almost shouting at him by that point, and poor Teddy Peterson looked lost. His eyes grew wide and blank, and his eyebrows floated above as though suspended in air. I'm not sure he knew how to stop himself.

He held his breath for a few seconds like he was mentally ordering up two fingers of scotch. He scratched the side of his nose. "I'm honestly looking out for your welfare," he said.

"Look, whatever, I have no interest in listening to any of this. I just want the money so I can stop worrying about it."

Teddy Peterson nodded and pulled out a large mailer envelope. He fumbled through the contents and extracted an oversized check and some forms. "Sign these at the x's," he said, handing Elaine a Mont Blanc pen. Those things are expensive.

Elaine signed and initialled the papers in a dozen places; when she was done, she handed the papers back to Teddy Peterson. He wouldn't let go of that check and envelope until he had the signed papers in his hand, like a child trading toys.

"Thank you," Elaine said, and I could tell she was trying not to be too huffy and exasperated.

"I think you'll find that there's more worry once you have the money," Teddy Peterson said, and after tearing copies of the forms apart and giving Elaine a set, he deposited the originals in his briefcase and stood up to go. "You have my card in there,"

he said, "so give me a call if you do want to set anything up." The zip was gone from his voice as he walked to the door with Elaine following.

"Thank you for coming by," Elaine said.

"Don't spend it all in one place," Teddy Peterson said flatly. It was canned, and this time, none of us laughed. He opened the door and disappeared into the hallway. I predicted that he would either drive to the nearest bar or serve himself a stiff one from his glove compartment. Old businessmen don't believe that drinking and driving rules apply to them. Or any other rules, for that matter.

Elaine closed the door behind him and then turned to face me. She waited a few respectful seconds before saying, "Good God."

"Shoot me if I ever get like that," I said.

"Don't worry, I will," Elaine said. She sat back down at the table, and we both stared at the crusting pot of yellow dinner. It was cold and some protruding macaroni edges had that translucent dried-out look.

"Want me to nuke it?" I asked.

"Every time I try to get excited about this, something shitty happens," Elaine said.

"Well, we shall overcome. Cheer up. You're rich. Now what are you going to do with it?"

"Spend it all in one place. Buy shoes. I don't know."

"Come on, Elaine! Think about it. Look at it." I took the check from her hand and held it out so we could both read it. It looked like a cashier's check; the numbers and words were printed in red and black ink, stamped with a crunch on a beige and white background. Pay to the order of Elaine Riccio Two Hundred Fifty Thousand and 00/100 Dollars \$250,000.00. "That's one hell of a lot of shoes," I said. "What are you at least thinking about doing with it?"

"I'm not buying an annuity or any of that crap," Elaine said.

"It's not necessarily a bad idea," I said. "I just wouldn't give Teddy the business."

"It's like a jinx," Elaine said. "It feels like George died because he had a life insurance policy."

"What? He didn't even buy it. It was through work."

"Oh, forget it. No—think about it. It's like getting a prenuptial agreement. You're dooming it from the start. If you buy something and stake your life on it, well. . . ."

"Elaine! It's not like it's some deal with Mephistopheles. Are you bummed about George or about the money?"

Elaine didn't answer me immediately. She picked a crusty yellow noodle from her plate and chewed it between her front teeth. "Both. Look, Luke. Just ignore me."

"I am. You're more depressing than Teddy Peterson," I said, and Elaine chuckled a little. "I think you should buy a yacht. I'd make a great cabin boy."

"Don't count on it," Elaine said. "I have three options: spend it all now, spend half and save half, or save it all for later when I'm old and senile and can't enjoy it."

"That certainly is the Pollyanna approach."

"But I'm not going to save it all, that's for certain. Look where that kind of thing got George."

I didn't bother reminding her that George's death was an accident.

Chapter 4

The day after Teddy left, Elaine was sitting cross-legged on the floor playing with a puppy when I got home.

"This is Dog," she announced. "I haven't come up with a name yet. She peed by the bookcase, so watch your step. I've threatened her with the name Rover if she doesn't stop peeing."

I didn't remind Elaine that our landlord, the persnickety Mr. Vereker, had said no pets. "Are you going to turn into the eccentric wealthy pet lady of Shifflettsburg?" I asked.

"Pet ladies have cats," she said. "I'm going to be the pet woman."

"Boy or girl?" I asked, crouching down to pet the puppy. I don't always listen well.

"Girl. I didn't really want a dog running around humping everything in sight," Elaine said. The puppy hid under her bent knee and tugged at the leg of her already torn jeans. Dog was black and brown, with a white ruff at her throat and fur-filled ears that stood up on top of her head like a Scottie. She was the size of a woman's tennis shoe.

We cooed over Dog for a few minutes, and I lay on my back and let her crawl over my face and lick me.

"Where'd you get her?" I asked.

"SPCA. I hope you're not mad," Elaine said. "I thought about asking you, but I really just wanted to get her today."

"You know me," I said. "Mr. Mellow."

"Right," Elaine said.

"I love dogs. My mother wouldn't let me get one when I was little. I'm just worried about Vereker." I was actually very pleased; I had wanted to get a dog as soon as I could afford the neutering, shots, food, vet visits, etc. Probably in my late forties.

"Little men like Vereker can be bought for cheap," she said, laughing.

"You're not going to turn into a Republican now that you have money are you?"

I asked.

"Hell no." Dog yelped twice at my right hand and then ran under the kitchen table.

"What breed is she?" I asked.

"The woman at the SPCA wasn't sure," Elaine said. "She guessed a beagle-terrier mix. Dog was dropped off there anonymously one night. They think she's about seven or eight weeks."

The Cabell County SPCA was a good twenty minute drive west of town. If Elaine had gone out there to get a dog, it was more than a spur of the moment decision. Then, I would've been angry that she hadn't consulted me first. We both prided ourselves on being considerate roommates, and it wasn't like Elaine to do anything as a major as planning to get a dog without asking me. I wanted to know, but I couldn't ask her any more directly than by saying, "What were you doing out there?"

"Man, Luke. You wouldn't believe . . . I went to the bank this morning with my humongo check and tried to deposit it. It was disgusting. I was wearing my "SHIT HAPPENS" t-shirt and these jeans, and the whole staff of the bank started some fierce brown-nosing. They had me sit in the office of the branch manager. Like it was some treat for me. The manager actually asked me if I would like something to drink. I turned

it down, but I swear he was ready to whip a bottle of twenty year-old Scotch out from his desk drawer. Luke, I was in there for almost two hours. They made me open up three different accounts to put the money in because of some rules about the money not being insured over a hundred thousand dollars per account. I thought banks were used to that kind of money." Elaine shook her head and rolled her eyes.

"Probably not in a personal checking account," I said. I still wanted to know why she'd been at the SPCA.

"Maybe. Then they tried to get me to invest it in this or that CD or IRA or whatever else kind of acronym. I swear, I had about six or seven men and women twice my age in suits fawning all over me. It was thoroughly embarrassing and a total pain in the ass." She crawled over to the kitchen table to stop Dog from eating a blue sock of mine. I hadn't left it there. "I probably catered their last Christmas party," she said, "and now they are treating me like royalty."

"Queen Elaine the Good."

"It was sickening. So when I left the bank I started . . . never mind. To make a long story short, I started driving around the county looking at the last of the foliage, and I went into the SPCA for the hell of it and came out with Dog."

"Oh," I said. That was good enough for me.

"This money's just been a total drag so far—oh, man!" She scooped Dog up and held her in the air, the last few drops of puppy pee dripping onto the hardwood floor. "I told you to cut that out, Rover," she said.

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Dog/Rover had been formally christened Bagheera by the time I got home from work the next day. "It'll make Baloo feel less jealous if I stick with the Jungle Book theme," Elaine said. I liked the name, even though it was a cat's name. At least it was

a big cool cat.

"Does that make Vereker Shere Khan?" I asked.

"He's more of a Kaa," she said, but I had a hard time reconciling the snake and Vereker's mustache. Elaine and I spent the evening trying to paper-train Bagheera; she liked being on the paper, but she'd get her paws on the paper to pee and then hang her butt over the edge, still peeing on the floor. "It's a start," Elaine said.

* * * * *

"The bank called again today to pester me. Did you know that the annual interest on all that money in the bank is more than my take home pay was?" We were on the balcony trying to keep Baggy from chewing the resin chair, enjoying the last few days of an Indian summer in early November.

"You weren't exactly pulling in big bucks," I said.

"I know," Elaine said, "but it's still weird when you think about it. The bank said I could triple the interest if I invested the money somewhere other than a savings account. They said I could probably make thirty-five thousand dollars a year in interest alone, without ever touching the principal. Right now it's making about twelve."

"Christ. Are you going to do it? Is it risky?"

"They were pretty vague about that, so it probably is. I don't trust them at all. Guess what?"

"No."

"I'm having an enormous party in two weeks," Elaine said. "I need to spend some money."

Ever since Elaine had quit catering, we had fallen into a routine that I was finding increasingly tedious. I worked all day at Kushman, Kushman & Walters wielding my blue pencil and trying not to be completely depressed by how boring the work was, and

I'd come home to hear about Elaine's day spent lounging with Bagheera. That was what I wanted to do, and the contrast only made my eight and a half hour days seem longer. I wasn't irritated with her, but the whole thing put me out of sorts. I tried not to show it, and I don't think she knew. I felt like I was living with Gatsby, about a third of the way through the book. All play and no work looked great from the outside.

The party date was set for November 23rd, the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Elaine was planning on spending a week with her family around Thanksgiving and driving back George's puke green car; being a lady of leisure, she could afford the one-way flight. I had hoped that we would consider spending Thanksgiving together that year. I'd never spent a Thanksgiving away from my parents, and it sounded heavenly. The idea of that long table with just the three of us around it was more depressing than a life of copy editing.

I think Elaine originally started planning the party just from sheer boredom. She wasn't used to sitting around all day with nothing to do; for a financially struggling energetic person, having a quarter of a million dollars in the bank and no job was a pretty major lifestyle adjustment. Elaine had been careful not to let people know about the money, at least not yet. I think she was more worried about leeches than she would let on. "I'm not worried about people taking the money or taking advantage of me," she'd told me. "I'm worried about them changing the way they act around me. That would really freak me out." Because of this, she'd asked me not to spread word of her windfall cash around. It would be harder to keep it a secret if Elaine suddenly threw a big party, but I figured that was her concern and not mine. I still worried about it, though.

The party kept her busy. After getting the Fox Hunt Tavern and Inn to rent her their biggest ballroom (the Sir Walter Raleigh Room—like he'd ever been there), she mailed out a thick stack of invitations, which cracked me up. No one that we knew

would actually RSVP to a party; they'd just show up or not, and most likely, they'd show up late, with a couple of people we'd never met before. Not only that, but the Fox Hunt was this stuffy twenty star restaurant, very Ye Olde Virginny, dark maroons and greens bordering polished wood floors, decorated with full length portraits of the five Virginia presidents and smaller fox-hunting scenes. James Monroe, Shifflettsburg's star attraction, was in the center, as though he outclassed Washington and Jefferson. The only time anyone I knew had ever been in the Fox Hunt was to work, or when their parents took them out to dinner for graduation or some such crap. My parents had wanted to eat there, but I hadn't made reservations in time, so we went to Chi-Chi's. My mother sent back her chimichanga because it was too spicy and too cold.

Elaine was planning this party to be the affair of the century. After a lot of debate, she asked Margitte to cater the party for her. Elaine still felt guilty about quitting at such short notice, even after a month, and she started setting a bad precedent by tossing money in the direction of hurt feelings. Margitte should have at least cut her some sort of former employee break, but she didn't. Elaine went all out—steamed shrimp, sashimi, steak tartare skewers, scallop and bacon rolls, crab portofino, caviar, clams casino—the most expensive food you can eat with a toothpick. This was in addition to the champagne, imported beer, full bar, and band. None of the grad students or restaurant workers of Shifflettsburg would ever eat as well again, unless they scavenged off plates bussed back to the kitchen.

"Didn't the Fox Hunt insist on using their catering people?" I asked.

"Yes, but I paid double rent for the ballroom," Elaine told me, distractedly, while she sketched how she wanted the place decorated.

I was looking forward to the event; since Elaine had brought home Baggy, we hadn't gone out much. I was afraid he'd whimper while we were gone, which was

certain to attract the attention of our neighbors, who I knew would tell Vereker. None of them were invited.

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While I was watching TV the afternoon of the party, Elaine came into the apartment; I was taking notes on an ad for imitation perfumes, and I was trying to think of a nice scathing synonym for atrocious. Beastly? Despicable? Abhorrent! Baggy was passed out next to me on the couch after wearing herself out chasing a seedless grape around the floor. I had patted her on the head as positive reinforcement when she finally killed it.

"Here's your tux," Elaine told me as she hung a garment bag atop the bathroom door.

"My what?"

"I rented you a tux. I told you about it last week."

"Oh," I said. I had rented tuxes for my junior and senior proms; those were the only times I'd worn a tuxedo before. I was lazy about the first one I rented, and I got to the rental store so late in prom season that they only had a beige tux with black piping that was my size. My mother wouldn't pay for it, and she didn't want me to go out in public in a tacky beige tux. I made sure to go to the tux store early the next year.

"I'm going to be the only one in a tux, right?" I asked.

"Most likely."

I liked that idea; it sort of made me the unofficial host of the party. Or the butler.

I turned to look at Elaine for the first time since she'd walked in. She had a large bouquet of shasta daisies under one arm, and her face was streaked with different colored paints.

"What the hell have you been doing?" I asked.

"Decorating." After setting down the flowers, she looked down at her hands, crusted black with different color paints. "I hope this shit comes off easily."

Chapter 5

The ballroom was certainly decorated. The staff of the Fox Hunt appeared to be in shock at the sight of their beloved Sir Walter Raleigh Room, its eighteenth century Georgian splendor transformed into a . . . well, there's really no one word for it. All around three walls of the ballroom, Elaine had draped dozens of cream-colored tarps, the kind that house painters use, over ten to twenty foot tall wire armatures. Some spots on the armatures formed long benches, like a throne with a mountain of fabric for a back rest. She had covered the tarps randomly with spray paint, streaks of bright colors, metallics, and day-glo. You felt that you were walking into the foyer of a haunted mansion that had been closed for years and graffitied by ghosts of Dadaists or erstwhile kindergarten finger-painters. The Sir Walter Raleigh Room smelled lightly of paint fumes, enough so that if you breathed in deeply you would wonder if you were getting a head rush.

Almost two hundred people streamed in through the double doors of the Fox Hunt's Sir Walter Raleigh Room between eight and ten that night, slowly at first, but then coming in fairly steadily until I lost count after that. The invitations said seven, so I was a little befuddled with Moët by the time people started arriving. I knew half of them; Elaine knew about two-thirds. She didn't care if people she didn't know showed up, as long as the people she wanted there arrived. I avoided the long tables spilling over with food and drinks; Paige and Margitte were hovering there, fussing at their workers and refilling chafing dishes and stainless steel jugs of orange juice. I couldn't avoid them all

night, I knew, but I could avoid them for as long as possible. Marty, one of the catering guys running drinks and hors d'oeuvres around the room, took notice of my tux and kept bringing me White Star and steamed shrimp. He'd been in my dorm my first year of college but had dropped out after completely failing his first semester by sleeping it away. I guess working for Margitte was better than panhandling.

The band, the Infidels, had set up against the bizarre backdrop. I knew the bass player, a guy named Reggie that had lived in our apartment building in college. They were an okay cover band who played some of their own stuff as well; I liked their covers because they made no effort to sound like the original. They were all the way into the chorus of "Take Me To The River" before I recognized it.

I saw a lot of people I hadn't seen in a while; it made me realize what a hermit I'd become over the past few years. You just can't stay up until four in the morning and get up for work at seven-thirty. At least I can't. I didn't have much to say to most of the people I knew. Our common ground—hanging around Uncle Buddy's or other fine establishments—no longer existed.

I did want to talk to Geoff, the law student live-in boyfriend of Diane's. She was a former bartender at Uncle Buddy's and Elaine's and my roommate for the last two years of college. Geoff had spent a lot of time in our old apartment, and I liked him. I sidled up behind him while he was talking to a guy I didn't know who looked like he'd been spending too much time at the gym. I wondered if Geoff and Diane knew about the money. No one else did, but I couldn't imagine Elaine keeping that from the two of them. I didn't see Diane around.

"Hey there, barrister," I said to Geoff over his shoulder.

"Luke! Where've you been hiding?" he said. We shook hands, but it felt embarrassing to me, overly corporate in the Sir Walter Raleigh ballroom. I mean we

were surrounded by gargantuan abstract mountains, listening to a hard-core version of "Hungry Like The Wolf." We weren't wheeling and dealing. My father was big into handshakes as the be-all-end-all of first impressions.

"Nowhere," I said. "I'm just a victim of poverty."

"Tell me about it," Geoff said. "I've been trying to keep the student loans to the bare minimum. I eat Oodles of Noodles and read law books twenty-four hours a day." He popped a crab puff into his mouth and licked his fingers.

"Are you still the star pupil?" I asked. Geoff had done well in college, from what I knew; he was one of those people who could pick up on theories quickly as well as remember facts. I always had a hard time merging the two.

"They're eating out of my hand," he laughed. "You still doing that editing thing?"

I nodded. "And loving every minute of it. Have you seen Elaine?"

"Just talked to her. I haven't seen her since her brother. . . . How's she doing?"

The band suddenly got louder, and I had to shout, "I think she's fine."

"But she quit her job?"

I nodded.

"Is she looking for a new one?"

I assumed this meant that he didn't know about the money. Elaine was being awfully tight-lipped about it. "Not yet," I said. "She got a dog."

Geoff was quiet for a minute. "She's throwing this out of control party, she doesn't have a job. Are you sure she's doing all right?" He shouted over the music.

"Positive," I yelled back, smiling reassuringly. I should have stopped then and there to think about what Geoff said, but I assumed that I had the upper hand with knowing about Elaine. Knowing about the money. I was confident that I knew her better than anyone, so confident that I didn't bother to look past the obvious. "How's Diane?"

Geoff looked at me evenly, his eyebrows lowered just short of a frown. "I don't know," he said. He watched me for a minute. "Well, I do, but we broke up."

"Oh! God, I'm sorry. I didn't know," I yelled, and I don't think he heard all of what I said.

"I thought she told Elaine everything and Elaine told you everything," Geoff said. He sounded a little spiteful in his assessment of the situation.

I said, "I did too. I doubt she knows. I'm sure she would have told me."

"She knows. We just talked about it." Geoff pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, indicating Elaine. I saw her laughing uproariously with two people I didn't know.

Oh well, I figured. She's been busy with the money and the party and Baggy. She probably just forgot. I didn't think about the fact that she'd told me hardly anything lately, not since right after she'd gotten back from the funeral. "What happened with you and Diane?" I asked.

"We fucked up big time," Geoff shouted, in the lull as the band finished their song. It was one of those every-head-turns moments when you find yourself suddenly shouting in a silent room. I was glad it wasn't me. "Whoops," he said, downing the last of his beer.

"Where are you living?" I asked.

"We're in the same place, living together," Geoff said. "We're still trying to be friends. We can't afford to split up."

"That's got to be bizarre," I said.

"To say the least. We're both avoiding the apartment as much as possible. I live at the law library anyway."

Marty the champagne guy came over to us as the music started up again, offering a tray of bubbling flutes. Geoff took one. I was tempted to have more, but I was

beginning to feel a little queasy between my sweet stomach and dry mouth. If it was cheap champagne, I probably would have already been ill. Champagne requires its own tolerance, separate from beer or wine or booze.

Geoff and I were quiet for a while, gazing at the ballroom full of people dancing in the flickering shadows of those enormous things that Elaine had made. It irked me that we had so little to talk about.

"I'd love to take someone home tonight," Geoff said. "Just to freak out Diane. But it's been too long. I don't even know what to do anymore."

"Yeah," I said, and Geoff walked off into the center of the dance floor and disappeared. I wasn't sure if he was getting food or finding someone to dance with. I spied Elaine sitting on one of the armatures, deep in conversation with a Portuguese guy named Milo who worked at one of the downtown bookstores. I found myself wondering whether she was more attracted to guys that looked more like her family than me. She occasionally had short-term boyfriends that I never said I hated, but she could tell. She didn't bring them around, and I hadn't seen her with anyone for more than a year. It was one of the things we didn't talk about the way I wished we could. I could never contain my jealousy, which seems odd considering my lack of perspective at the time.

I decided against breaking in on Elaine's chat, so I wandered around the Sir Walter Raleigh room for a while, chatting with people I hadn't seen in a long time but not meeting anyone new. I was a little disgusted with myself; everyone was having a blast, from what I could tell, except for me. People were laughing and dancing, devouring the food, taking full advantage of the bar. The band was tight, one of the best shows I'd ever heard them do. The place looked great, and the party was a total success, except I just wasn't having as good a time as I should have. I found myself moseying laps around the perimeter of the ballroom, watching the party get louder in inverse

proportion to my gloom. Sometimes I wish I could hang around someone other than me.

While wandering, I made the mistake of not watching where I was going. "Luke, so goot to see you," Margitte said. She made a show of coming around the banquet table to double kiss me. Her dress was a pseudo-African robe, colorful and loose but held fast to her chest and shoulders by the weight of a dozen large wooden beads and cut-out figures of elephants and tigers, and she wore a modified mall version kente turban. Elaine said Margitte dressed like a guilty WASP.

"Hi Margitte," I said. "Great food." It was hard for me to enjoy the food. I'd served the same stuff for her parties before, and it reminded me of wearing a cheap white tuxedo shirt with a clip-on bow tie.

"Elaine iss doing beautiful things with the paints, yah?" she said.

"Yah," I said, without really realizing what I'd said. It made me uneasy to recognize a certain quality of Margittism to the paint work on the tarps. Maybe it was just the day-glo.

"You are a great kidder, Luke," she said while clearing toothpicks and napkins from green linen tablecloth.

Margitte was by far the oldest person in the room, my mother's age, and probably the same for everyone else in the room. But as I watched her walk off to the kitchen with a couple of empty trays, I noticed that she moved with an enviable ease through the room, talking and laughing with people I hadn't met, people she probably hadn't met either. She was even dating someone my age. If I'm not mistaken, Paige was a year younger than me. If my mother was there, she would have asked everyone she met what their parents did, a transparent frozen smile plastered to her face as she silently evaluated them and their parents.

Thinking about my mother did not help me enjoy the party any more than I

already wasn't, so I switched to bourbon.

* * * * *

Just after midnight, Elaine found me sitting by myself on one of the armatures, working on a bourbon and water. I was in a much better frame of mind by this point, as far as I was concerned. I was happier, but sloppy and mostly immobile. I may have even taken a little nap for a while.

"Are you bored?" Elaine asked me. Her hair was clinging to her sweaty face in thick strands. I'd been watching her dance on and off.

"Nope," I said. I held onto the "p" a little longer than I should have.

"Why are you sitting over here all by yourself?"

"I'm a participant observer recording the history of this party for posterity," I slurred.

"Come dance with me," Elaine said. The Infidels were playing some reggae song that I knew but couldn't name; they all sound alike to me, especially after a few bourbons. I really didn't want to dance.

"Okay," I said, and Elaine stood up and tried to pull me off the bench, grabbing my hands. "Whoa," I said. All the blood rushed out of my head, and I stood still for a second, propped by Elaine, until I could feel my body behaving as it should, or at least feeling controllable. After a minute or so on the dance floor, I was able to relax into the idea of dancing and make a spectacle of myself. That's how I always feel when I dance; I don't like doing it very much, and usually only when I'm very drunk. All the criteria were in order that night. People tell me not to be self-conscious when I dance. "Nobody cares. Nobody is paying attention to you," they've told me, but I don't believe them. I know that I pay attention to people when they are dancing, and I am amused by the bad ones.

"You having fun?" Elaine asked me as we danced.

"This is an amazing party," I answered. "You deserve the Nobel party prize."

Elaine smiled and said, "But are you having fun? Every time I've seen you you've been wandering around by yourself."

"Praise God, she does care!" I shouted.

"Luke. Are you mad at me about something?"

I hate that question. I didn't answer for a minute, intent on getting my feet and hips back in rhythm with the music. That syncopated reggae crap throws me off easily.

"Should I take that to mean you are mad?" she said.

"Ignore me," I said. "I'm a mess." Other people were dancing close to us, and I didn't want to have a heart-to-heart at that moment, not as drunk as I was, and not with other people around.

"Come on, talk to me," she said. She stopped dancing, and so did I. She was going to stand there until I spoke again.

"Elaine . . . okay." I really didn't want to go into this, so I resigned myself to saying something to divert her. "Why didn't you tell me about Geoff and Diane?" That wasn't what I wanted to ask. I wanted to ask her if she'd sleep with me or if she loved me or something along those lines.

"What? Didn't I?" she said.

"Nope."

"I guess I forgot," she said. "Is it that big a deal?"

I wish I'd stopped right there. But I didn't. "No, it's not that big a deal. It's the principle of the thing!"

"Look, I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. What principle are you talking about?"

I sputtered, feeling cornered and stupid, but she'd asked me if I was mad, and I

suddenly realized that I was. I told myself that I wouldn't be if she hadn't asked. "The get a goddamn dog without asking Luke principle! The sit around the fucking house all day principle! The poor little Elaine has a quarter of a fucking million dollars principle! The ignore Luke principle!" People definitely heard that.

Elaine stared at me for a full minute without responding. I immediately wanted to take it all back, but I was brimming with drunken pride that wouldn't let that happen. And she just looked at me, her mouth slightly open. I either wanted to kiss her or keep yelling. The suspense of what she was going to say was killing me.

"You are an ugly drunk," she said. She turned on her spiked heels and walked away from me. The band had stopped playing, and I know that everyone around us could hear. I went and got myself some more bourbon.

Chapter 6

I slept late enough the next day, a Sunday, that my hangover had a chance to work itself out while I was still asleep. I tossed in bed, trapping myself in the blue and white striped sheets around my legs. When I picked my head up and read 10:30 on the clock by my bed, I knew it would be bad news to move for a few more hours. Sunday is a day of rest, after all, and I took advantage of the Sabbath. Baggy slept beside me; whenever she got playful I pushed her off the bed a couple of times until she understood that there was no romping allowed for the time being.

Elaine wasn't there when I finally managed to crawl out of bed well after noon. I didn't realize this for a while, because I assumed she was asleep behind closed doors. Foggy recollections of hearing people moving around the apartment came to mind, but I wasn't sure if those were restless morning dreams or not. After staring at her closed door and wondering what was going on in there, I finally knocked. I wondered if someone was in there with her. I had some questions and some apologies for Elaine. But there was no answer, so I called her name. When she didn't respond, I opened the door a crack and called her name again. She wasn't in her room.

"Someone didn't come home last night," I said to no one, and then I looked down at Baggy, who was sniffing the Turkish throw rug on Elaine's floor. I ran through the list of things that could have happened: she spent the night somewhere else, alone; she slept with someone; she got a room at the Fox Hunt Inn; she slept with someone at the Fox Hunt; she was in jail for drunk driving; she was lying dead in a ditch somewhere.

There weren't that many ditches between our apartment and the Fox Hunt, but the thought still worried me. I thought of our nights in college at Uncle Buddy's, when Elaine would get a wild hair and road trip to watch the sunset or go swimming or have breakfast in Atlantic City. There were plenty of chances for her to be in ditches. I sat on the couch and worried. I got up and looked out the balcony. Her little red Ford Fiesta was parked out in front of our building, all the more confusing. She could at least call.

When six o'clock came and went and I still hadn't heard from Elaine, I began phoning around. The Fox Hunt wouldn't tell me if she'd gotten a room or not, but she wasn't currently checked in. Margitte had no idea where she was. When I called Diane and Geoff's, I just got the machine and didn't leave a message. I called a dozen other friends of hers, but they had all left the party before Elaine. That slightly reassured me that she hadn't drunkenly road-tripped anywhere, but I still didn't know where she was, and I didn't know who else to call. I finally called the police and asked if they'd picked Elaine up. I told them I was her husband, and they said they didn't have any record of her. I called the hospital, but they hadn't admitted her and she wasn't in the ER. I liked the pretending part.

Flopped on the couch, I was sick from worrying. I was too worked up to concentrate on reviewing any TV ads, so I just sat there stewing and tapping my fingers on crossed arms. I was angry at her for not calling and being so irresponsible, and angry with myself for having been so nasty to her the night before when she could very well be lying dead somewhere right now. I was also disgusted that I was using my mother's screwed logic. Baggy curled next to me on the couch. I've heard that petting a puppy lowers your blood pressure ten points, and I think it may have worked.

When the phone finally rang, I leapt from the couch, sending Bagheera whimpering to the floor.

"Hello?" I said.

"Is this Luke?" asked a male voice that I didn't recognize.

"Yes," I answered, hesitating. I hate when people on the calling end ask the questions.

"This is Stu Vereker, your landlord."

"Oh, hi," I said. Thank God it's not the hospital, I thought. Then I wondered what he was calling about. Rent wasn't due for another week. I dragged the phone to the couch, and Baggy climbed back up next to me. "What can I do for you?"

"I got some complaints about some noise in your apartment last night," he said. It sounded like he was eating something.

I didn't know exactly what time I got in from the party, but it was around two or three a.m. Nobody had been in the apartment. "I wasn't here most of the night," I said. "And neither was Elaine."

"Seems there was a dog yelping all night. Sounded like it was coming from your place. Do you and your girlfriend have a dog up there?" he asked.

She's not my girlfriend, I wanted to say. "No, of course not," I told him. "The lease says we can't." Baggy began twitching her paws in her sleep, and I scratched her stomach.

"Well, people heard a dog last night," Vereker said, "and any dog you do or don't have has to go. It's a breach of the lease."

We didn't see the other people in our building much, and when I did see them, I did little more than wave. The people upstairs from us played a lot of bluegrass that got under my skin when I was trying to read. "You might want to call the people upstairs," I said. "Because we don't have a dog."

"They're the ones was complaining," Vereker told me. Whoops, I thought.

"You can come check if you want," I said. Vereker was too lazy to fix the leaky hot water handle in our shower, let alone drive over to our place on a Sunday to check for illegal pet aliens. I knew he wouldn't come.

"I just might do that if I get any more complaints," he said. The lazy threat in his voice made me want to belt him. "The lease says no pets and that's that."

"Right. Goodbye," I said and hung up the phone. I looked down at Baggy, stretched out against my leg, and I remembered that Elaine was still missing. "This is a crummy day, Bagheera," I said, settling back into the couch to worry and wait for Elaine, filling up the ashtray and watching the time slowly blink away on the VCR clock.

* * * * *

The phone rang after eleven that night while I was watching the news.

"Hi," Elaine said. "How're you feeling today?" She sounded exhausted.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Boston. Where else would I be?"

I sat for a moment, still. I remembered that she was leaving for Boston the day after the party to spend a week with her family around Thanksgiving. I'd been making myself sick worrying all day about her, when I'd known perfectly well that she was going out of town. I felt like an idiot, but I was also a little irrationally angry. I said, "I forgot you were going. I wish you'd left a note or something."

"I'm sorry, Luke. I was running late this morning and I didn't even think about it. I just figured you'd know. Actually, I flew up here wearing that dress from last night. I barely had time to grab my toothpaste. I was going to stick my head in your door to say goodbye, but I forgot in the rush."

Her being mad at me from last night probably had something to do with her selective memory. "It's okay. Did you get up there okay?" I was wondering where

she'd spent the night and how she'd gotten to the airport.

"That's why I called," she said. "Guess what else I forgot."

"No."

"Baggy. I totally forgot about her. And Baloo, but that's not as bad. Will you feed Baloo? I'm an idiot! I bought one of those little carrier boxes for Baggy, but I think I left it sitting against the living room bookcase. I didn't see her when I ran through this morning. God, I could shoot myself."

I looked over, and sure enough, leaning against the bookshelf was this big sheet of thick cardboard with red letters scrawled over it, one of those boxes that you fold yourself and stick your dog in, like a Dunkin Donut Munchkins box. It didn't really occur to me as any kind of big deal that she'd left Baggy. I could take care of Baggy fine. Then I remembered Vereker's call.

"Vereker called about Baggy. Some of the dickweeds in the building complained about her barking or something."

"What'd you tell him?"

"That we didn't have a dog. I even told him to come over and check if he wanted to. Oh, man! I just realized—I'm going to have to leave her alone here while I go to work. What if Vereker comes over and lets himself in while I'm gone?"

"I am so sorry to do this to you. I can't believe I'm this stupid. At least it's a short work week."

"Yeah," I said. I was looking forward to the break for Thanksgiving, but I wasn't looking forward to spending time with my parents. My mother would pitch a fit. "Damn, Elaine. I'm going to have to take her home with me for Thanksgiving."

"I know!" Elaine said. "That's why I feel so bad about the whole thing."

"The Wicked Witch of Smyrna will make me put her in a kennel or something."

She never lets animals in the house. She's always afraid they'll mess up the plastic on the furniture." There wasn't really plastic on her furniture, but there should have been. She was the type.

"I feel terrible. I am the worst doggie mother. Maybe you could mail her to me or something?"

Between my mother and Vereker, Baggy and I seemed pretty much screwed. "I'm not going to mail a puppy," I said. "We'll manage this somehow. So what if Vereker evicts us? Maybe my mother will forbid me from entering the house and I'll get reprieve from Christmas duty."

Elaine was quiet for a moment. "Luke, you are. . . ."

"An ugly drunk?" I'd said this before I could stop myself, before I'd even thought about it. Neither of us said anything for longer than I could bear. "I'm sorry. Forget I said that. I'm an idiot, too, apparently."

"I'm the one who should be sorry," Elaine said. "I had no business saying that last night." For some reason, I knew that she sat back in whatever chair she was sitting in as she said that.

"Just forget it. Anyways, you don't have anything to apologize for. I do. I was just being . . . you know. I hate big parties like that."

"But you meant what you said."

I had to think for a moment before I could remember all the glorious things I'd said. I groaned to myself; I might as well have gone out and gotten an Elaine-heart tattoo on my forehead. It would have been less obvious. "Forget everything I said. I was just drunk."

"Come on, Luke! At least be honest with me. I have been ignoring you lately."

"You've been pre-occupied."

"Duh. That's exactly what I mean. I've been moaning about poor little me with all that money. If I were you, I think I'd drive me crazy. I was talking about it with Geoff this morning. I told him about the money, and about what you said last night at the party."

That stopped me cold. Two things that made me crazy—one was having people discuss their relationship with me with other people. The other was the possibility that since she was at his place, they had slept together. Little pieces of hangover that had been waiting offstage joined me just then.

"I was blabbing on and on about how upset I'd been lately, and Geoff just stared at me. He told me that people who inherit a quarter of a million tax-free dollars have no business whining about it. God was he right. I mean, George is one thing, but the money is another. I think I've been confusing them. I haven't talked to you at all lately except to complain about that damn money. Geoff said if I complain to you about the money again you should bill me by the word. I was thinking about it on the plane. Have I been completely unbearable?"

Here's what I was thinking: Geoff—that smarmy, kiss-ass, cocksucking fuckhead, that asshole, that fucking arrogant pushy know-it-all shit-for-brains. Here's what I said: "What?" Geoff, of course, deserved none of this internal rant. But I'm being honest.

Elaine laughed, which got under my skin a little. How could she laugh at a time like this? My head was caving in and my world was following suit. "Come on, just tell me that you don't totally hate me for being so god-awful."

"I don't hate you," I said, evenly. I was not entering into her spirit of fun.

"At least hate me for leaving Baggy, like an imbecile."

I pictured her that morning, groggy and flushed, floating ecstatically around Geoff's apartment, humming to herself while she forgot about Baggy. My stomach

churned loudly. "Okay. We both hate each other and we both treat each other like dirt. Even Steven."

"Fine. Now do we both forgive each other?" Elaine asked me, her voice light and happy. We were having completely different conversations.

"Sure," I said.

Elaine said, "Good. Jeez, we sound like we're practically married."

* * * * *

The next day was pure hell. In addition to lacking energy, having a destroyed digestive system, craving but reluctant to smoke because of how much I'd chain-smoked at the party and the day I worried about Elaine, and finishing all the aspirin in the first aid kit at work, as much from hangover residue as feeling nauseous about Elaine and Geoff, I came home to find Vereker waiting outside the building for me, combing his mustache with his thumb and forefinger.

"The dog you don't have seems to want to be taken on a walk," he said to me, sitting on the railing of the front stoop. He said it as though he was a Mafia don with the goods on me and my moll. I wanted to belt him.

"Our toilet still drips," I said. It didn't, but only because Elaine had jury-rigged some rubber bands around the flush column.

"The lease says no dogs."

"Look, Stu," I said, "this is just a temporary thing. I'm watching her for a friend."

"You have one day to get rid of the dog."

I argued with him for a while, but he wasn't budging. According to Vereker, all dogs do is chew moulding, pee on hardwood floors, and scratch doors. I told him that I didn't want a dog tearing up the place any more than he did. It was useless. He left and told me that he'd be back tomorrow to check and he'd evict us if the dog was still

there. I pretended to be concerned, and he left. I knew that he couldn't evict us without giving us written notice of a problem first, giving us at least two weeks to fix the problem, and then 30 days once he'd served formal notice of eviction. I'd read enough leases to know what his limits were. I wasn't worried about the legal trouble; I was worried about the hassle. But I'd be gone to Smyrna in a couple of days and then Elaine would be back and she could deal with it. Elaine.

My very bad, horrible, awful day continued on the inside of my apartment. Baggy had slain a sofa cushion and dragged its mustard-yellow foam entrails all over the living room and kitchen, where she had left two puddles and three very large turds for such a small dog. When I yelled at her for it and shoved her nose into all of the very bad things she had done, she submissively peed all over my green suede bucks. This, in turn, generated more yelling, which led to more peeing. Baggy was exiled to the balcony while I cleaned up, groaning and cussing. While vacuuming the I floor, I found pieces of blue yarn that I am sure used to be one of my socks. I was too worn out and miserable to yell at her any more.

The light was blinking nine times on the answering machine. Here's what I heard:

#1: Hi guys this is Diane. Elaine, I'm sorry I missed your party but I was at my grandmother's. I hope it all went well. Megan told me it was a blast. Give me a call if you feel like it.

#2: Hello. This is Stu Vereker, your landlord. I just received another complaint about a dog. I'll be by this evening. The lease says no dogs. Goodbye.

#3: Elaine, this is Lydia. Call me as soon as you can—Mr. Canter is accepting your counter-offer! I'll be at the office around noon, so call me at home until then. Bye now, and congratulations!

#4: Hi Elaine, Lydia again. I'm at the office. Please give me a call.

#5: Click (someone hung up—drives me crazy)

#6: Elaine—Lydia. You need to set up the settlement date as soon as possible and we need to talk. I'm here until six or so, and then I'll be back home. Please call!

#7: Hello? Luke? Anyone home? Hello? (she always thinks I'm in the apartment, taunting her by not answering, I'm sure) Luke? I need to know what time you're coming, sugar. I do hope it's Wednesday night, but your father and I are having cocktails over at the Frazier's (fray-juhs) and your father was sure that you wouldn't get in 'til late, but I was just calling to be sure, because I thought you might have a half-day and head on down here early to visit before Gramma West's flight gets in at 9:30. I don't even know why we're having cocktails, the night before Thanksgiving for heaven's sake and me with a million and a half things to do, but you know how those Frazier's are. They'd never let us forget it if we declined and I don't even really want to go, but I did just buy the sweetest suit, and it's really too fancy for Thanksgiving dinner, so I'm glad I've got a chance to wear it somewhere before Christmas parties start up, because it really wouldn't—click (our machine cut people off after a minute, thank God).

#8: Oh, I hate these things, Luke, I really do. Just make sure to give a call to let me know your plans, honey. Bye now. And you be sure to say hi to Elaine for me. Good bye. Oh—and make sure you take something decent to the cleaners so you'll look nice for Gramma West, now. Talk to you soon. Bye.

#9: Click

I'm sure that last click was the Lydia woman calling again. I didn't know who she was, but I didn't like the sound of it. What was Elaine doing that she wasn't telling me about? It sounded suspiciously like a real estate deal. And how perfectly convenient that Diane was gone Saturday night. I bet that smug fucker Geoff planned the whole

thing.

The Lydia woman called again that evening and confirmed my suspicions—she was with a real estate company. I asked her if I could give a message to Elaine, that she was out of town. Lydia exclaimed, "Oh that's right. I've got the number," and hung up. That made my stomach churn more, and I went to bed early.

* * * * *

I headed down to Atlanta on Wednesday evening after work. I hoped Baloo could live on the amount of food and water I'd left for him, because I wasn't taking him with me. This was the first time I'd ever taken Baggy in my car—the first time she'd ever been on a long car ride. She did a pretty good job of not getting tossed around too much, because I was on the interstate most of the time. When I got to Greensboro and stopped for gas, she pitched off of the front seat and into the dashboard. Then when I let her out to pee, she didn't want to get back in. She ran under the car behind a tire, and I had to shimmy under there on my stomach and pull her out. She had another first then—growling at me, seriously. That ticked me off. When I scooped her up with one hand and lobbed her into the back seat, she got the idea about who was going to be in charge for the rest of the trip, which from there on out was uneventful. Well, the car part at least.

I arrived at 3 a.m. and braced myself for my mother's reaction to Baggy. Doing that helped me not have to brace myself for the worst part of the trip, which was simply having to go back to my parent's house, sleep on the sofa because Gramma West was going to have my old room, and pretend I was a member of my family. I hadn't mentioned the dog ahead of time. I called from a gas station down the street before I pulled into the driveway and knocked on the front door. My mother would likely call the police if someone banged on the door at 3 a.m., even though she knew I was coming.

I had cajoled her to leave me a key somewhere, but that was apparently too dangerous.

After I got that cold look from my mother, after she'd opened the door and simultaneously exclaimed and moved to hug me and then stepped back in surprise as Baggy jumped up and put her front paws on my mother before running into the house, tail wagging, after that I wanted to turn around and get the hell out of there as fast as possible. My mother tried to force food on me and then kept me up for an hour telling me about the cocktail party at the Frazier's and what Weezy Frazier had done with her sun porch. Baggy stayed in the basement, whimpering and pawing the basement door. I finally let her out and she slept at my feet on the couch. There would be hell to pay in the morning, I knew, but in order to manage a weekend at home, I would need all the sleep I could get.

* * * * *

I woke up to the sound of Gramma West screaming "Mitchell! Sonny!" at the top of her lungs from what sounded like the inside of an echo chamber. Those are my parents' names—Mitchell is my dad, in case that isn't clear. My mother's real name is Francine; I don't know where they got Sonny from.

It was just before six a.m. when the noise started—I dragged myself out of couch and started moving fast up the stairs when she repeated her scream, sounding almost hysterical. The following things happened more or less at the same time, but I can't exactly tell it that way. I got a head start on Baggy, who began yapping and tried to run past me on the stairs, tripping me up near the top so that I fell on the carpeted steps. I tried to catch myself, but my hands shot across the carpet, burning the skin on my palms, and my chest landed on the floor in front of the hall bathroom door at the same time that my parents arrived. I screamed "Fuck!" when my rib cage slammed into the corner of the top step, and Baggy barked at my father.

My grandmother screamed, "What was that?" and began rattling the bathroom door from the inside, occasionally screaming "Mitchell! Sonny!"

Baggy howled at the door, and my father, who I still hadn't seen yet, looked like he didn't recognize me. I glanced up at him, my face contorted from pain and blushing rapidly for having shouted one of the many unspeakable words in my mother's house, not five steps from my grandmother nonetheless. I think he was still addled from the cocktail party; it happened every time my parents left the house. He looked like he might kick me down the stairs and go for the baseball bat he kept behind their bedroom door. I don't think he fully realized who I was until the whole thing was over a few minutes later. My mother said, "What on earth!" and my father said, "He's not wearing any clothes." That's when I realized I was wearing my boxers; and these were the patchy, threadbare ones that I only wear near the end of the laundry cycle.

My grandmother screeched, "Let me out! What's going on? Mitchell!" Gramma West was now fully hysterical, and the door slammed hard. She'd thrown her full weight against it, trying to get out. "Ow—Mitchell, my shoulder!" Baggy barked at the door again.

"Mama? What's going on in there?" my father asked, taking his eyes from me suspiciously, as though I might ambush him while his head was turned.

"Go put some clothes on, for goodness' sake!" my mother hollered at me, exasperated. I pulled myself off the stairs, my ribs throbbing and my palms burning. Baggy was still barking, and my father kicked her out of the way and began shaking the bathroom doorknob.

"Mitchell, get me out of here!" Gramma West screamed.

"What the hell is this dog doing here? Could everyone stop yelling for crying out loud!" he roared, turning wildly to look at my mother for an explanation.

"Hey! Don't kick her," I shouted, moving off the stairs toward my father. I was worried he might kick me too.

"Please take that dog downstairs," my mother said.

"Dog?" Gramma West yelled. "I can't get out!"

"Calm down, Mother," my mother yelled through the door. Gramma West is actually my dad's mother. "It sticks all the time—we'll get you out. For heaven's sake Mitch, open the door!"

"I'm trying—it's stuck!" my father snapped back, and I scooped Baggy up as she started barking again.

"I'm getting claustrophobic," my grandmother screamed. "I can't get out!" There was another loud *thump* against the door as Gramma West hit it again. She watches a lot of television at the home.

"Mother, go sit on the toilet before you break something! And Luke, get downstairs and get some clothes on before your grandmother has to see you half-naked!" my mother said, as things began to calm down and she was able to take more control. My father whipped his head around, startled, when she said my name, and I think that's when he recognized me completely.

"Let me out! I don't want to die in here," Gramma West screamed.

"Lord, woman, you're not going to die in my bathroom!" my mother shouted through the door.

"Would you stop yelling?" my father bellowed at my mother.

"You don't need to take that tone with me," my mother hissed. I took that as my cue to head back to the living room. My hands and chest were killing me, but I was dead tired, with two hours sleep, on Thanksgiving morning. I wasn't feeling very thankful. When my father finally got Gramma West out of the bathroom, all three of them migrated

downstairs and kept me from sacking back out on the couch. When it was all settled, the only thing anyone seemed to remember was that I had said fuck in the house.

"It's HBO is what it is," Gramma West said, stirring her coffee.

"He certainly didn't learn it under this roof," my mother snorted.

This was the least stressful part of my Thanksgiving holiday. Things had gotten off to a bad start, but you can only excuse a hideous relationship so far before you bow out. I swore to myself I would not do this again at Christmas.

I spoke with Elaine on Friday and was slightly cheered by the fact that she was also having a miserable time. She said she wanted to meet me Sunday around noon, if possible. She was driving George's car back and she had a surprise for me. I didn't want to guess when she tried to get me to, and she wasn't giving me any information. It was a relief to hear her voice, to know that there was someone that I actually liked alive and well, talking to me instead of slamming kitchen cabinets to communicate. I was almost able to forgive her for Geoff. We were on the phone for an hour, comparing notes about our families. I would still trade mine for a pack of wolves, but this was the first time Elaine had ever convinced me that her family was a contender in the Evil Modern Entity category.

Chapter 7

A narrow board, nailed down only at one end, hung aslant from the split rail fence at the beginning of a gravel driveway with long dead grass and wild flowers cresting the hump between the tire ruts. Thick, gnarled trees, giant apples with some smaller and more gnarled peaches off to the right, ran in rows parallel to the driveway, converging at some point I couldn't see behind a slight incline. The trees still held most of their leaves, and occasionally one would float down in front of us. It was all just trees, trees, and more trees on that side of the county road, behind the fence that ran along beside it. A black mailbox, its mouth open, stood beside the fence in a dense patch of tall grass. Next to it, a yellow FOR SALE sign with UNDER CONTRACT diagonally across it caught my eye in the grass. Thigh-high grasses filled the spaces between rows, giving the old orchard a wild look, but muted as though grown from a savage youth to a merely disheveled old age. Like an old biker, but nice.

"Surprise!" Elaine said. "What do you think?"

That wasn't much of a question for me to answer. "I don't know yet. It's beautiful—but I still wish I knew what I was supposed to be seeing." Elaine hadn't told me anything substantive yet, and I didn't let on that I knew about Lydia. I wanted her to do all the talking. She seemed to want to surprise me. There was no house that I could see.

"Alright, let's take a look." Elaine shifted George's car into first and pulled into the driveway. I scanned around us as we moved up the incline, taking it all in. Most of

it was pretty homogeneous, but every so often my eyes were relieved of monotony by finding a tree fallen over or an empty space with no tree at all. This was an old orchard, and the reseeded were obvious, dwarves that were easier for picking because of their height. I've been through my share of old peach orchards. The car shuddered as we hit holes and bumps in the driveway.

"Did you see read the sign back there? Nailed to the fence?" she asked.

"The FOR SALE sign?"

"No, the other one," Elaine said, smiling. I shook my head. "This place used to be called Elysium. The sign's fallen and faded, but it's still there."

"I bet whoever had to mow this didn't think it was all too Elysian."

"Really," Elaine said. "The name's a little pretentious, but I like it anyway. Seems like it takes a lot of guts to use a name like that."

I looked around, trying to think of a word better than naivete, one that meant confidence in things that went unexamined.

"And here we are," Elaine said.

We reached the top of the incline and looked down at the rest of the orchard beneath us. The land slanted away more sharply on this side, down to a narrow river bed. I didn't know what river it was, but it turned out to be a fork of the Mawmannock. The trees all stopped at the water's edge, and on the other side was a wide patch of open grass, green but browning and dotted with pines or firs. I can't ever remember the difference. It's like alligators and crocodiles or conservatives and republicans. The driveway went straight down to the river, where it met a low concrete bridge spanning the forty-yard bed. After that, the driveway twisted off to the left and ended in front of a nineteenth century farmhouse, white clapboard with a red tin roof, a few other buildings clustered off to the side of the house. There were no other houses, not even tell-tale

chimney smoke. I felt like I was looking into a frontier painting of the lush Tennessee and Kentucky valleys west from the mountains. I took in a sharp breath.

"Ta dah!" Elaine shouted, stretching her arms forward like a magician's assistant.

"Elaine, this is . . . *amazing!*"

"And guess what recent heiress just bought it?"

"You're kidding! You bought this place? It must be worth a fortune!"

"It will be when I'm done with it," she said.

"How big is it?"

"Sixty acres, including the river and the islands. Apple, peach, cherry, and pear, but mostly apple."

"I can't believe you bought it." I really couldn't. I hadn't expected anything like this.

"Cash money. I felt like a crack dealer."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Luke, I know, believe me. I'm sorry. But I didn't tell anyone. I didn't even tell my family over Thanksgiving. I didn't want anyone to talk me out of it."

"Talk you out of it? This is awesome!"

"Yes, it is. But it's also crumbling, on a flood plain, unkempt, molested by Japanese beetles, the house is uninsured and uninsurable. That's part of the . . . charm, I guess you could call it. You can't see it, but the house is actually on an island. The river forks over there somewhere—" she pointed off to the left. "And meets back up with itself there. See where that gully runs?"

I did see a low patch far off to the right of the bridge running into the river bed.

"What did you pay for it then?"

"Guess."

I groaned but humored her. We played it high-low, Bob Barker style, as we drove down the driveway, crossed the bridge, and ended up in front of a house with peeling paint, missing screens, and a sagging porch. But—enormous and spectacular all the same. I zeroed in on one hundred and sixty-five thousand three hundred dollars as the purchase price. Over half the loot, but it was her money.

"That's a bargain," I said, "for all this land? And your own river? And orchard?"

"And a barn and two little buildings for I don't know what, and one of them's full of bushel baskets, a tractor, and a pretty sturdy little bridge."

"That is a bargain," I said.

Elaine smiled at me and turned off the ignition. "You haven't seen the inside yet," she said.

We got out of the car and walked around the house. Baggy shot out of the car and disappeared immediately behind the house. When I called her to get her back, Elaine stopped me. "There aren't any cars out here. Let her run. Oh—and remind me to get her fixed as soon as possible." I was too impressed with the house and too happy about having a good time with Elaine to harp on her about keeping this secret from me. I told myself, let it go Luke. Breathe deep, count to ten, and try to remember that she's not obligated to tell me anything anyway.

The house was huge by my standards. It was funny looking, tall, because of how it sat high on the ground at the top of a swell and because the foundation stood up about four feet from the ground, which served as flood protection. I'd never seen anything like it. You got a sense that it was almost too tall for its width, like looking at downtown Manhattan from the deck of a ferry. The main body of the house was a standard nineteenth century farmhouse—two stories, with a long front, full length porch, and little depth, but it had a number of additions jutting out from the right side and the back, and

the porch had been extended around the left side.

I ran around and through the house exclaiming about everything I saw: the sliding guillotine opening between the kitchen and the dining room, the pressed tin kitchen ceiling with a square and fleur-de-lis pattern, the strange vaulted living room ceiling, French doors to the dining room, the largest basement I'd ever seen—about fifteen foot ceilings because of the height of the foundation, with a huge old clunker of an oil furnace that would have made Hephaestus proud, a crusty old attic with two dormers looking east and west and stacks of old newspapers, the old beds in three of the four bedrooms, the little balcony/porch that had been added on over a sitting room, the old tub with claw feet (the best part of a particularly nasty but big upstairs bathroom), an ancient oak rocking chair, dried and splintering, sitting next to the floor-to-ceiling windows of the sitting room, hardwood floors everywhere, two staircases, the main one in a line from the front door, the back one split at the bottom and going to both the kitchen and sitting room, two chimneys. When I came back down to the kitchen to report my findings, Elaine grinned, flattered, I think, by my enthusiasm, and she said, "You sound like my realtor."

When you looked out of the front door, there were about a hundred and fifty yards of grass and trees before the rivers converged around the point of the island and ran on straight for a while before swerving off and disappearing to the left. The house had been built so that the straight course of the river lined up with the center of the front door, facing almost exactly east. I poked around the barn, which was mostly empty except for the tractor and its attachments, and guessed that there were rats. This later proved accurate. The two other little buildings sitting by the barn caught my attention, one a shed with old paint tins and bushel baskets and lumber odds and ends, the other completely empty but with a door so wide that I assumed it was a garage.

I couldn't stop gushing about how wonderful the place was. Elaine laughed at me.

"Luke! Shut up! You're making me want to say I hate the place."

"But it *is* like Little House on the Prairie with running water," I said. "I can't help it. I'm so excited for you. This is the kind of place people dream about. Shutters that work, for God's sake!"

"I know, I know. If you like this, just wait til you walk around the orchard and the woods. There's a little dam and a pond up at the west end of the island."

"I can't believe you own this place!"

"Luke."

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again. When do you settle?"

"I hope before Christmas. I'd like to spend it here, camping if I have to. I've got quite a bit of work to do on the place, as you can see."

For some reason, that was when it hit me. From the minute we'd seen the house from the top of the orchard, I'd been too absorbed to think about what it all meant in terms of Elaine moving out of the apartment. She was talking about this new house, only saying I, not we—I didn't blame her for this, I didn't expect anything less, I guess, but it did all come crashing down on me in an instant. Elaine was moving out.

"How's it going to be, out here all by yourself?" I asked, staring at the hardwood floors.

"I won't be alone," Elaine said. "I've got Baloo and Bagheera. It'll be hard, but it'll be good for me."

My body temperature dropped about ten degrees. Celsius. "Oh," I said. "Right." I didn't put on much of a poker face. If living alone was good for her, then living with me must be toxic.

"I'm *so* sorry I didn't talk to you about this earlier. Please don't hate me. I just couldn't deal with that while I was looking for this place. Luke?"

"What?"

"Just don't look so depressed. We'll still see each other. I need to live by myself."

I didn't answer her.

"And I'll keep paying rent on the apartment til the lease runs out. I want to ask you a favor." She looked at me and moved a strand of hair from her face. I still didn't say anything. I was surprised at myself, even in the bowels of my mini-depression, that I was feeling happy for her, glad that she'd bought this place and glad that she was able to do what she wanted to do. I wanted her to be happy.

"What favor?" Baggy came running up to us through the grass, sopping wet. We didn't know she could swim.

"If I've settled on the farm before Christmas, would you spend it out here with me? It might be camping in the living room or something, though."

Of course I would.

That was the first time she called it the "farm", and from then on, it just stuck. Elaine made phone calls to plumbers and electricians about "the farm." When we were driving carloads of her books and boxes and stuff the twenty-five miles from town the week before Christmas, we were going out to The Farm. And by the time she'd moved in, it was just simply the Farm.

Chapter 8

Vereker stopped by the apartment during the first week of December. Baggy greeted him at the door, and I stood in the doorway talking to him, not inviting him in. He handed me an envelope.

"This is your eviction notice. I hope the little dog is worth all the trouble it's causing." He smiled when he spoke; I think he was enjoying himself, but Elaine said he was probably just embarrassed by the whole thing. "You have to be out January 4th."

"Well Merry Fucking Christmas to you too," I said. Vereker glared at me.

"Come on in," Elaine said. "Would you like a beer or something?"

"Elaine—" I said. Vereker shook his head. I opened the envelope and skimmed a five page form letter with blanks that had been filled in by a blue pen. It had been copied so many times that the letters were fat black and patchy. I flipped through it, looking for the city seal or a judge's signature or something. I didn't see anything but our names, the address, the offenses of the dog against the sanctity of the lease, and Vereker's signature. I handed it back to Vereker.

"I tell you what, Stu," I said. "Why don't you read the lease over and then read the laws and then go about evicting us the right way? If you've never evicted someone before, let me just tell you that it's not this easy. And to save you the time, I'll let you in on a little secret—the dog will be gone by the time you've gotten the right paperwork together." I didn't know exactly what I was talking about, but I did know that you had to have a court date for eviction, and you've also got to give a written warning

beforehand.

He handed the letter back to me. "This is my eviction notice to you. You be out by January 4th or I call the police."

"The dog'll be out by then," Elaine said. Her settlement date was set for the December 19th.

"It's too late for that," Vereker answered.

"Fine," I said. "But let me tell you now that I won't be out by then but the dog will. And then I'll stay until the lease runs out, and then you'll give me back my entire security deposit."

"I'll see you on January 4th," Vereker said, turning to go. We watched him walk down the stairs.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like something to drink? Eggnog?" Elaine called after him.

"Elaine!" I hissed at her. "You're a highly unpleasant little man," I shouted to Vereker. I hate short-men-mentality power trips.

"You don't need to get nasty with him," Elaine said, closing the door and walking to the living room. "You're just making him feel justified for acting like an asshole."

"You're not the one he's trying to kick out," I said.

* * * * *

When I got home from work on the big settlement day, there was a message from Elaine that she now officially owned the Farm and I should come out there and celebrate. I was really too tired to do it, but I had no way to call her and cancel, so I drove out. It was dark when I got there. The FOR SALE sign was gone, and I noticed that Elaine had propped the Elysium sign up so that it no longer dangled in the grass. The Farm looked a lot more barren than when last I'd been there; the grass was browner, and the

trees had few leaves, an occasional brown one still attached or a withered piece of fruit appearing in my headlights. A leaf fire was burning somewhere, faintly scenting the air.

"I can see people coming from about a mile away!" I heard her shout from inside the house. Elaine came outside onto the dark porch, her face lit by a swinging Coleman lantern. She was dirty looking and wired and happy. "It's mine! It's all mine—and I have got so much work to do," she beamed. "I don't know where to start. There's no electricity yet, but I'm on a well, so there's water. After I clean it top to bottom, I need to paint, fix the upstairs bathroom, I don't trust this porch. I was thinking about—"

"Whoa!" I said. "Slow down. You've got all the time in the world."

"I know, I know. But there's so much to do."

"The I suggest you start with a list of things, enjoy your first few hours as an apple orchard owner, and worry about all that stuff tomorrow. I brought beer. Nifty lantern."

"Beer? I bought champagne. And not Andre or Roget either," she winked at me.

"You might want to save your money for paint and Windex," I said. "There's not that much left."

"I think I can afford some fine hooch with more than seventy thousand still in the bank," she said.

"Whatever. So tell me about your settlement."

She shot a cork up into the air, and we didn't hear it land. We sat on the back porch of the house, drinking champagne out of the bottle by the lantern light and watching the last glow of the hidden sun fade from the sky behind the black wall of the Blue Ridge, while Elaine told me all about signing papers and meeting the previous owners and writing checks and handing over keys.

"This used to be a goat dairy and sheep farm around the turn of the century. The

main house used to be on the north side of the river, but in the late twenties the place got sold to some Dutch family. They tore down the old house and then rebuilt it on the island after they poured that bridge." Elaine caught her breath, elated. The energy she'd been putting into making plans for the house had leaped into her story-telling. It made me happy to hear her like that again. "They're the ones that planted the orchard—most of these trees are over sixty years old. Mr. Canter—he's the old guy that owned the place—said the orchard used to be over a thousand acres, but the land got all chopped up when his father-in-law died, and then he split up his part when he closed the orchard. He married one of the daughters and they lived out here and ran the orchard until this place got flooded in the sixties."

"That's a little scary," I said. "I don't want to drive out here some Sunday and find you and Baloo floating in some umbrella with Baggy paddling after you."

"Don't worry—that's kind of the cool thing. Mr. Canter said that the flood did a lot of damage—including carrying away one of the outbuildings and trapping it on the island for four days—but the bridge held up. And he said the water never came near the upstairs of the house. The basement was full of more than ten feet of water, but the rest of the house only got rained on. Isn't that great?"

"How do you know he wasn't trying to con you? If I was trying to unload some floodplains, I don't think I'd tell people about the week I spent on my roof."

"I don't think he was the type to lie about it."

"Why? I'm not trying to be Mr. Negative or anything, but you know."

Elaine took a sip of her champagne. "He's one of those old guys that would love to tell me about the life-threatening adventures of the big flood. He wouldn't be able to help himself."

"Well then why'd they move after the flood?"

"They didn't. He said his wife and he decided to stop running the orchard then. They lived here for another few years. And listen to this—he told me his wife got struck by lightning out by the fork of the river. He smelled something burning, looked around, and found her smoldering."

"Ew."

"Really. There's a granite marker on the point for her, but I haven't seen it yet."

"She's buried here?"

"I don't think so. Probably wasn't much left to bury. But after that's when he moved out."

"I don't blame him. Not exactly Elysium, is it?"

"He said his father-in-law came up with that. He always thought it was a joke. But this wife stuff was all twenty years ago."

"So what has the place been doing since then?"

"He didn't say much. He sold most of what he had, and then he rented the place out a few times but he always had trouble with the tenants. He sold it to retire on. I told him I'd invite him out here to take a look at the place after I get it fixed up. Her marker's out here and everything."

"Think he'll still be alive then? Next century?"

"You are a riot. I'll have this place sparkling by the end of spring. There's not really that much to do to make it liveable—once I've cleaned it, I think I can pretty much move in, and then I'll keep all my stuff downstairs while I paint the upstairs and fix up the upstairs bathroom—I was thinking about making the room that looks east into my bedroom because of the morning sun, but then the room with the balcony over the sitting room. . . ."

Elaine went on with her plans for the Farm, making list after mental list and

occasionally breaking to ask me if I knew anything about plumbing or drywalling, more to include me in the monologue than anything else, because she knew I didn't. We finished off the champagne and moved inside when we got cold. There wasn't any heat inside, so before we left, Elaine asked me to remind her to call about getting oil delivered out there as soon as possible.

* * * * *

Once I'd gotten used to the idea of Elaine moving out, I noticed a positive development between the two of us. Elaine was getting up early, leaving the apartment before I was, and getting home late, exhausted but energized by the work she was doing on the Farm. There was no more lounging around while I was at work, no complaining about George or money after work. I even realized that I'd been angry about how late she was sleeping in, for some stupid reason. I just didn't like having to get up first every single day, knowing that she was sleeping late in the next room, maybe even reading in bed. One of the dangers of rehashing all of your petty complaints is the likelihood of taking a good long look at the way you've been acting and coming to the conclusion that, on certain occasions, you're an insufferable dink.

Part of what I realized was that, even with my fiendish concern that since Elaine was leaving, the drunken night I'd been looking forward to when we'd come home sloshed and give each other back rubs before sliding into sloppily making out on the couch and ending up unclothed and romping in one of our beds, even with that pipe dream a less distinct possibility, I was marginally relieved that Elaine would no longer live with me. Maybe it took the pressure of the drunken night possibility off my shoulders, maybe I was looking forward to working on my ad critiques without anyone around to disturb me, maybe I wanted to be able to walk around the apartment and scratch myself with impunity—it was probably a combination of all three. Again,

knowing exactly why you want something often uncovers less than chivalrous motives. And this isn't to say that I wasn't going to miss Elaine terribly. I had plenty of time to think about this while I went through the kitchen cabinets and tried to figure out what was the difference between hers, mine, and ours, plenty of time while we loaded up two carloads of stuff to take out to the Farm.

* * * * *

I arrived at the Farm with a trunk full of food, clothes, pillow, sleeping bag, and Christmas presents. Christmas was on a Wednesday, and I had been given the choice of the first or second half of the week off from work. I chose the second half, a better deal time-wise, because I got an extra half-day on Tuesday off. But this also meant I was exhausted come Christmas Eve from doing everyone else's work, because they took off the first half, and there was only a skeleton crew, really more of a vertebrae crew, at the office Monday and Tuesday.

It had been a good excuse to give my mother: I just couldn't make it this year because of my damn job. I even managed to sound forlorn on the phone for her, until she suggested driving up to spend Christmas with me. No way. I know I hurt her feelings during that phone call, when I was suddenly spluttering for the thirty-two reasons why them coming up would be a bad idea. I also knew she could stay mad at me for only so long. Then my father called and I had to go through the whole thing again, with all the tension and none of the hysteria. I made the right choice.

Elaine had put a gold star atop one of the firs in the front yard. Both of her cars sat beside the house, hers and George's, and there was a heap of firewood in front of one of the sheds. Bags of raked leaves sat inside the door of the barn, and the brown December grass had been cut around the house and between all the outbuildings. She'd been busy since the weekend before when I'd helped her move in. Baggy came trotting

out to me, and as I petted her, it occurred to me that, other than phone calls, I hadn't been speaking to anyone for almost three days outside of work. It was kind of spooky.

"Merry Christmas!" I called inside the house.

"Hey! Merry Christmas to you," Elaine yelled from somewhere upstairs. "I'll be down in a sec."

I brought in my loads from the car and deposited all of it inside the front hall before looking around. The place was immaculate; the dust and grime of the house's abandonment had been conquered. It was also eerily empty. The kitchen had all of Elaine's stuff put away, hidden in cabinets and drawers that I poked around in, the downstairs bathroom had her stuff in it. The sitting room had all her mattress, boxes, Baloo, and assorted junk on the floor. "Hey there Baloo," I said, and he just stared back at me. I didn't particularly miss him.

There were pillows stacked against one wall of the living room and firewood stacked on the hearth. It was clean, but it was empty. The biggest difference was that you could actually see out of the windows; they'd been black with who knows what sort of crap when we'd moved her stuff in. That combined with bare light bulbs on the ceilings and a pair of wall sconces in the living room made the possibilities of the house more apparent.

Elaine came down, her hands and hair covered in paint, and took me for a tour of the upstairs—the same story as the moonscape of the first floor, but more barren and also more lighted. "The whole upstairs is primed, and I'm almost done painting the bathroom," she told me. I peered in the door, not touching the walls. The upstairs bathroom floor had been ripped out, funky toilet and tub stains exorcised. "I'm putting blue ceramic tile in here."

"I can't believe how well you cleaned it," I said. "And it looks so much nicer

painted." Duh.

"I'm going to go crazy painting white on white. You can't tell where you've been already. Go ahead downstairs and get something to eat if you want. I'm just going to finish up the window trim in here. The tv's in the sitting room, but I don't get any decent reception down in this little valley."

"The last thing I need is more tv. Do you have any extra brushes? I can help."

Elaine looked a little embarrassed. "I didn't ask you out here for cheap manual labor."

"I'll just expect a nicer Christmas present," I said.

"Well don't get your hopes up," Elaine laughed. "I'd have to run back into town. Are you serious?"

"Sure. You've already done the hard part."

"Really. Please don't offer if you don't want to."

"I'm sure. I'll get us beers, and we can deck the halls with paint."

When I came back upstairs with two cold Basses—I splurged—Elaine handed me a paint roller with a broomstick extension. "Don't worry about getting paint on the floors too much—I'm going to refinish them when I'm done painting anyway. Do you mind decking the ceilings?" I shook my head and got started in one of the bedrooms. The only part I hate about painting is doing the trim.

Elaine and I had only been living apart for three days, but we had a lot to say to each other, and when we ran out of catching-up things to say, we just chatted, shouting from room to room, and then we moved on to Christmas carols. When we ran out of carols, we'd make appropriate variations. My favorite was "Away on an Orchard, Hardwood for a Bed." Every hour or so, one of us would yell "God rest ye merry gentlemen" and we'd take a beer break on the floor of the upstairs hall. She made me

blow my smoke out an open window, but I can't blame her. Elaine's hands were covered in paint, and I was a speckled egg from the roller. The Basses gave us energy for a few hours, but at nine thirty that Christmas Eve, we stopped painting when we started getting a little sloppy. We'd finished the bathroom, two bedrooms, and part of another. We were getting past slightly drunk when Elaine started daubing me with paint and singing that it's a white Christmas after all, sort of a combination with "It's A Small World." We moved downstairs in our paint-covered clothes, changed and showered, and started a fire in the living room fireplace.

"You are awesome," Elaine said to me, hoisting her Natural Light. We'd polished off the Bass. "You paint for me, you get me drunk. Hell, Luke—you're my baby Jesus."

"No, you're my baby Jesus."

"I wish I'd gotten a tree. I love Christmas trees."

"That dandy gold star on the one out front counts, doesn't it?"

Elaine jumped up from the floor. "I forgot! Come look."

We went out onto the porch, and Elaine fumbled with an extension cord running out from a crack in one of the windows. "Ta dah!" she shouted, and the tree lit up with tiny white blinking lights. "I think the colored ones always look a little creepy," Elaine said. The damp air chilled my shampooed and speckled hair, but we walked, rather stumbled, out to the tree.

"It's beautiful," I said. The stars were out in force that night, moonless, and the decorated tree almost blended into the sky, pinpoints of light blinking against the black. The whole thing, the house, the tree, the night, Elaine, the beer—started to choke me up a little. I'm not usually a weepy drunk.

I sang, "Oh Christmas tree, Oh Christmas tree, You are lit and so are we."

We looked at the tree for a while until we got cold and went back inside to the

fire. I hadn't noticed how warm the house was before. Elaine always liked to keep the apartment warm. "I hope you know how much I appreciate your help," Elaine said. "That would have taken me forever up there. And not just the painting. I'm really glad you're here."

"Me too," I said. I exhaled my smoke into the fireplace and let the natural draft do its work. "We always threatened not to spend another Christmas or whatever with our families. It's nice not being ineffectual."

"You're a case," she laughed. "But who am I to talk?"

"You're the baby Jesus," I said. "Man am I wiped from using that roller."

"I know!" Elaine said, getting on her knees and crawling behind me. "You deserve a backrub."

I froze. "You don't have to."

"Duh! Consider it a Merry Christmas. You want it sitting up or lying down?"

"Lying down," I said, feeling very slimy about telling the truth. *Deja vu, fantasy come true.* And all that.

"Well, do it then," Elaine said. I stretched out on my stomach beside the fire, and Elaine brought me a couple of pillows. She climbed on top of me, straddling me and sitting on my butt, and I practically stopped breathing. "Put out the smoke," she said.

I tossed the third-smoked cigarette into the fire and put my arms at my sides.

"Boy are you tense!" Elaine said. I laughed nervously. She started karate-chopping my back, neck, and shoulders, and then began working her knuckles up from my jeans waist to my hair, running beside my spine. "Breathe, Luke" she said. "And relax." She had me breathe in and out a few times, and I actually did relax. It's hard to stay tense with blood vessels full of Bass and Natural Light. We hadn't eaten.

"You hungry?" I asked.

"Nope. You?" Elaine kneaded my upper arms.

"Uh-uh." The long day of work caught up with me, and I relaxed into a pile of Jell-O on the floor.

"There you go," Elaine said. "I must be good."

I murmured agreement, cleared my mind of best and worst case scenarios, and as Elaine started singing, quietly to herself, "Oh Christmas tree, Oh Christmas tree, You are lit and so are we," I fell asleep in front of the fire.

* * * * *

Hearing metal banging together, I woke confused, staring at my pillow beside my head, which rested on my left arm. My ribs ached from poking into the oak floor, and my sleeping bag was unzipped over me like a blanket. I lay there, thinking for a moment, and realized that Elaine must have covered me up when I fell asleep. I guess it's more like passed out—there's not much of a chance that I would have fallen asleep in the position I was in without a little chemical help. I sat up and heard the clanging metal again, which was Elaine banging around in the kitchen. I hoped she was firing up a breakfast. I was groggy. Not hung over, at least not yet, just exceedingly morning-groggy. I looked at the fireplace in front of me, finally noticing a big hand-knit red wool sock filled with familiar Christmas bulges, and next to it a smaller green sock with a baked rawhide bone poking out of the opening. I smiled to myself, and then felt like crap for not getting together a stocking for her. Well, you can't do everything. I stretched and stood up, a little wobbly, and looked at my watch. It was six-thirty in the morning, and I never get up that early. I wanted to crawl back under my sleeping bag.

"Morning," I said to Elaine, propped in the kitchen doorway.

"Merry Christmas!" She came over and gave me a hug and then re-cinched the belt of her old blue robe. She had on her Big Feet, a pair of Tweety-Bird slippers. I

smelled sausage.

"You too. Do you know what time it is? It's early."

"That's the way we do it out here in the country," she told me. "I'm gone git me a rooster. Coffee?" I nodded, and she poured me a mug. White winter sunlight streamed in through the bare windows facing south. Thin frost dusted the long grasses along the river. There was nowhere to sit, so I hopped up onto one of the counters and sipped. I burnt my lips and the tip of my tongue, but I woke up a bit. Elaine's coffee was always stronger than I like it. She always said that there was no point in it if it wasn't strong.

"What're we having?"

"Everything," Elaine said.

"Can I help?"

"Nope. Oh—you can let Baggy in. I didn't want her waking you up. She's back in the sitting room."

I came back into the kitchen, following Baggy. "Baggy and I would like to thank you for our stockings," I said.

Elaine didn't turn around. "I don't know what you're talking about. Santa brought those." She indicated Baggy with her head. "Little pitchers," she whispered to me.

"Ah. Well then, thank you for putting me to bed last night."

"You zonked. I don't know when you fell asleep—I'd been rubbing your back for a while and I thought you were just relaxed. Then I noticed you were dead to the world. I actually fell asleep on top of you! I didn't go to bed until about three."

I liked the picture of Elaine asleep on top of me. I thought to myself that we really would be good together, and then I made myself stop thinking that for fear of destroying what was looking to be an excellent Christmas.

I opened my stocking before breakfast. This was not one of my mother's classic stockings full of trial-size shampoos and shoe horns stolen ("They *expect* you to take them," she'd told me) from motel courtesy baskets, a requisite tangerine filling out the stocking toe. No sirree. Here's what Santa put in my stocking: an antique corkscrew of brass and ebony (both polished shiny), a half year's subscription to *Ad Week* (a trade journal—"Santa thought it might help with your reviews, but he didn't think you could stomach a whole year of it"), some new cologne that I actually liked, a shot glass in the shape of a cowboy boot, a pair of expensive-looking tortoiseshell sunglasses, and, jammed in the toe of the sock was its red wool mate. I gaped and tried to keep myself from mentally tallying the expense. My loot lay spread out on the counter beside me.

"Elaine! This is out of control."

"Don't talk to me about it. Santa is responsible. I think he had a hard time stopping. He just wanted you to have a good Christmas."

"I guess! Looks like I have a lot more painting to do." I slipped the thick socks on over the white ones I was wearing. The one on my left foot was a little stretched out from gift-bearing, but they were toasty.

"Suit yourself, but I don't see strings attached to any of those things. Maybe you could help Baggy open her stocking."

I set the green sock on the floor, and Baggy wasted no time investigating. She pulled out the rawhide bone and sniffed it. She ignored the bone, and then she became very intent on getting her nose into the body of the sock. After pushing the sock around the kitchen floor for a while, she started whimpering at the sock, so I helped her get at what she wanted—a long brown turd-looking doggy treat that Baggy had ripped out of my hands before I could tell what exactly it was. She settled herself down on the floor and polished off the treat.

"I believe there might be something else," Elaine said. I looked and pulled out a brass dog tag with Baggy's names and Elaine's name and address, along with two bandannas, red and green. "She needs some kind of Christmas decoration," Elaine said. There was also a white thing that looked like a pre-historic comb, which Elaine explained was a cuttlebone for Baloo. I twisted the two bandannas together, and when Baggy had finished off her snack, I tied the red and green cloth around her neck and attached the dog tag to her collar.

"That's a little frou-frou," I said.

"She is now an official country dog," Elaine said.

Breakfast was a feast of grease and salt, and we couldn't finish everything Elaine had made—sausage gravy and biscuits, scrambled eggs, hash brown potatoes, fresh-squeezed orange juice (bought), cantaloupe, baguette with two cheeses. We both pigged, sitting on the floor of the living room, swatting Baggy away when she tried to join us in front of the fire that I re-made. It wasn't that cold out, but it seemed the right thing to do. The coffee had roused me, but solid food in my stomach brought me fully to life. I got up in the middle of eating and retrieved a present for Elaine that I'd left in a bag in the front hall. I'd gotten her two things, and after the extravagant stocking, I was glad I'd done it.

Elaine looked pleased as she opened her wind chimes, the gleaming metal tubes resonating as she unwrapped each one. She dragged me out to the front porch, and we both froze while she hunted a hook or nail already in place to hang it on. "Under it's right where I want to put a porch swing, one of those old metal ones," she said. Every time she talked about doing something to the house, her face lit up like it was Christmas. In this case it was. In that early morning half-light and still air, thick mist hanging low over the river and the clearing on the island, the Farm looked like a place lost in time—it

could have been 1790 or 1990 from what I saw. The cars were around the other side of the house with the barn, and the tall grasses by the river hid the bridge. A column of smoke rose from an unseen chimney far past where the river bent out of sight. Nothing I saw looked planned, tended, or built. "I love this place," I told Elaine. There was no wind, so Elaine tapped the chimes a few times to hear them before we went back inside to the warmth of the fire.

Elaine brought me a large shirt box, unwrapped but with a large green bow blooming from the top. Inside was an oversized black sweater thick enough for the Arctic. It was gloriously heavy, and I slipped it over my shirt.

"I knit it myself," she said.

"You're kidding!"

"Of course I am. More coffee?"

* * * * *

After we'd opened our gifts to each other (and Elaine had gone even more overboard with these than with my stocking, but she said I was the only person she was going to get to watch open gifts from her that year, and she'd be damned if it wasn't going to be a lot), we opened packages from our families. Elaine's mother sent her a gold cross on a chain that had been George's. "I always forget you're Catholic," I said.

"I do too," Elaine answered. My mother sent me a bundt pan. Whoopee.

When the gifts were all opened, we got dressed and went outside for a walk around the property. The sun had warmed the frost off the grass, but I wanted an excuse to wear my sweater. Elaine took me over a little foot bridge on the other side of the island. I hadn't noticed it before—it was through the trees behind the garage. The bridge was nothing more than four halves of tree trunks, sheared of branches and split down the middle with the rounded side down, resting on short pilings in the middle of the water.

The river wasn't as wide on this side, only fifteen yards or so, but that bridge made me a little nervous. Elaine stood out in the middle of it and jumped up and down to show me that it was sturdy. We walked through the woods north of the house along the river, and then walked down to where the river converged to the east. It was a strange spot, that convergence point. On our side, the north, it was all trees. To the right, across the thin part of the river, was the east point of the island, long grasses with an occasional fir, and directly across the main body of the river lay the straight, straight rows of the orchard going up the hill. It looked like the borders of three countries.

Elaine indicated the point of the island with her finger, a clump of tall grasses stopping abruptly at the muddy bank. "I found Mrs. Canter's granite marker there the other day," she said. "She died pretty young." We both shivered at the thought.

We continued along the north bank of the river. Baggy followed us, running off but coming back every few minutes or so. It was fairly easy walking in the winter, but in the summer, brambles and vines clogged up the spaces between the trees along the shore. Across the river, the fruit trees had gotten smaller—peaches—and then we finally came to a point where there were no more trees in those unnaturally straight rows across from us. Continuing on, we tried to spot the property line, but it wasn't until we turned around and headed back that we saw the occasional blaze orange ties around a few well-spaced tree trunks or sticks dug into the ground that showed where the surveyors had been. Elaine wanted to follow the property line all the way around this side of the house, so we trudged back into the denser part of the woods, using the surveying ties as guides.

"Shouldn't we be leaving a trail of bread crumbs?" I asked her at one point, when we were having a hard time spotting the next flash of orange.

"I think you mean pebbles," she said.

We had to move around to see the orange flecks; if there was a tree between you

and the next tie, no amount of neck-craning would help. We found the northeast cornerstone of the property—it seems silly to call a piece of pine moulding with orange plastic tied to it a cornerstone, but that's what it was—and then walked west along the north property line. The ground was more uneven here, so the markers were easier to find, looking up or down a hill.

"What's on the other side of your property?" I asked her as we trudged along.

"I have no idea," she told me. Just then, a gunshot rang out nearby, startling both of us. Gun, rifle, pistol, whatever—I couldn't tell the difference. I think it came from behind us, but I couldn't be sure—it echoed a little.

"That sounded close," Elaine said, whispering to me. Baggy came running toward us, barking, and Elaine clamped her muzzle shut.

"Probably just hunters," I whispered back. We walked on a ways, silently and tentatively, trying to be good little Indians and not break any twigs. We took to pointing when we saw the markers, instead of speaking. Then Elaine stopped in front of me and turned around.

"What the FUCK are we doing?" she shouted. Surprised the hell out of me, more than the gunshot. She continued, not shouting, but talking loudly. "You're wearing black and khakis, I'm wearing this green thing. We might as well be begging some hunter to take a pot shot at us!"

"Good point," I said, not exactly shouting.

"Let's sing something while we walk, or at least keep talking."

"I'm a little caroled out. I can't think of a single song that isn't about angels or wise men." I found myself using the volume and inflection of someone giving a speech, as though we were speaking for the benefit of a hidden transmitter somewhere and wanted to fool the owner into thinking that we didn't know it was there. Or something like that.

"This land is your land, this land is my land," Elaine bellowed. I joined in, harmonizing with her, and we kept walking, belting out our song and stumbling over the words of the verses but coming in strong for the chorus. We ran the patriotic gamut of "The Star-Spangled Banner," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "America the Beautiful," and "You're a Grand Old Flag." They all seemed to go together and were the only things that came to mind at first. I tried "Dixie" but Elaine didn't know the words. Elaine was determined to follow the property line all the way around, so we kept on going.

"We don't *know* that there are hunters around," I said at one point.

"We don't want to take our chances, either. If we're loud enough, maybe we can scare them and any deer off."

"I can't imagine it's legal to hunt on Christmas," I said. "They've got really complicated calendars for when you can and can't hunt. I know you can't do it on a Sunday, so I would bet Christmas is out, too."

"Great. Drunk outlaw hunters running around shooting everything in sight." Elaine lowered her voice, as though they were out of sight but listening. "On my goddamn property, too," she hissed. "Fucking hunters."

I thought she was over-reacting a little, but I didn't say anything. I started up with "Scarborough Fair," just about the lamest song in the universe, but the only one that came to mind, and we kept up the Simon and Garfunkel repertoire until we came back to the river west of the Farm, having successfully navigated the north half of her property line. It disgusted me how well we knew a lot of those songs. We walked along the river back to the foot bridge, and I noticed that the lights were still blinking on Elaine's tree in the front yard.

I said, "It's still Christmas," and Elaine laughed.

* * * * *

Elaine and I spent the day after Christmas buying some basic necessities for the Farm—a futon sofa-bed and a square kitchen table with four matching oak chairs. After we'd assembled the new furniture, we painted the upstairs again for a few hours, beer-free this time. I still enjoyed doing it. Elaine's enthusiasm for fixing up the place was contagious. Diane came over for dinner that night. She had gotten lost on the drive over, so my first sight of her in a few months was her looking pretty frazzled. I wondered if any of it had to do with the Geoff situation. Elaine gave her the grand tour while I made a mess in the kitchen trying to create stuffed pork chops.

"So tell me what you've been up to," she asked me, coming into the kitchen. "I've hardly seen you lately."

I hadn't seen much of her, which was a shame. We'd been roommates for almost two years, and I enjoyed her company. She still worked at Uncle Buddy's, and I just didn't go there that often anymore. I always liked Diane, though. She was one of those people that focused attention on you and made you feel like you were the most interesting person she'd ever encountered. Maybe I was, but I doubt it. She was a Shifflettsburg native, and her parents still lived in town. I'd had dinner with them a few times at their place in one of the snotty older communities out near the Fox Hunt Tavern that had their own golf course.

"I've been up to no good," I told her. "Same old job, same old thing. The pattern's really pretty disturbing."

"What about the thing you're writing?"

"What thing?" I knew what she was talking about, but I certainly hadn't told her about it. It made me simultaneously queasy and proud that she knew about it—Elaine. I caught sight of Elaine slipping into the downstairs bathroom in a towel.

"The commercials thing. You are still doing that, right?"

"Oh, that. Yeah—I'm working on it in my spare time, which has for some reason been exceedingly spare lately. Elaine told you about that silly thing?"

"You know us. She tells me everything," Diane said smiling. She had a great smile that spread wide across her face and gave her dimples. I momentarily wondered if she knew about Geoff and Elaine. I heard the shower go on.

"Which reminds me," I said, changing the subject. I didn't want to talk about my project—it was still too formless, and I was afraid that if I talked about it, it would become something different as I ran my mouth. "I ran into Geoff about a month ago and he told me that you guys split up. How's everything with that?"

"He said he saw you. Told me you were pretty much guzzling everything in sight." Diane laughed a little. She was one of those people that never seemed to get drunk, no matter how much she drank. I can't count the number of nights that I found myself slurring and stumbling while Diane managed to close the bar as though she hadn't had a single drink. Come to think of it, I can't believe we weren't all fired.

"Yeah, yeah," I sighed.

"Just like old times, huh? Well, anyway, everything's going well. Being stuck in that apartment together has been weird, but we're getting along better now. My mother keeps telling me to move back in with them, but that would just about kill me."

"I know the feeling."

"We've even talked about getting back together. I think I want to." Diane started into a whole monologue about her relationship with Geoff. It was odd—interesting to me, since I knew both of them, but not the kind of thing I would ever tell anyone. I can't imagine just laying out things that bare for someone else. It seemed that with Geoff nearing graduation from law school, they were both looking ahead to what they'd be doing in the future. I knew that feeling too. "Sometimes I've considered moving back

in with my parents just so Geoff and I can date again and not live together," she said. "I think with a change of scenery everything could work out."

"Really?" I couldn't think of any salvaged and reconstructed relationships that had ever lasted.

Elaine poked her head out of the bathroom, her hair wet. "Tell her to do it, Luke. Those two belong together." Ah, I thought, Miss Guilty speaks.

"Eavesdropper," Diane said.

"Like I've never heard that stuff before," Elaine answered.

After dinner, I made up my mind to try and see more of Diane from now on. She was what my father would call a good egg. I wouldn't use the term, but there was something straightforward and pleasantly simple about Diane. You never had to second-guess with her. There was a moment, when the three of us were sitting by the fire, me and Diane on the sofa and Elaine on the floor with her back to us, that I thought it would be a good idea to ask Elaine about Geoff. We were all talking a lot, and I tried to jump in, but Diane cut me off talking about something else. As the question lingered on my tongue, I realized what a bad idea it was to ask it, especially now, but possibly ever. If Elaine wanted us to know, she would have told us. But had she possibly told Diane and asked her not to mention it to me? That possibility bugged me even more than the original question, but I kept silent about it.

Diane and Elaine slept in the sitting room, on Elaine's double bed, and I was on the new sofa-bed. Elaine took us around the orchard the next day, and then Diane and I joined her in painting more of the upstairs. I went back home on Saturday, and that little apartment seemed very small and lonely after a few days at the Farm.

Chapter 9

A week later on January 4th, the Saturday after New Year's, Vereker came to my door around noon.

"Today is moving day," he said. "You need to vacate this apartment by 5:00 this evening."

I hung my mouth open in disgust, as though I'd forgotten all about the eviction notice. I hadn't. "Look, Mr. Vereker. What is your problem? The dog isn't here any more. I told you she'd be out; she left two weeks ago."

Vereker moved out of the way, and I saw that he'd brought a policeman with him, standing behind him. I got that sense from Vereker that he'd brought his big brother to beat me up for him.

"See?" Vereker said to the cop. "He won't leave."

"Son, it looks like you're being evicted, whether you like it or not," the policeman said to me. He had on wire-rimmed glasses, a little pudgy for a cop, but he looked like a fairly pleasant guy.

"Officer—" I looked for his name badge, but it was partially hidden in a fold of his jacket. "I've paid rent for this month already." This was true, and it wasn't even due until the next day.

He looked dubiously to Vereker. Vereker spluttered, "I haven't gotten it yet."

"Well I sent it," I said. "I'm sure it's in today's mail. Officer—my roommate had a dog here for about a month. . . ."

"Longer than that," Vereker interjected.

"Whatever. The other tenants complained, and two weeks ago, my roommate moved out and took her dog. Stu here never gave us any kind of written warning. He just handed us an eviction notice, even when we told him the dog would be leaving."

"I told you in person." Vereker snorted. "Written warning!"

The policeman looked at Vereker. "You said there was going to be a disturbance here, sir." He called him sir and me son. God that bugs me.

"I think there would be if you weren't here," Vereker said. It was then my turn to snort.

The policeman told us it wasn't a police matter -- it was for the sheriff. I don't think I ever realized that there was a difference. He told us to head down to the magistrate's office to work it out. I didn't like that word, magistrate. I pictured an old man in suspenders and an undershirt answering the door in the middle of the night, telling his plaintiffs to duel it out. Frontier law, or trailer park law.

So that was how I got to spend my Saturday, at the magistrate's office. Vereker wouldn't wait until Monday. I don't know what his problem was. The police officer had to call the magistrate, Judge Battle, at home on a Saturday. That gave me an edge against Vereker from the start. Battle didn't like being called in from home, and I made sure he knew that I had been perfectly willing to let the whole matter just drop.

The policeman (and I finally read Officer Wilcox on his badge) drove over to the city office building, and Vereker and I followed separately. He left the two of us sitting on a bench outside of Judge Battle's office. "He'll be around soon enough. Can I leave the two of you here without any trouble?" He grinned at us, but neither Vereker nor I thought the whole thing was worth smiling about. It was all just pure hassle.

So I sat next to Stu Vereker for about a half an hour on that bench, not a word

passing between us. The place was empty, except for two cleaning women that were working far off at the end of the hall. Vereker played with the end of his mustache and sighed loudly. I chain-smoked. When Judge Battle finally arrived, he scowled at us like we were two juvenile delinquents and then ushered us into his office. I don't really understand what a magistrate is, but it seemed like he wielded an awful lot of power based solely on his own discretion, with no accounting for it to anyone. He sat behind his desk and listened while Vereker and I gave different our versions of the story, without many discrepancies between the two. Battle made it very clear to us that he didn't want to be there, resting back in his leather chair with his hands behind his head, his glasses pulled up to his receding hairline.

"So why didn't you get rid of the dog the first time Mr. Vereker complained?"

"It wasn't my dog, sir," I said. Old men like that love being called sir.

"But you knew it was against the lease."

"Yes sir."

"So why shouldn't you be evicted?"

That stopped me for a moment. My whole reasons, up to this point, had been that Vereker wasn't following the letter of the law, and that didn't seem to me to strong an issue to push with Battle. "Well, sir—two weeks after Mr. Vereker told us he wanted to evict us—that's me and my old roommate—she moved out with the dog. I always pay rent on time, and except for the dog, I've been a pretty good tenant."

"Your roommate was a girl?" Battle leaned forward, conspiratorially.

"Yes sir," I answered.

"And she moved out on you, eh?"

"That's right." I felt like I was giving answers to questions that asked things I didn't quite get. I think Battle was envisioning the House of Sin, menfolk and

womenfolk under the same roof out of wedlock. I wonder how old I'll be before people like that are finally all buried.

"And you, Mr. Vereker. This dog that's got you so worked up has moved out. So why are you still trying to evict Mr. West?"

"He has no respect for the lease," Vereker said. "He breaks this one rule, I'm sure he'll break another."

"You've had problems, other than this?" Battle asked.

"Not any major ones," Vereker said. I was about to say something indiscreet about problems we'd had with Vereker, but I thought that might not be such a hot idea.

"When does this lease end?" Battle asked.

Vereker and I said, in unison, "The end of May."

Battle settled back in his chair and thought for a moment before speaking, chewing the inside of his mouth. "I don't see any reason for an eviction here," he said. "But you, Mr. West, are going to add an additional fifty dollars to the security deposit for any damage this dog may have caused. Now that's just a deposit, mind you, Mr. Vereker. And when the end of May comes, you all'll end the lease without an option to renew it so I don't have to get the two of you in here again." He looked patiently back and forth between the two of us. "Is that clear to the both of you?" Vereker and I nodded and looked at each other out of the corners of our eyes. I felt like I won. I didn't want to stay there anyway.

* * * * *

We were having lunch at the Kangaroo Klub, a little restaurant downtown that had just opened up and was trying to cash in on the current fad of obsession with everything Australian. The name always surprised me a little bit, Klub being so close to Klan, but maybe I was the only one who thought that. The menu was full of kutesy names like

Waltzing Matilda Burgers and such.

"Let me run something past you, as long as we're on the subject of the apartment,"

Elaine said. I'd just finished my story about Vereker and Battle.

"Since you're paying, my ears are yours." I emptied a second packet of sugar into my Nicely Spicely Iced Tea and watched the crystals swirl as I stirred.

"Well—I'm paying rent at the apartment still, and my bedroom is empty. Right? I had an idea—now it's completely up to you, but I don't see any reason why not."

"Out wid it."

"Well, Diane and I were talking, and I was thinking about her and Geoff being stuck miserable in that apartment together. I don't see any reason why, when my room's empty. Think you could handle a roommate moving in? Just til June?"

For some reason, she'd gotten me all nervous. I always get that way when people say they need to tell me something. I assume they're going to tell me something I don't want to hear—Luke you've been drafted or Luke I always hate the way you . . . —something along those lines. Elaine's proposal caught me off guard, but I gave it a think—really didn't sound like a bad idea, and it made sense with what Diane had told me. Plus, I'd get to see her more often, and we both work different schedules, so we wouldn't always be bumping into each other around the apartment. A perfectly good idea. I said so to Elaine.

"No, not Diane. Geoff could move in with you."

A groan escaped involuntarily, before I could stop it or even notice that I was doing it. "Excuse me. My tea went down wrong."

Elaine frowned at me. "What's wrong with Geoff? You guys get along fine."

This lunch had taken a nasty turn, as far as I was concerned. What could I say? No? I *had* always liked Geoff. I couldn't tell Elaine that I secretly wished him dead for

something I used to suspect but now was one hundred percent sure of. Especially when that something was as horribly petty as it was. And more pettiness—Geoff was in school during the days, so we'd see each other a lot at night. Although he did say he studied a lot.

Elaine continued. "You'd be doing the both of them a huge favor."

"No, I know," I said. "There's nothing wrong with Geoff. I was just assuming Diane, for some reason. She'd talked about moving in with her parents, so I just naturally. . . ."

"So you don't mind?"

Here I was again. Decision time, my least favorite time of the year. I took a hearty swallow of my now-syrupy tea and tried to put it off. "Can I get back to you about this?" I asked.

Now it was Elaine's turn to look uncomfortable. "Is it really that hard a decision? I don't see any reason why this is a problem."

"It isn't. I'd just like to think it over first." First of all, I wanted to say no, for all the wrong reasons, and second of all, it was her half of the apartment to do whatever she wanted with it. Those two things pointed in the wrong direction for me then.

"What is there to think about?" Elaine pressed me.

"I don't understand the rush," I said. "Unless. . . ." Then I did understand. "You've already mentioned this to them, right?"

"Shoot me. I didn't think you mind. Look, just forget it. I'll call them back and—"

God she knew how to work me. "Elaine, it's fine. I just wished you'd checked with me first."

"Oh, I know Luke—I'm sorry, really. I just got kind of excited about the idea.

I'm sorry. You know how I get ahead of myself. You are an avatar of light. I think I'll go call them right now."

* * * * *

Geoff and I found ourselves sitting across the kitchen card table from each other on a Friday night drinking beers that he'd bought as thanks for helping him move his stuff. There wasn't that much, mostly books, and clothes. The only furniture was his desk, so we stopped by the Salvation Army to pick up a cheap bed for him. We sprayed the thing with flea spray and Lysol and left it on the balcony to air out. We'd already rehashed how drunk I was at the party, our Christmases, Thanksgivings, New Year's Eves, and how glad Geoff was that he was entering his last semester. He cracked me up sometimes, and it was easier despising him when I didn't have to see him. He was a pretty revoltingly talented and pleasant person. He'd even asked to see the ad critiques—Elaine—and although I didn't want him to read them, I gave in and he read them anyway, and chuckled all the way through my very rough drafts. "These are a hoot, Luke," he'd said. Yup—he was pretty hard to dislike, so I stopped.

When the Super Bowl rolled around, Geoff and I spent the afternoon and evening glued to the television. He tried to talk me into going out to some bar to watch the game and all its trappings in a more festive atmosphere, but I had to stay in the apartment. This was the biggest advertising day of the year, with the most expensive, involved, polished commercials known to man airing at a cost exceeding in a minute what I'd probably make in the next thirty years. I taped it so I'd be able to watch them again later, but I still didn't want to go out and miss the experience of catching them first-hand, lost in the noise of a crowded bar full of people less interested in them than I. I wished I'd already had my column going at the Alternative Times, or at least had even sent them anything yet, because this could be my crowning achievement if I was already known as

Luke the Commercial Man. Geoff sat on the couch while I was on my stomach on the floor writing notes, and we held short panel discussions about the commercials when the game came back on. He was genuinely interested in my reviews, which is about as flattering as anything I could think of at the time.

So along with the glories of being able to leave the seat up, Geoff and I quickly became damn good roommates. When he'd first started dating Diane, he'd pretty much lived at our old apartment for days on end, but I'd never felt like he was a roommate. Now things were different—we both had our own things to do during the days and nights, but we could easily talk each other out of responsibilities to go nip a beer or ten. As the semester progressed, Geoff had more work to do and he began seeing Diane again, fairly frequently. They asked me to tag along, but that was bizarre, so I only did it once. They got me and Elaine to tag along, equally bizarre, and again, only done once. I got a sore neck looking back and forth from Elaine and Geoff, trying to notice any subtle messages passing between the two of them. If anything passed, they were most subtle about it.

In those first three months since Elaine moved out, I didn't see much of her, and I only got out to the Farm a couple of times. It wasn't that far, but it was a long drive home, and I hated waking up at her place an hour earlier to head home, shower, and generally get the day off to a crappy start. I worried about her the day it snowed in February and everything closed in a panic, but she called me that evening, exhilarated, and told me all I never wanted to know about attaching the plow to the tractor and how the farm looked so beautiful in the snow that she'd almost been reluctant to plow it. I had to give Elaine credit for sometimes knowing what was best—all four of us were pretty happy with our living arrangements. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Or at least I was happy and assumed that everyone else was too. In mid-March, Geoff started spending the night at Diane's again, and I was pleased with myself for not calling

Elaine immediately and telling her. I had my apartment, I had just enough playmates to entertain me but not distract me, I sent off five sample columns to the *Alternative Times*, and I may not have had liberty—who does—but I had my life, and I was working on the other one. Then I got a letter from Vereker reminding me that my lease ended in sixty days and he wanted to show the apartment.

Chapter 10

I sat idling at the end of the driveway, my mouth gaping. The rows of trees sparkled with light from the early April drizzle, the apple blossoms on the trees a brilliant white down those long rows. No green had yet come into the trees, but the grass in the orchard had been cut short and had turned that delicate pale green that shouts Spring. Wild dogwoods had attracted my attention, bright glimmers of white and yellow off in the woods as I'd driven out to the Farm, but I hadn't expected anything like this. It was far more spectacular than any peach orchard I'd ever been in. I hate to say it, but it looked enchanted, some fairy vision of an orchard too beautiful to believe real. The sign on the split rail fence had been repainted with green letters, and Elaine had put in a new mailbox, shiny black with a red flag standing straight. I drove my car through the slushy ruts of the driveway and had to stop again when I got to the top of the hill and looked down through the trees at the Farm. Those powerful spring colors just get you sometimes, even when you expect it. It seemed that the house looked whiter and the tin roof redder than before, and of course, they were, because Elaine had had them painted two weeks earlier. The water under the bridge ran clear and smooth, filling the banks to the brim with spring run-off. Farm-ucopia.

Elaine was sitting on the porch steps when I pulled up, warming her hands on a mug of coffee. "I saw you coming," she hollered. "I've got all this stuff to do, but I keep making excuses to come outside and look around."

"I don't blame you," I said. "Elaine, this place is—hey you got the porch fixed!"

It was sag free, and there was a new two-seated metal rocker against the house, facing east down the river. Turns out it was a freshly painted old one.

"Did that one myself," she told me.

"Congratulations," I told her.

"That depends on whether it holds. I'm only a journeyman carpenter so far." She was wearing her old grey MSU sweatshirt pushed up at the elbows, atop some ratty jeans, and her hair was pulled back in a lazy ponytail. She looked like she'd gained some weight—healthy weight or strength weight. She looked great.

"I want to get out here with my camera. I can't believe how pretty this place is."

Elaine leaned back against the top step. "I couldn't either. I swear, I just woke up one morning and it looked like this."

"I voot guess it's shpring. Vere iss der little dog?"

"Somewhere, Siegfried. Man, she's gotten huge. She's turned into the total country dog—brings back rabbits and squirrels. I wish she'd get to the rats in the barn."

"Maybe you should get a cat," I said.

"Shere Khan the rat killer? Nah. I thought about it. But I hate cats. I'm not enough of a country girl yet to get one just to eat my rodents. I'd feel guilty about leaving it outside."

"You could just think of the rats as pets—you know, Templeton, Ben." I stopped. I couldn't think of any other famous rat's names.

"Ugh. I hate thinking about it. Don't remind me. I lie awake in bed at night and wonder if there are rats in the house and it just makes my skin crawl thinking about it." Elaine stood up. "Let me show you what I've done inside," she said.

From the porch, I could see curtains in the living room windows and a new brass knocker on the door. That was just the start. The refinished floors gleamed with the rich

buttery color that only old oak can get. The downstairs had all been painted, some new light fixtures in the ceilings. It was still sparsely furnished, but it tended to look plain now instead of bare. The banisters into the kitchen and living room had been stripped and polished along with the floors. The sitting room had two new sofas in front of the small fireplace—she was obviously using this room instead of the living room. The downstairs bathroom had a new floor and some striped wallpaper that I didn't like that much. She'd stripped the yellow paint off the kitchen cabinets, and they looked to be some kind of dark wood, cherry or walnut. Almost all the downstairs windows had curtains—the place looked like a home now. The amount of work stunned me. The upstairs bathroom was a showroom now—the blue tiles looked great, and she'd even done something to the old claw-footed tub—it was bright shiny white. Two of the bedrooms were empty, other than the one she was using and another that had a new bed and dresser in it—not really new, more like antique, but I hadn't seen them before.

She took me out to the upstairs porch balcony over the sitting room that overlooked the backyard. The first thing I noticed was the new truck in place of George's car, a glossy red Ford F-150 that could probably have hauled cattle. But that wasn't the star attraction. Elaine pointed out her new garden. When I think of a vegetable garden, I think of a small square of dirt with a few tomatoes and maybe squash growing in it. This was a wide rectangle of raw dirt that took up most of the west half of the island. And it was huge, the size of a football field but wider.

"Oh my God, what are you growing?" I asked her.

"Everything. I'm just getting ready to plant. I put the early tomatoes in two days ago. It looks kind of ugly now, but it'll be okay when the plants start coming in. I want to grow corn!"

"Elaine, I can't believe how much work you've done around here."

"Me neither. Honestly, it hasn't been bad. There's not really much else to do. It's kind of lonely out here."

"It must be," I said.

"I just make myself keep busy so I won't think about it too much. I'm thinking of getting a cow or a goat or something—cheese! And some bees. The man at Southern States said if I got bees it would help the apple crop. And I could have honey."

"You've got a bazillion apple trees—what do you want a better crop for?"

Elaine looked at me strangely. "I'm going to run the orchard as a business this fall," she said. "I'm planning on working it and having one hell of a crop."

"I had no idea," I said.

"Did you think I bought it just for the hell of it?"

"I guess so."

"Well, I did. But I changed my mind. And the money isn't going to last much longer. There's plenty left, but I need to stop spending and start making. Ta dah! That's where the orchard comes in."

"I didn't think about it. That's so cool! Elaine the fruit lady of Cabell County. You can make pies and cider and sauce and butter . . . what else can you do with apples?"

"Eat them plain," she said.

"Nah. Too boring. Boy, Elaine—running this place is going to be a lot of work," I said.

"Well I'm not going to be able to do it myself," she answered, smiling at me.

* * * * *

"She's turned into a farmer. And a carpenter. And a home fixer-upper maniac. And she's moving on to bee-keeping and goat-herding," I told Geoff and Diane that night.

This was only the second time Diane had been over to my apartment since Geoff had moved in. I think they were afraid that being seen in public together was too strong an admission of couplehood. Their two drinks on the coffee table were closer together than they were.

"Goats?" Diane said.

"She's going to expand into being a goat's-milkmaid along with her apples, corn, and honey. Maybe." I stiffened my drink.

"That's quite a load for one little ex-caterer," she said.

"A hefty load."

Geoff said, "You're worried about it?"

"Well, she's done a hell of a job with the house. I don't know. I mean, she just doesn't know the first thing about any of that stuff."

"So you are worried about her?" Geoff said.

"Yeah, a little," I said. I immediately wished I hadn't said it, so I lit up a cigarette. I didn't like the three of us sitting around drinking rotgut vodka that Diane had borrowed from Uncle Buddy's and talking like this about Elaine. Although I had brought it up. I felt traitorous. "I don't think she's flipped or anything," I added. "I just wonder how she's going to manage it." We were all silent for a minute or two.

Diane laughed a little to herself. "I can't get over the goats. Have you ever looked at a goat's eyes?"

Geoff and I stared at her. I don't think I've ever seen a goat outside of a book. They weren't exactly common pets in the Atlanta suburbs.

"Well they have horrible eyes. Their irises are square and the pupils go sideways like the opposite of a cat. I got chased by a goat when I was in first grade. The damn thing bit my hair."

"That settles it for me," I said. "Elaine shouldn't get a goat." Geoff laughed.

Diane made a face at me. "My point was, city boys, that goats are nasty."

"And it was a good point," Geoff said.

"I was just trying to make conversation!" I watched Diane for a moment to see if she was actually getting mad. You can't always tell with her, and you can never tell what's going to set people off when they're under the stress of a tenuous relationship. If anger was brewing, she smothered it. "I'm not worried at all about her," she continued. "What kind of trouble can she get into running a farm? The worst thing that could happen would be getting stung by bees." The moment of tension was gone. My mother really would love her.

"You're right," Geoff said. "She's a big girl."

They both looked at me as though I was the only one doing any worrying, as though I was the one that needed to stop what he was doing. I felt ganged up on. Groups of three people invariably create tension. I finished my drink, eyeing them over the top of my glass. "I'm happy for her," I said.

* * * * *

Geoff wanted to know what I was planning on doing when the lease ran out. I was lying on my stomach in front of the television, taking notes, and he'd come in from the library or Diane's.

"I'm trying not to think about it," I said. "The idea of moving, yet again, is making me ill."

"I'm doing it twice in five months," he said. Okay, you win, your life is worse, I thought. I was trying to think of an approach to the phenomenon of the Energizer Bunny, and I didn't want to break my train of thought. I had set up a meeting with Ranger Rick in a few days to go over my column idea. His name wasn't really Ranger

Rick—Ricky Albert. Two first names. He was the guy who almost singlehandedly ran the Alternative Times, and he always wore tan or olive green workshirts. He also had these dark rings around his eyes, either Mediterranean ancestry, workaholism, or insomnia. It wasn't a nickname I shared with him. Then Geoff again. "I'll be able to start working again in the middle of May. I can't move back in with Diane, not yet. I'll be studying for the bar until October, and then I don't know what the hell I'll be doing. Luke?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "Hold on." I stared at the paper, trying to make it come to me, whatever it was, before my concentration disappeared. A force of goodness? Vaudeville camp? A Christ-like pink Easter bunny banging the drums of salvation and rebirth? Maybe. "What?" I'd heard him.

"In a nutshell—do you want to get an apartment together when the lease ends?"

I sat up. "I haven't thought about it."

"The time has come, the Walrus said."

"Quoting pedophiles is a bad habit," I said.

"Really, Luke, let's think about this."

I put down my pen. "Okay. I was sort of thinking about getting my own place, but then again, I'd also like to have a roommate."

"We've been doing okay, right?"

I was flattered that he'd said it first. Just being honest here. "I think so. I don't really want to lay out four hundred bucks a month by myself for rent for a one-room."

"Me neither. But—and this is a big but—I can't sign a year's lease. I don't know what I'll be doing after the bar."

"Well that's stable of you. Are you planning on staying in town?"

"I might. Depends on Diane, among other things. I like it here, but it's not

exactly the best place for me to get a decent paying job."

"You could join all the lawyers in DC or Richmond."

"Don't depress me. I'm not even sure I'm going to practice law."

That took me by surprise. I'd rather shave my head than be a lawyer, but if I'd gone through the hassle, I think I'd at least make an effort to cash in on it for a while.

"What? Three years and a prestigious degree down the pooper?"

"It's been good training. Anyway—the apartment. I could sign a year lease, but I'm not going to turn down a job just because of being tied to an apartment."

"When you're pulling in six figures from some hideous firm in DC, you can just pay the rent on the side. It'll be smaller than your jacuzzi payments."

"I doubt it. But maybe you're right." The phone rang.

"I got it," I said. "It'd be cheaper than getting your own place and having to keep that up if you move out of town." I got up and went to the kitchen phone.

"True," Geoff said to my back.

It was Elaine. "Hey bud," she said.

"Hey," I answered. "It's Farmer Elaine," I said to Geoff, loud enough for Elaine to hear.

Elaine laughed. "Not today. Today I've been Gardener Elaine. Azaleas, rhododendrons, and bulbs by the truckload. Baggy kept trying to dig up all the stuff I planted."

"What a good girl. So what's up?"

"I'm calling to ask you a favor."

"From me? Hm."

"And Geoff. I'll trade you a dinner of Chef Elaine's Lasagna this weekend if you will come out here on Saturday and help me put a fence around my property line."

"Whoa. Big favor."

"I know. I hate asking. I just can't afford to pay workmen to come out here and do something I should be able to do myself."

"So what will this involve?"

"Digging holes for fenceposts and then stapling barbed wire to them. I heard more gunshots back in the woods. I just want them to stay off my property. I got a post-digger. I just need a little extra manpower to work it. I go too slowly by myself."

"You think barbed wire will keep out rogue hunters?"

"I'd like to think so. A fence'll make me feel better. The rolls of barbed wire are too heavy and awkward and pokey for me to manage by myself. I promise it won't be that bad."

"I assume the offer requires us to stay and finish the job on Sunday if it takes more than a day."

"Oh God, I hope not. It's not that big a job. I don't think. So will you?"

"Me? Or Geoff?"

"Second person plural."

"That's what you all is for. I hate yankee you's. They make no sense," I said into the phone, and then covered the mouthpiece and explained the situation to Geoff. He groaned but agreed. "I'll do it," I said, again to Elaine. "Geoff said you damn women's libbers still need men to help you with men's work."

"Ha ha. Please tell him I can't afford to ruin my nails."

Geoff came over to the phone and shouted into it, "I didn't say that! I said damn suffragettes."

"So we'll be over on Saturday," I said, with my getting ready to hang up voice, "after we protest a few abortion clinics."

"Wait—do you have work gloves?" Elaine asked.

"We're city mice."

"I'll get some," she said. "Newly made, unrusty barbed wire is sharp stuff.

Thanks again!"

"Adios." I hung up the receiver. "You're not going to believe this place," I said to Geoff. He hadn't been out there yet, for one reason or another.

* * * * *

Finding the property line was much easier the second time for me. All you had to do was follow the black and blaze orange signs that Elaine had stapled to just about every third tree—

POSTED:

NO TRESPASSING

NO HUNTING

Elaine had dug a few holes, starting at the west end of the property north of the river, three or four of them in a row. All three of us took turns driving the post-digger into the soil, spinning the blades to loosen the dirt, and then pulling out a plug of dark black loam. Then back in the hole with the tool until it was deep enough. About two feet down, as deep as we were going, the ground turned to red clay. The top must have been the leaf compost of a hundred years.

The late April sun shone out of a cold but dry sky. If it had been hot, the work would have been intolerable. As it was, it was just unbearable. We dug holes for about an hour and a half and realized that it would take us at least this weekend and possibly the next to finish the whole property line north of the river. We looked to Elaine for a decision.

She chewed the inside of her lip. "I guess we could go to Southern States and get

the metal posts that you just drive in without a hole."

Geoff and I looked at each other. "I guess we could!" he said.

"They're cheaper and easier than these wood posts," Elaine said, "but ugly." Sadly, she looked at the posts piled next to us that we'd dragged from the barn. "I wanted it not too look too nasty." We all stayed silent for a moment, staring at the ground.

"Compromise," I said. "Alternate the wood and the metal. You won't even really be able to see the metal in the woods. It'll blend in."

"No, I still can't ask you to do all that work." Elaine, I don't think, didn't realize the pressure of the challenge she'd just given us. I was up for it.

"Sure you can," Geoff said. "We'll get it done."

"How good is that lasagna?" I asked.

"Really? You'll do it?"

"You owe us," Geoff said.

We finished three quarters of the job that day and quit before it was too dark to see and we started driving the post digger into our feet. Elaine served up a great meal, as promised, and we ended up in the sitting room until late. Elaine couldn't thank us enough, and Geoff couldn't stop saying how much he loved the Farm.

"Forget the fence," Elaine said. "I'm just glad you guys are out here so I have someone to talk to besides a dog and a bird." She emptied the dregs of a jug of red wine into her glass.

"And we're much obliged for the vittles ma'am," I said.

"I'm being serious," Elaine said. "It's not boring out here—I like it too much for that, and there's too much for me to do to be bored. It's the solitude. I turn on the TV sometimes just to hear people talking in another room. I'm not the solitary soul I maybe

thought I was."

"That's sad," Geoff said.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"So what're you planning on doing out here?" he asked, sinking down into the sofa.

"Do what all country gentry do, I guess. I'd like to paint some—remind me to show you what I did with the attic. See how long I can live out here without getting a job."

"That'd be nice," I said.

"I want to see if I can make any kind of living off the Farm. I don't know really. What're you going to do?"

"Me?" Geoff asked, and Elaine nodded. "Hard to say. I know what I don't want to do. Practice law. I mean, I don't want to be a contract lawyer at some humongo firm, and I don't want to set up practice with a smaller firm."

I could tell Geoff was going into a diatribe about something, so I lit a cigarette and smoked it out of a slightly opened window.

"I feel like law school's taught me a lot, none of it having to do with law. They teach you how to think critically, and I've ended up with a lot of criticism of the profession and the people in it. It's actually a noble profession. But practicing law would be like being a trained philosopher and then using your skills to sell products to people that teach them not to think."

Elaine asked him a few more questions, and he answered, saying things like, "Lawyers create self-perpetual need for their services." There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary between the two of them. They hadn't seen each other much since their wild night, as far as I knew, and I couldn't help wondering if maybe I'd been wrong.

Maybe she'd just spent the night there because she'd been avoiding me. Elaine was circling a wet finger around the rim of her wine glass, making the cheap glass sing like crystal, and Geoff was lazily scratching his chest. I couldn't muster the slightest disgust or envy if they were going to be so casual around each other.

"And what about you?" Geoff asked me. I stubbed my cigarette out against the window screen. Pieces of ash and tobacco fell on the window sill, and I wiped it clean with my hand.

"What about me what?" I said.

"What do you want to do?" Elaine joined in.

I've never liked that question. "I'd like to teach the world to sing. I don't know. Rephrase it. It's too what do you want to be when you grow up."

"How would you live if you could live the way you wanted?" Geoff asked.

I looked at Elaine, now sipping from her glass and looking at me. It wasn't a fair question, in present company, and she knew it, I think, but she didn't interject. I don't blame her for being curious.

"Rephrase again, please," I said.

Geoff sat up and leaned forward on his knees. "What for you are the essential elements of a good life?"

"I can handle that," I said. "Good friends. Fun. A job I love or none at all. The money, freedom, and time to take long vacations in places where I don't know the language. Faith in your government. No leases. A sense of humor. Someone who loves me as much as I love them." Elaine, the deportation of my parents, Elaine, a mentor I trust, Elaine, a go-ahead nod from Ranger Rick, Elaine.

"A little more abstract than what I intended," Geoff said.

I stood from my seat by the window and moved to the end of the couch by

Elaine's feet. "Sorry. My own brewery. A signed exemption from lung cancer from God. The correct numbers to tomorrow's lottery drawing."

"Luke," Elaine said, in that almost mothering now-now-dear tone she often took with me. "I like your first list. I'd add self-reliance. And maybe the confidence to believe in having made right decisions."

"Amen, sisterwoman," I said.

Geoff looked at the two of us incredulously. "Seriously? But what about passion? Excitement? Good sex? Adventure. Fame. Moral fortitude."

I shrugged. Elaine said, "Seems secondary. Except for the sex. Are those what you want?"

"More than anything else," he said. "Plus somewhere to live until I take the bar."

"Amen again," I said.

* * * * *

The phone was ringing when Geoff and I got back to the apartment late Sunday afternoon. I ran to get it and I shouted "Sorry! Hold on!" through the recording of my voice singing "Leave A Message For Me" to the tune of "Happy Birthday." It was time to change messages, but I hadn't gotten around to it.

"You have to come back out here," Elaine said when the beeps had stopped. It sounded like an emergency.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"If I have to listen to crickets chirp by myself out here for one more minute I'm going insane. Please please please please—I want you to move in with me."

I was hesitant to respond. There was too good a chance that she didn't mean this the way I wanted her to mean it. A vague fear of having my wishes too exposed kept me from saying anything. Geoff looked at me, questioning silently what was wrong. I

waved him off.

"Luke? Are you there?"

"Sorry. I was thinking."

"You don't want to?"

"No, it's not that. I'm just trying to figure out what you're asking."

"I want you to move out here. You need a place to live, and I need people around."

"So you want me to move into your house at the Farm to be roommates again." I needed to put it my way, for some silly reason.

"Yeah. You and Geoff."

"Oh." That yankee you again. Ugh. We need a new word for it, along with something that means s/he but doesn't look idiotic.

"I was kind of hoping you'd be excited," Elaine said. "If you don't want to, I understand. It's a long drive into town and it's an old house, and you'd have to—"

"Shut up Elaine! Of course I'd like to move out there. I'm totally excited. You've just got to give me a second to respond, pushy woman. Hold on a sec." I turned to Geoff and, not covering the mouthpiece of the phone, said, "How'd you like to move in with Elaine out on the Farm?"

I heard her voice squeak something through the handset. Geoff said, "As tenants or guests?"

I laughed. "Did you hear that Elaine?" I said, now into the phone. "You sure you want a lawyer under your roof."

"Jeez. Let me talk to him," she said, and I handed Geoff the phone. In a matter of minutes, all but the details were settled.

Chapter 11

My meeting with Ranger Rick was at the Alternative Times office, three dark and cluttered rooms in the basement of a former bus station. It was the kind of place you imagine you'd be tossed into if you were being held hostage, bare light bulbs dangling on loose wires from the ceiling, small casement windows twelve feet from the ground illuminating the dirt and leaves on the glass more than the rooms beneath them. I was thinking that you'd have to look like a night creature, the way Ranger Rick did, if you spent any amount of time in that place. Days or seasons could pass with little effect on the interior of the room.

Ricky wasn't there when I got there, just two women a little older than me smoking filterless cigarettes and reading something on their computer screens. They asked me to sit and wait, showed me the coffeepot with an untempting dark quarter-inch of liquid sticking to the bottom, and read in silence, tapping occasionally on their keyboards to move the text along. I fired up a cigarette and waited for Ricky, nervously eyeing my watch. I was stretching a thirty minute lunch break to meet with Ricky. The people at Kushman, whether your supervisor or underling, looked at their watches when you left the building. A well-understood concept of my work place was that they paid you for an eight hour day, not seven hours and fifty-three minutes thank you very much.

I felt nervous in that basement, staring stupidly around me and looking at my watch too often. After I was seated, one of the women said, "He's always late," and smiled at me, pushing her ashtray a few inches closer to me. Friendly enough, but a little

creepy in the dank confines of that basement. I wondered if they'd read my stuff.

Ranger Rick finally showed up twenty-five minutes late, with no apology, other than "Whoa! I forgot." He had what looked like chili stains on the front of his tan shirt. He's one of those kind and gentle flakes that you guess are hiding some sort of brilliance. I wasn't in a position to be mad. We knew each other's faces from around town, but I don't think I'd ever said much to him or he to me. Plus, I wanted him to tell me how much he loved my stuff.

He took me into his office, the smallest room of the three. The walls were covered in newsprint clippings, from Far Side panels to bad Ann Landers advice to snippets of outrage about what horrible judge or senator had done what. There was a large cutting from over his left shoulder as he sat at the desk that looked like a smear piece about the president of MSU. Ricky noticed my attention to it and said, "I wrote that one myself two years ago. I wish more happened in this town to do that sort of investigative journalism."

"You could cover the way they took the park benches out of Winchester Park so that the bums wouldn't have anywhere to sleep," I said.

"Did it last spring," he said.

"Ah. Probably where I heard about it." I wanted to come up with something I'd read in his paper to compliment him on, but there really wasn't that much that stuck out in my mind. The Alternative Times is not necessarily the best paper, just a place I thought would go for my reviews.

"Now left me find your copy," Ricky said. He rolled his chair forward to search the far corners of his desk and came up with a folder after a short hunt. "Here we go," he said. "Now there were a couple of questions I wanted to ask you about this."

"Sure." I didn't like this. He was supposed to tell me that they were fantastic and

leave it at that.

"Are these supposed to be funny?"

I swallowed. "Well, sort of, kind of depending on the commercial I'm talking about. I guess they are." Blood warmth rushed to my face. I wanted to throttle myself. Of course they were supposed to be funny!

"I think they're pretty funny," Ricky said.

"Oh. Good." He'd completely confused me. I couldn't tell if he was jerking me around or not.

"Are they supposed to be serious?"

I felt like a Wheel of Fortune contestant wandered by mistake onto the Jeopardy! set. "I don't know what you mean."

"Are these good faith reviews? Are you actually reviewing the ads, or are you just making fun of them."

A second question I'd hoped was obvious. "I'm making fun of them and reviewing at the same time. But they're honest reviews, if that means anything. Is that what you're asking?"

"Basically," he said. "Do you plan to do more of them?"

"Only if they start getting published. I thought it would make a good regular or semi-regular piece."

"So how do you decide what ads to review? Do you just pick the bad ones out?"

I got a sense that he liked the stuff I'd written, but I was still bewildered by the questions he was asking me. "I write about the most interesting ones, bad or good, but usually bad, I guess. There are some positive reviews in there. Can I ask you a question?"

Ricky looked up at me from the folder, his eyes cartoonishly hollow and dark

under the bare light overhead. I wonder what I looked like in there. "Sure."

"What do you think of them? Do you think they're right for the paper?"

"Do I like them? They're original. They're funny. I think it's a great idea for the paper. But I want to know what your attitude about them is. Sometimes, you're mean-spirited about the commercials, and sometimes you seem to actually like them." He looked at me as though this was a question or something that deserved explanation.

"I guess they're both. It depends on the ad. Just like any reviewer."

"Do you have standards? What makes a good ad, what makes one you revile? What's the basis of your criticism?"

"Oh." This was the first real question I felt he'd asked me. I felt like the answer was a little obvious from the material in front of him though. "My standards are what works. If it's an effective ad, I give it a positive review. If it isn't, it's negative."

"So you're not looking at these commercials as art critiques? See, I haven't seen a lot of the ads you're talking about, and I can only go by what I read here."

"No, they're not art critiques in the least." I suddenly wondered if that was what he wanted.

"How do you decide what's effective?"

This too was a fair question. "Well, if I like it, for one thing. If the ad makes me angry at the product or the people who made the ad, it's not effective."

"A lot of these ads seem to do that."

"Well, yeah. I guess I'm not an easy critic."

"I'd like to see you come up with some standards, some kind of objective measure of these ads. I'd like to run two of these pieces you've given me, see what kind of response we get from them. But I want to know that you're a fair reviewer, and that you can be consistent, before I would let this become regular."

"So you want to use them?" I sat forward on my seat, beginning to feel less unsettled.

"Well of course. That's what this meeting is all about."

"Cool!" I was tempted to go into how I thought he was preparing to rip my stuff to shreds, and now I was so relieved that he liked the stuff after all, and blah blah blah. I didn't say anything else.

"Don't get too excited. We run this place on a shoestring, and we can barely pay you enough to cover the paper this is printed on. We definitely can't pay you a decent wage for your time."

That didn't matter to me right then—I was accepted. "I'm not worried about my time right now," I said. I decided not to say I wasn't concerned with money either. That could only come back to haunt me.

"We pay different rates depending on how much you've written for us. It's a crappy way to do business, but it allows us to pay our regulars more in the long run."

"Sure," I said. I was planning on being a regular. "So what two do you want to run?"

Ricky pulled two stapled papers out of the folder. I had a cheap dot matrix printer that made terrible looking copy—I didn't dare use the lasers at work for this stuff—but this copy looked worse with writing all over it, words circled, lines crossed out, x's across whole paragraphs. Ricky flipped the papers around so I could see them.

He clicked his ball point open. He said, "Now there are just a few changes I want to make."

* * * * *

I slunk back into the office that afternoon, trying to be inconspicuous getting back to my cubicle, but it wasn't possible. Vicky Ann Morris, the receptionist, looked at her

wristwatch and raised her eyebrows as I walked past her. I grinned at her and said, "Whoops!" and kept going. I was over forty-five minutes late. There was a yellow post-it note stuck to my computer screen:

SEE ME NOW—MTF

Marjorie Fricke, my direct boss, was relaxed about pretty much everything but the minutia of running her department. You could finish a project late, send errors to the printer, spill coffee on reports, whatever—but don't think about being late, don't leave your desk messy, and don't stretch a ten minute coffee break to eleven minutes. Which made her a pretty sucky boss. She wore these cotton flowered jumper dresses over brightly colored t-shirts with a cardigan around her shoulders every single day, summer or winter. She was always cold.

I had this idea that if I worked extra hard, faster, better, and more efficiently than everyone else in my department that I would be excused for minor transgressions against the corporate ten commandments. I was always running a little late. How are you supposed to go to the DMV or the bank or register to vote if you work from 8:30 to 5:00 with a thirty minute lunch? How are you supposed to conduct the business of your life? Most of the women I worked with had little kids that they were constantly having to pick up or drop off somewhere. But Kushman still had this idea that it was some 1950's corporation where every employee had a wife at home to run errands. It wasn't realistic. And to make matters worse, if everyone had simply been cool about it and covered for each other when we were late, it would have been fine. Instead, one minute away from your desk and some office bloodhound was pounding on Marjorie's door complaining that her cubicle neighbor had taken yet another extended break.

I headed to Marjorie's office and knocked. She was on the phone, so I stuck my head in her slightly-larger-than-mine cubicle to make eye contact and let her know I was

there, and then I headed back to my desk. I read through a pile of federal tax court summaries about people trying to defend early IRA withdrawals from penalty. They all lost. It was like reading a Flannery O'Connor story, knowing someone's going to die by the end. Tax court is an ugly place to end up, from what I've read.

"Nice to have you back," Marjorie said, standing in the doorway of my cubicle with her arms crossed, cardigan dangling from her shoulders.

"Hi," I said. There was a chance she only wanted to see me to give me a raise or something.

"You took an hour and fifteen minute lunch." This meant that she'd checked with someone about what time I'd strolled in. Her management style was a combination of mother and gossipy sneak. She wanted me to feel guilty this time.

"I know, I'm sorry," I said. She raised her eyebrows at me without answering. Marjorie always wanted to know what you'd been doing, why you did something wrong, as though it mattered. It was partly nosiness, and I suspect she kept her eyes open for any chance to put Kushman's substance abuse policy into effect. "I was running some errands that took longer than I thought."

"Such as?"

I'd thought up my excuse on the drive back, and it disgusted me that I had to use it. "I'm moving out of my apartment, and I had a lot of little stuff to do."

"You couldn't do it over the phone?"

"During work?" I asked. Thou shalt not have personal phone calls was practically engraved on the lunch room walls. It wasn't a particularly bright question to ask Marjorie though, because it implied insubordination on my part, and that was the first commandment.

"During lunch. Luke, we've got to do something about this. I can't have this

department running scattered. I have to know where everyone is, always. What if Mr. Walters came through and wanted to know where you were? What would I tell him? Just think how that would make me look. How are you supposed to get your work done if you aren't here?"

"I'm pretty much caught up," I said.

"Well that's no excuse," she said. "You still need to put in your eight hours."

"Marjorie, I'm sorry. It was something I couldn't avoid. I'd be happy to make the time up."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid you're going to have to take it as vacation time. Maybe that'll remind you in the future when to be where. Priorities, Luke."

I got 6.67 hours of vacation time a month, two weeks a year, and this was always the big punishment. It made it nearly impossible for me to ever take more than a long weekend off at one time.

"Fine," I said. "I was on vacation today for lunch."

Marjorie smiled at me and turned to go. "Good. Now don't forget to bring cookies for Sandra's birthday tomorrow."

"I won't," I said. This was a bizarreness—they constantly were having luncheons and birthday parties and baby showers and bridal showers, on company time mind you, but if you weren't willing to participate, it was work as usual. Explain that to me. Marjorie tried once, and she said it had something to do with morale.

* * * * *

I called Elaine to give her the news about the Alternative Times accepting some of my reviews. She was as excited about it as I was and wanted me to come over to celebrate. I put it off until the weekend so that I wouldn't come crashing into work late the next day hung over. I was scared about what was going to happen when Geoff and

I moved in less than a month and would have to fend off Elaine's party madness that usually included sunrises when she didn't have to work the next day.

I picked up the next *Alternative Times* that I saw in a grocery store entrance, the new issue. It didn't have my piece in it. It was a biweekly, and it had been put out two days after my meeting with Ranger Rick, so I told myself that it would be in the next issue. While I waited for the next issue to come out, or at least to hear from Ranger Rick, Geoff and I began the tedious business of moving our stuff out to the Farm. All the stuff that had become mine when Elaine had moved out five months earlier, like the kitchen table and the ugly couch, should have gone to the dump, but it made me nervous to throw the stuff away. I guess I was planning for the possibility that Elaine might boot us out within a week, although I knew it was unlikely. It just seemed a bad idea to get rid of stuff that wasn't completely ruined, so it got moved into the barn loft, to be eaten by rats and ruined by rain. For some reason, I could feel better about that than just hauling it off somewhere.

We did the move kind of backwards, taking the big stuff first and leaving clothes and toothpaste back at the apartment, so between the two weekends that we moved everything out, Geoff and I spend most of our time in a bare apartment, sleeping there and feeling pretty transient while doing so. I was all for moving at once, but Geoff had so much to do with his final finals that he couldn't take too much time at once, and I had a hard time motivating myself.

It's amazing how much room little crap takes up that you don't even notice you own, like window cleaner and old sponges under the kitchen sink. And things like all of my notebooks from college—I kept them. I never looked at them, and I didn't even take that many notes in college, but there they were—four boxes of dog-eared spiral notebooks with mostly blank pages, packed in with xeroxed readings I'd picked up in college. I

hadn't read them then, and I wasn't planning on reading them any time soon, but I just couldn't throw them out. They moved with me every year since college, and they just stayed with me. I think I might have been planning for those books to be around in case mid-twenty-first century scholars needed to scrutinize my life. All that kind of stuff went into the basement at the Farm, along with boxes of little things like broken binoculars and souvenir shot glasses that I couldn't bring myself to throw away.

The next Sunday, I walked through the apartment taking out light bulbs and putting white toothpaste into any holes we'd made in the walls. I'd cleaned it by myself, top to bottom, while Geoff was at the library. I looked through cabinets to make sure we hadn't left anything, checked to make sure it was clean so we could get the whole security deposit back, unlikely as that was with Vereker. I felt strange that day. I'd moved too many times in too few years, but this felt a lot different. I was definitely moving on to a new place. I swear this isn't hindsight—I did feel a foreboding that day, not of anything bad, but of a major change in my life. I put the keys on the kitchen counter and walked through one last time. It was sterile and bare, until I noticed one last thing. Elaine's graffiti board, sitting propped against the living room wall, wiped clean of any writing or drawing, as white as the wall. I almost hadn't seen it—we hadn't used it in months. Maybe it blended in too well with the walls, but it had just stood there, unnoticed. I tucked it under my arm and walked out of the apartment.

Chapter 12

Late spring is pretty much indistinguishable from early summer when you live in an apartment. Then, you take a first sun-focused vacation to the beach and enjoy the sun and shiver knee-deep in the water. You start eating outside. Grocery store tomatoes are a deep, juicy red instead of a mealy hothouse orange. Little things.

On the Farm, the movement of seasons was as definite and noticeable as a blizzard. Everything was so green it almost made me wince, different greens though, of grass and pines and leaves and tiny apples and hard green peaches and raspberry brambles and tomato stalks and corn plants, a gaudy variety of greens. The tiny azaleas and rhododendrons that Elaine had planted around the Farm had stopped blooming, along with various bulbs by the driveway and all the fruit trees and dogwoods. Plants had moved on to the less showy and more serious business of growing rampant with lengthening days. The river that had swelled with April rains was now slowly coming back down in its banks. Baggy shed fistfuls of winter coat all over the house.

Quite a bit was going on in the three busy little lives running around that freshly painted farmhouse. Geoff finished his exams and instead of looking for a job to pass the time until the bar, he got offered a job with a prestigious little law firm, Hawthorn & Ellis. They weren't known outside of Shifflettsburg, but in town they were the quintessential old money firm. I happened to know that their clients spent an awful lot of time in tax court, which is sort of like the inner circle of hell for the wealthy. You just don't end up in tax court without a six figure income and a condo in DC or New

York. A lot of these people had houses in Shifflettsburg because it was a cheaper place to claim residency, owning well-trimmed two acre lots near the golf course with houses the size of country inns. Here's Geoff's luck: before exams were over, he got a phone call from this place asking his plans after getting his degree. Two days late he gets invited to lunch, swills some vodka with two junior partners old style, and ends up with a job offer the day after his last exam, or at least that's how he tells it. I'm guessing it also had something to do with his class rank. It irked me how quickly he got a job paying over three times my salary, with zero effort. Some people—and I don't know if this is a truth, misconception, or carefully created illusion—have it so damn easy. "Plus, they'll help out with paying back my loans. Twenty-five percent. Cool, huh?" Geoff told us as he popped a champagne cork off in the air from the porch.

We were having a celebration dinner that night, originally to mark my being published finally in the *Alternative Times* and Geoff graduating from law school. He tossed his new job in the celebration pot, and it overshadowed my little achievement more than I would have liked. I'm just being honest, petty as it may be. I was still happy for him. I was trying to be on my best behavior. I'd started that when I'd moved in. I decided I was going to stop thinking about Elaine so much and try to consider the possibilities of allowing myself to date other people. This, of course, was a bizarre decision to come to, seeing that I had never actually dated Elaine, so the seeing other people part seemed like a bad joke. But I wanted my little monomania to go away.

Diane had come over, and Elaine was ecstatic that she and Geoff were back together again. I told myself that she was just happy for the two of them. Diane pleased me by reading my piece in the paper and laughing uproariously over it, reading aloud certain choice phrases that caught her attention. Geoff was laughing with her, so I tried to get rid of my sourpuss feelings. One thing I couldn't get over was how much Ricky

had changed what I'd written. It wasn't a hatchet job or anything; I think his changes made it better, but I was disheartened that he'd felt the need to make so many. The minute I read what he'd done to my piece I made up my mind to go back and edit the hell out of all the other reviews I'd previously thought ready for print. I didn't want him to see any flaws in my stuff.

We tried to get Elaine to celebrate how much she'd done to the Farm, but it was nearly impossible.

"You guys don't know how much there is that I still want to do," she said. "I wish I had more time to do things."

"You've got all the time in the world," Geoff said.

"Not really. I wanted so much more done by now."

"Here we go again," Diane said.

I laughed. "She didn't get a chance to paint the rocks in the bottom of the river and do the topiary work with all the pine trees. Shame." Elaine had this list she kept on the refrigerator of the things she wanted to do to the Farm. She crossed things off as she did them, but every time she crossed something off, it seemed that she added three more things. And there were a lot of scratched out jobs. Next on the list was pruning all the fruit trees and tarring the stumps—an enormous job that Geoff and I had tried to talk her into ignoring or at least paying someone else to do. The apple trees were all cluttered with things called suckers, offshoots of branches that grew straight up but didn't bear fruit. Apparently, they reduce the yield of the trees. Elaine was furious with herself for not finding that out before the trees had blossomed that season.

"You guys can laugh, but this place is my life now," Elaine said. "As sad as that may be to you."

"There's nothing sad about it," Diane said. "But you're not stuck out here. You

could do something else other than try to get this place running."

"Oh, I know. But I don't want to. I love it. I'm not complaining. It's just frustrating to have all this energy, and all these plans, and not enough hours in a day to do it all."

"I think you should let yourself relax more," Geoff said. He turned to Diane. "She gets up at six every morning and is deep into some project or another by the time I'm out of the shower. The day before yesterday I woke to the music of Elaine banging nails in the barn."

"Ha. You're jealous of me," Elaine said. "Lady of leisure in paradise doing whatever she wants."

"I'm not the hammer and nail type," Geoff answered. He grinned. "I can't do blue collar work like that as a lawyer now, can I?"

"Ugh," Diane said.

"I'd like to propose a toast," I said, holding up my glass. The three of them looked at me, and any cleverness I'd had lingering underneath my tongue had disappeared.

"Yes?" Elaine said.

"To us," I said. That was better than something clever anyway.

* * * * *

Our rent situation took some arranging. Elaine did not want us to pay her rent; she didn't want to feel like a landlord. That was fine with me, but according to Geoff, unless we paid rent, we would be the horrible guests that would never leave. Geoff insisted on paying rent; he said we'd all end up resenting each other if we didn't. Elaine said that was a ridiculous idea, but I sort of agreed with him. She didn't want any money from us at all. Geoff suggested that we pay the property taxes, but those were

minimal—he didn't think that fifteen hundred dollars, split between two people and twelve months, amounted to paying anything at all.

"Elaine, I'm making plenty of money with Hawthorn & Ellis. I'd have to pay at least three-fifty for my own place. Minimum. Luke was paying two twenty-five at the old place. That doesn't even include how much more utilities would be if we all had three sets of them. So there's about seven hundred a month that Luke and I aren't paying."

"Great. Then buy yourself silk suits or go on vacations. You're being so weird about this money. I don't want any!" Elaine said. We'd been having this discussion every day since we'd moved in, and we didn't seem any closer to an agreement. Elaine called it our fortuitous good start. I stayed out of it. In all honesty, I liked the idea of that extra money greasing my wallet, but I didn't want to look cheap.

"How long can you live off of the insurance money?" Geoff asked.

"Once the Farm is running, I think I'll be a self-supporting venture."

"What if your tractor breaks? What if some hurricane rips out all the fruit trees? What if you get hurt or sick? You need to have an income other than—"

"Then I have George's money."

"You can't count on that to last long with the expenses of running a farm."

"You really are a lawyer," Elaine said. "I asked you guys to live out here for company—it's a good deal for all of us. It doesn't cost me a penny more to have you two living here. Why do you insist that I make money off of it?"

"I don't want you to make money. But I don't want to feel like a freeloader. What's wrong with making money, anyway? For the first time in my life, I'll be pulling in over fifteen thousand dollars a year, and I think being a parasite on your generosity is a bad idea."

"Make a donation to the cancer society in my name every month then," Elaine said.

"That would be a little extreme."

They were both silent for a moment, staring at each other. Both of them were stubborn as dogs on a scent, and they both liked this kind of in-your-face argumentation that churns my stomach. I spoke up, finally. "Here's an idea," I said. "Mr. Capitalist Lawyer wants to buy his room. Ms. Generous To A Fault doesn't want to make money off of her friends. Right?" Neither of them made any kind of positive or negative acknowledgement, so I just kept going. "One easy way to solve this would be for me and Geoff to buy a third of the Farm. But—then we'd be responsible for a third of the work, which we don't want, and I doubt Elaine wants to sell it. So let's do this—Geoff and I pay the house rent, instead of Elaine. A slush fund. House money."

Geoff asked, "What do you mean, pay the house?"

"Put it in an envelope, I don't know, but don't hand it to Elaine."

"But it would still be money coming to me," Elaine said.

"If you don't want to touch it, don't," I said.

"How much?" Geoff asked.

"Fifty a month," Elaine said.

Geoff shook his head. "Too little."

"Wait wait," I said. "Let me finish. We split utilities three ways, like usual.

Elaine takes care of the place—"

"Like a maid?" she said.

"Please. Like an owner. So we won't feel like you're our maid. Let's say Geoff and I put two hundred a month in—"

"That's more like it," Geoff said.

"Could you let me talk? That's almost five thousand a year. There's stuff around here that you can't do yourself, Elaine, like the pruning. Nope—" I said, cutting her off before she could interrupt again. "Let me finish. This is money for you to put into the Farm so you don't dig too deep into George's money. It'd keep you from having to get a job maybe. It's less than I was paying Vereker, and for a much better deal, may I add. Geoff'll be happy—it's about what you'd pay to share an apartment with someone. So it sounds like a good idea to me."

Elaine and Geoff looked at each other for a minute before answering. I could see the little debate wheels turning in their minds, trying to think of some problem with my plan. There were problems with it, but I'd thought it up that moment, so I hadn't had much chance to think it through.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"I can live with that," Geoff said.

"I won't use it, but you're welcome to throw money at me, I guess," Elaine said.

"Perfect. We're agreed then. And by the way, you're both impossible," I said.

* * * * *

After the heated Rent Debates, the first major problem at the Farm snuck into my life while I was trying to work on my reviews. I had taken a sabbatical after the publication of the first piece, and two issues later, Ricky printed the second one. It was as intensely edited as the first one, and I went back to my other pieces that I'd thought finished. I compared the final versions of the two pieces that had been printed with the versions that Ranger Rick had printed, trying to figure out what sort of general changes he'd made that I could anticipate.

I began working on one that focused on representations of non-comical fathers in commercials. I stayed away from the comical ones, because they're such an obvious rip-

off from sit-coms. These men came in two flavors that I was focusing on—the grumpy old lonely man, say of a long distance ad, and the beefy poster muffin of a soap or shampoo ad. I was stretching the idea, very thinly, I might add, that these were two points of the Trinity, and I was a little stuck about what to squeeze into the Holy Ghost point of the triangle. The version I'd written so far claimed that disembodied announcers were the Holy Ghost, but seeing that that had little or nothing to do with fathers, I wanted to come up with another angle if possible. Ranger Rick's little speech about a reviewer's integrity had stuck in my craw. This one wasn't even really a review; it was more of a joke analysis of commercials, and I figured the more integrity it had as analysis, the less Ricky was likely to object to it. It was one of the ones he hadn't picked for publication, but I liked it, because I used the word transubstantiation in it, and that's such a nice silly word and concept.

So I took my notebook and copy down from my room, and as I was walking down the stairs, it occurred to me for the first time that we only got one channel out at the Farm, and it was fuzzy cable-free reception at that. I froze on the landing. This was bad news. I wasn't going to be able to watch television. That's not something I'd normally feel stricken about, but I had basically just created a small role for myself, as something other than tax law copy editor and Elaine chaser—I was a television critic, and you pretty much need decent television reception to do that. I ran down the stairs into the sitting room and flicked on the TV. We hardly watched it because the reception was irritatingly bad. Out of sight out of mind, I guess. We got one station, Channel 7 out of Shifflettsburg, the CBS channel. CBS, of all things. Two UHF stations came in barely, flickering in a way I hadn't seen since I was a child trying to watch the Electric Company on the low wattage Atlanta PBS station that barely made it to the suburbs. I got aluminum foil from the kitchen and ran shiny modern-art-looking rabbit ears up from the

antenna screws on the back of the set, but that just made for a goofy looking television and no better reception worth speaking of.

In the attic, it wasn't any better. The Farm wasn't just in a flood plain, it was in a valley, and beautiful little river valleys aren't renowned for the television reception. I cussed a few times and kicked the brick chimney. Even if I put an antenna atop the house, we still wouldn't get but crappy reception. This was a total inconvenience, and one that it was hard not to feel pretty stupid about—shit, damn, fuck, I can't watch my television commercials. I could just see a nice big satellite dish sprucing up the front yard.

"Luke?" Elaine called up the attic stairs.

"Yeah," I said.

"What happened?" I heard the stairs creak as she headed up.

"Nothing. I brought the TV up here to try and get some decent reception but no dice."

Her head appeared coming out of the stairwell. "I haven't watched that thing in months," she said. "It's been kind of nice."

"That's all and good if you're not trying to write reviews of commercials."

"Oh! God, I didn't think about that."

"Me neither. This blows." I tried touching the rabbit ears to the brick chimney, thinking that maybe brick absorbs broadcast waves. It doesn't. "I can just see me camped out at Circuit City with a glass of iced tea and my notebook."

"Maybe an antenna would help."

"I doubt it. I'd need about a mile high antenna to reach up out of this valley."

Elaine came over to the set and flicked through the channels. Fuzz, fuzz, and more fuzz. "Maybe you could get a better TV."

"It's not the set. It's the house. Can you get cable out here?"

"I doubt it," she said. "I think not getting trash pick up is a pretty good indication that I can't get cable." We kept trash piled up inside the barn and took it to the dump when we had time, or snuck it into parking lot dumpsters if we didn't.

"This is a major drag," I said, unplugging the TV and crumpling the foil sculpture.

"Could you watch it at someone's house?"

"Yeah, right. 'Hi! can I come over and flick around your channels until you want to scream and never watch anything but the bad parts?' I don't think I'd be too welcome." I was disgusted with myself for not having thought of this sooner. I wondered if I would have moved there, if this was that big a deal to me. "How the hell am I going to get my work done?"

"Hold on. Don't get too worked up. Maybe we can find someone who'll let you—hey, Diane works some nights. I know she'd let you use her TV while she's at Uncle Buddy's."

That was very probable. I'd often found myself wishing I had more friends than I did, but not usually so that I could ask favors of them. That's what family's for, I guessed.

As soon as I got off the phone with Diane, Elaine called the cable company. "Well, one out of two ain't bad," she said as she hung up. "Diane's got a nice couch." But she didn't let me smoke there.

* * * * *

We had a nice routine going in those early days when the three of us were living together. Elaine had her gardening and pruning, Geoff liked his job more than he ever thought he would (although I knew he would), and I was up to seventy-five bucks per review in the Alternative Times after my fourth piece got published. I even became a

minor celebrity at work when Evelyn Thomas, a woman in payroll, ran across one of my reviews and posted it in the lunchroom at Kushman. The people in my office who read the piece did so with very blank looks on their faces, but they were all impressed that I'd gotten my name published in something other than the police beat section of the mainstream Shifflettsburg paper, *The Newsleader*. Many of their husbands and boyfriends ended up with minor notoriety after bowling alley fights and deer spot-lighting violations.

Not only did the three of us have plenty to keep us busy, but we were getting along unbelievably well. It was early summer, and at seven or eight almost every night, we'd all converge on the porch to enjoy the last bit of daylight. This was before the mosquitos kicked in in early July, but even then, with our spray can of Cutter, we just lazed and chatted. Sometimes we'd have dinner together, but we didn't want to get into the habit of having to do it, so the nights that one of us fired up the barbecue became informal, unexpected parties.

I got a call from my mother one evening while I was cooking some chicken on the grill. She asked me if I'd like to join them for a week in August on their annual trip to Sea Island. Some of her neighbors—"the decent ones, with sense"—had time shares or owned houses on Sea Island. My parents liked to go there and rent a house or condo for a week and do exactly what they did at home—cocktails, dinner, golf, and gossip with the neighbors. When I was little, I'd be stuck with my parent's friend's kids, who were never my friends. Once we were all old enough to hate each other, we did, and we renewed our dislikes each summer. Back in Smyrna, we could just ignore each other, but not at the beach. I found excuses not to go some summers, but even after college, I still found myself tagging along helplessly to that steamy colony of suburban expatriates. Often I was the only one under forty.

"Margaret and Steven Pritchard are going to be there this year," my mother said.

"You always liked them." They were twins two years younger than me, some of the more harmless and innocuous parent's friends' children forced on me. I actually found myself wondering what they were up to, but not enough to find out first hand.

"I just can't get away this year. Work is busy right now." I hadn't told her about the reviews getting published. She'd just make Plans for me.

"Not even for a weekend? I know you can get away for a weekend! We've got the cutest house this year, off the beach road—we were there three or four summers ago, you remember. The Overton's place, with the two-story porch."

I did remember it, one of the nicer places we'd stayed. My father must have actually had some sort of income that year to be able to afford it again.

"I can't," I said. I wanted to scream at her *Don't you remember Thanksgiving?* But I knew she wouldn't. "I'd love to, but I just can't. Maybe next summer."

"Next summer! Well when are we going to see you again, Luke? I can't remember the last time you called. You didn't even spend Christmas here."

I hesitated for a moment, trying to second guess what she'd say, and then went ahead. "You can always come up and see me," I said. I shuddered when I said it, praying that there wasn't a chance in hell she'd take me up on it.

"Don't you ever want to come home?" she said.

I breathed relief. My parents were a long way from coming to visit me. "I can't stay on the phone," I answered. "I've got chicken on the grill."

"I just love being pre-empted by poultry," my mother said, and I got off the phone as quickly as I could.

* * * * *

I was having a little trouble using Diane's television set. She'd gotten a new roommate after Geoff and I had moved to the Farm. Geoff had been paying rent at his

old place while living at Elaine's old place, where Elaine had been paying rent at her old place, and the whole thing was just very confusing. Claudia was a substitute elementary teacher and was having a rough time finding work in the summer, so Elaine hooked her up with Margitte to do catering work. I thought that was a mean trick, but money is money, I guess. Claudia hung around Diane's apartment some evenings when I was watching TV after work. Diane explained that my hogging the television was just part of the deal of the apartment, but it got to where I couldn't concentrate on what I was watching with Claudia lurking behind me. It was like someone reading over my shoulder. I liked Claudia, but those days when she was at the apartment, and it was just the two of us, I ended up getting nothing accomplished.

"Where're you going?" she'd say. She was very pretty, in a scrubbed, plain way—Ivory soap, corn fields, the deck of a sailboat. I imagined that the children she taught loved her, let alone Margitte and Paige. "You just got here." She might be flipping through a magazine on the couch or eating a bowl of cereal in the doorway to the kitchen.

"I'm just not in the mood today," I'd say and flick off the television. We'd sit and chat for a few minutes before I got my things together and left. I thought she was a little too pretty to actually be willing to waste her time with me. So any new reviews I worked on were coming slowly. I put all my energy into making the old ones air-tight, and it seemed to work well for me. Ranger Ricky had stopped changing my copy so much, so maybe I even learned something from my mistakes. My father would have been shocked, but I was keeping contact with the Atlanta suburbs to a minimum.

* * * * *

Along with the mosquitos that July brought came the one year anniversary of George's death. About a week before it came, I remembered it and watched Elaine

closely for any signs of inordinate depression, not really knowing what I was looking for other than the sullenness and estrangement that I'd felt with Elaine the few months after his death. A lot had happened in that year, and I was wondering how far Elaine had come from that evening she'd spent crying in my car when I'd picked her up from the train station. I hesitated and then finally mentioned it to Geoff, and he said he'd keep his eyes peeled, which I've always found one of the more repulsive images. Corneas and paring knives.

"I have some good news for you both," Elaine told us one evening on the porch, as I rubbed my arms and legs with a new mosquito lotion Elaine bought that didn't smell as bad as Cutter or make your skin feel quite as nasty. It was also much less effective. Elaine was trying out her own new approach to mosquito repellent—quinine in the form of tonic water. That's what the English used to do to save their pasty skin in colonial swamps. Even with a healthy splash of booze du jour, I still found it unpalatable. I don't see how people can drink the stuff because of that horrible bitterness, but Geoff and Elaine were quite content with it as a mosquito prophylactic.

"You say that a lot," I said.

Elaine squeezed a lime into her glass and tossed it off the porch for Baggy to chase. It was always good fun to watch Baggy's face contort in disgust from either tonic or gin.

"I have reason to," she said. "I do many magnificent things."

"Please don't make us guess," Geoff said.

"I wouldn't dream of it. You'll be pleased to hear," she said, turning to Geoff, "that I've used money from the guilt pot for the first time." This is how Elaine referred to the house money that Geoff and I gave her each month. She felt guilty about us giving it, and Geoff had created it out of guilt fear, so the nickname had stuck. I thought it was

a damn good bargain. It was a savings account set up in Elaine's name that Geoff and I had deposits slips for.

"I'm quite glad to hear it," Geoff said. "Did you buy that goat you've been threatening us with?"

"I thought you didn't want to guess. And no, I didn't, thank you very much, but I still might." Tomatoes were coming in by this point, and Elaine was loving eating what she'd grown. She was back on her dreams to raise everything she ate, but we all knew she'd never last without meat, and she certainly wouldn't get into the slaughtering business. She considered that separate. Little did we know. "I wouldn't use the guilt pot for that. But I did think of something. I heard about this new little gadget, so I had it installed today. Did you guys notice it?"

I hadn't noticed anything, and Geoff said nothing.

"Well, if you were keenly observant of your surroundings, you might have noticed something different about the bridge light." She pointed to it, a telephone pole-looking column on the island side of the bridge that carried electric and phone wires over the river to the house. It had a yellow light at the top of it that shown onto the bridge, but from where we sat on the porch, we couldn't see anything different about it. "See under the light? That little metal disc?" I saw it, but it wasn't anything I had or hadn't noticed before.

"That's my present to Luke from the guilt pot."

"Thank you," I said. "I've never had my very own metal disc before."

"If you weren't such a smart-ass, you might know that it is a tiny fancy little satellite dish that has now brought the curse of cable to our once peaceful home."

"That's a satellite dish?" Geoff asked.

"You're disappointed it's not a big black one in the yard?" Elaine said.

I said, "Elaine! This is so cool—you *are* Queen Elaine the Good. I hope it wasn't too expensive."

"That's none of your business," Elaine said.

I grinned at her. "May I go play with my present?"

Geoff grimaced at both of us. "I hope you're not actually asking for permission."

"He was kidding," I heard Elaine say as I retreated into the house. I went back to the sitting room and flicked on the television. Clear, crisp pictures. On every channel. Skin was looking a little green, so I messed with the color. I watched part of an ad selling life insurance to veterans, so cheesy, beneath the scorn of my pen. But I was delighted to be watching it, and maybe even more delighted that Elaine had done this for me.

"Thank you, Elaine," I said, back on the porch. The screen door banged closed behind me. I wanted to give her a hug, but she was on the rocker, and it would have been awkward. Sometimes I wish I could just *do* things. "This is going to make things a lot easier for me."

"I've enjoyed not having a TV around," Geoff said. "I don't think I've missed it in the least."

"Me neither," Elaine said.

I didn't agree with them, but then again, I didn't exactly watch shows. Elaine had pretty much given up on television at our old apartment, with me constantly flicking.

"I wanted to ask you an obnoxious favor, Luke" she said. "Can we not watch TV? I mean obviously, you've got your stuff to do, but other than that? It's such a time suck for me sometimes."

I felt a little attacked. "It's not like I waste my life bug-eyed in front of the TV."

"No, I know," Elaine said. "I'm just afraid it'll kill our porch time."

"Okay. I promise not to spend my life drooling over the television. But I want you to promise me something," I said to Elaine.

"What?" An ice cube in her drink popped loudly, startling all three of us.

"Well, this stuff you've been doing lately. The look-what-I-just-did-without-asking stuff. Sometimes I think it's a little out of control. I wish you wouldn't do it."

Elaine squinted her eyes a little, and I wished I hadn't said it that way. "Like what, exactly?"

I looked to Geoff for a little support. He knew what I was talking about, I hoped, but I didn't think there was much chance of him jumping in.

"Don't get mad, Elaine. I mean things like bringing home Baggy unannounced, and buying the Farm and moving out." I wanted to add the part about asking Geoff to move in with me before checking with me, but that seemed like bad politics with Geoff there, so I lit a cigarette instead. That keeps the mosquitoes away better than tonic.

"Those were all months ago." She wasn't mad, but I could tell she didn't like this. I felt ungrateful.

"I'm not saying you do this all the time, or that you even do anything wrong. I just wish you'd tell me. It's a little unsettling to me, for some maybe paranoid reason that I shouldn't even worry about. Wouldn't it bother you if I did things behind your back?"

Elaine stiffened. "Behind my back! You make it sound like I've been sneaky."

"Elaine! Look, forget it."

Geoff said, "Hey! Look at the time!"

Elaine rolled her eyes at him. She said to me, "No, I want you to finish." Now she was mad.

"I don't mean that I think you're sneaky. This has all come out wrong." Geoff

looked amused at my floundering, in his slightly superior way that occasionally bothered me excessively. "I love that you do favors for me. That satellite dish is incredibly generous and thoughtful of you. Especially because you didn't particularly want it. I appreciate it. But. It seems like you make all these plans that include me without including me in the decision. I'm really not trying to be critical." I hated getting into these kinds of discussions. They make me so flustered that I can never remember what I want to say or how to say things without being a weenie.

Elaine crossed her arms against her chest, chewing the inside of her lip and looking offended instead of mad. "If it was bothering you so much, you could've said something rather than stocking up a year's worth of evidence. It was a gift for Christ's sake."

"It's not something that's been bothering me for a year," I lied. "It just occurred to me now. Wouldn't it bother you if I did things that affected you without telling you? Let's say I . . . oh I don't know. I can't think of an example."

We were silent for a moment, uncomfortably so at first, and we all turned away from each other and watched the play of purple and pink in the afterglow. Something slightly spooky, a swallow or bat, swooped down through the light and then flitted and disappeared against the dark background of the horizon. A calm descended like fog and none of us said anything. As that first minute dragged itself into many, I noticed that the confused distress I'd been full of a moment ago had pretty much snuffed itself out. I took a drag off my cigarette, and Elaine shifted in her seat. Geoff began smiling.

Elaine gave a little laugh and a sigh. "Whatever," she said.

Chapter 13

"Do you ever think about why people live the way they do?" Elaine asked me as she tossed clumps of onion grass and clover into the wheelbarrow.

"No," I said, "or maybe I don't know what you mean." She'd shanghai'd me into helping her weed the vegetable garden on a Saturday afternoon in July. I'd agreed immediately, because she hardly ever asked favors. I hadn't wanted to do it, but I found that I was kind of enjoying myself. Weeding is terribly nerve-wracking business if you don't know what plants you're supposed to weed around and which you're supposed to pull up. I'd spent more hours than I care to think about when I was little being instructed about which plants I should be protecting and which ones I should be destroying, only to later have either or both of my parents scream hysterically at me for what I'd done to the bean plants or zinnias or whatever. I'd told Elaine I would do it if she was there and didn't mind stupid questions. Distinctions between plants are a lot easier to spot when you're an adult for some reason. I swear they all used to look alike.

Elaine wiped her forehead and left a red smear of clay on her summer-tanned skin. "I mean, why do people take horrible jobs and live in little families that make them miserable? It's not worth it."

I looked sideways at her. I got the impression that she wasn't talking about me, wasn't making some kind of off-hand criticism. "You think everyone's miserable? Some people love their jobs and their families. So I hear."

"I know that. But the others. Why bother?"

She occasionally came out with things so idealistic and naive that I could be simultaneously charmed and repulsed. "I would guess it has something to do with putting food on the table and taking care of people you're responsible for." The air steamed around us, thick heavy humidity that made you sweat without exerting yourself and made wiping the sweat off almost pointless. I was wearing some old ratty khaki shorts, my shirt crumpled on the grass with Elaine's. She had on cut-offs and this dingy sports bra thing that she swore was no different from a two-piece bathing suit top. But it was still a Jockey, not a Speedo, the kind of public outfit that would have made my mother grab the nearest jug of white wine. I stared at her for a minute as she bent over. Elaine had never been noticeably fat or thin before; I'd always thought of her as just normal, but after seven months of work that ranged from scrubbing old paint from brass fixtures to totting wheelbarrows full of stones she'd dug out of the garden, Elaine had developed something of an aerobic instructor's body sans pink leg-warmers and topknot scrunchie. I thought about wiping a drop of sweat from her arm.

"You think people spend their lives doing all that just for food and a sense of responsibility?" Elaine said, not looking up.

"Sure. I don't think most people in the country, hell, in the world, have much of a choice about what they do."

Elaine said, "I don't know. I certainly don't know about other countries. I just doubt that most people have to struggle that hard for the absolute basics of food and shelter. A lot do, I'm not saying that. But think about the crap that people spend their money on. Nice cars, or even not so nice new ones. Cement deer. Stuff you don't need. Is that worth the misery of being stuck in a routine?"

"Probably makes people feel like they're not struggling."

"That's a waste."

"Is there a point to this that I should be taking personally?" I asked.

"No, not really," Elaine mumbled, shaking a clod of dirt from grass roots. "Maybe. Maybe me too, though. I just wonder about spending your life not doing what you want to do."

"And that is. . . ?" I said, thinking that at least I wasn't getting paid for something morally abhorrent, like being an insurance or vinyl siding salesman.

"Well, it depends. I'm not sure what I want to do, but I knew what I didn't want to do. So I stopped doing it."

I lifted myself from hunched position to enjoy a light breeze coming down the river. There wasn't usually much air moving through that valley, but when there was wind, coming rushing down the river valley, it was often strong and cooling if not cool. I faced it and rested my arms atop my head to dry off. Elaine stood and met the breeze with her eyes closed, her hair fluttering behind her. She looked like an eighteenth century noble savage painting, with war paint on her forehead and a jogging bra instead of fringed buckskin.

When the wind died, I said, "Don't you think you'd still be working for Margitte if you hadn't gotten that money?"

"No, I don't," she said.

"What would you be doing?"

Elaine maneuvered the wheelbarrow a few feet down the row of squash we were weeding. "That's a good question. I wouldn't be here, that's for certain. But I wouldn't be catering. There's just no point in doing something you hate."

I didn't necessarily agree with her, and I still thought she was being a little naive. "I guess people learn to like it. I don't love Kushman, but I don't hate it, I don't think."

"Don't you think that's lazy?" Elaine said.

"I beg your pardon? I think I work my butt off." I turned to look at her to see if she was kidding or not. I may not have loved my job, but I knew I was good at it and worked hard. She didn't look back at me.

"No, I mean lazy because you settle for something that isn't perfect."

"Nothing's perfect."

Elaine snorted, dismissing my semantics argument. That kind of minor needling always seemed to bug her. "It's still worth trying for."

"It's a hell of a lot better than settling for head garbage man or assistant caterer."

I had completely stopped weeding at this point and wished she would, too.

"I know, Luke. Don't get mad—I'm not attacking you. But it's still settling, right?"

"Elaine! That's so naive. I'm probably lucky to have my job, in the grand scheme of things. You think everyone who does things they dislike is lazy? When did you become a Republican?"

"I'm just playing with the idea," she said, glancing back at me, probably in response to the increasingly unpleasant tone of my voice. "Settling, when you don't have to, seems a little lazy to me. I'm not ragging on welfare mothers or anything. Isn't that why you're doing the reviews? Because that's what you want to do?"

"So *that's* lazy too?"

"No, exactly the opposite. That's going for something you want."

"You spent three years catering."

"That was lazy of me. Letting yourself fall into a routine, allowing inertia to keep you where you are instead of doing what you want to do—that's lazy. I feel like I got a kick-start when George died."

It was my turn to snort. "Yeah, after a few months of doing nothing."

Elaine glared at me, and I felt a little bad about being snippy. I said, "Okay, granted—it would be lazy if I hated what I was doing. But I don't know what I want to do, and I don't hate what I am doing, so how can it be lazy, according to what you're saying?"

Elaine crumbled a big clod of red dirt in her hand, weighing what I was saying. "Okay, that's not lazy, then, when you put it that way. I guess what I mean then is that I think people should try harder to do what they want to do. Like I think Geoff is a little lazy for taking this job. He doesn't want to be a lawyer, but since he's got the degree, he's taking the job."

"He has enormous student loans," I said.

"But that's still lazy," she said.

"I think it's practical," I answered. "Now Diane's got that job at Uncle Buddy's that she's had since we've know her—five years behind a bar. She likes it, though. Is that lazy?" I felt heat under my skin, surprised that I could get any hotter.

"Luke, I'm not judging people," Elaine said, "I'm just thinking about this. It's not even something I've thought all that hard about. Diane likes her job, but she's sort of just living, isn't she? Just getting by?"

I felt like I was being overly defensive, but I couldn't help it. "She's trying to pay the rent and figure out what's going on with her and Geoff, and she's also trying to enjoy herself while she's doing it. Okay—take Claudia. Claudia wants to be a teacher, but she can't get a job, so she subs. Then she can't sub, so she caters—a lazy job you got her, I might add."

"That's not the kind of thing I'm talking about. Claudia is doing something temporary to get by while she tries to do what she wants to do. Now if she stopped trying for a teaching job and just relaxed into pushing crab puffs for a living, that would

be lazy. She's not, though, at least not yet. I think Geoff and Diane—and maybe you—are doing things just to pass time, sometimes. Don't you ever feel like that?"

Well, yeah, but not until she'd mentioned it.

* * * * *

The phone rang while I was watching TV, just the ads. Diane asked if I could join her that weekend at a place her parents had rented in Sandbridge, near Virginia Beach. "They won't be there," she said. "Dad sprained his ankle on Monday and made my mother take him home today. I've got the place to myself if I want it, from now until Sunday afternoon—I'm taking off work Thursday night to Sunday. What do you think?"

It was Wednesday evening. If I wanted that Friday off, I'd have to ask for it at work the next day. If they said no, I'd be screwed. If I called in sick Friday morning, they wouldn't be able to have veto power. "I'd love to! I wanted to get to the beach this summer. I was afraid it wasn't going to happen." If my mother found out, she'd have a fit. I handed the phone to Geoff.

Geoff couldn't get away early and decided not to go at all, which disappointed Diane, but I thought it might be nice to see her without him around, because I didn't get to see her by herself anymore. Claudia was going, bringing her boyfriend Doug that I hadn't met yet. I told Elaine about it later, and she hemmed and hawed for a few minutes before saying no.

"I don't think I can get away," she said. "The garden, and I'm nowhere near done pruning." This pruning job was even bigger than she'd thought—clipping or chain-sawing suckers and deadwood, and then painting the oozing stump with tar to keep the tree healthy. Then hauling all the stuff away into the woods. But she still wouldn't pay someone else to do it, and her arms were beginning to look like a female superhero's.

I groaned. "Aw, come on, Elaine. When was the last time you went a whole day

without doing some major chore around here? This place'll be here when we get back."

"Why would I want to go to the beach and spend three days baking on sand crowded with nasty people, when it's just as hot here, there's no sand, and I can take a dip in the river any time I want?" We'd been spending time in a little pool upstream of the island. In the lazy flow of the river in dry summer, it was an excellent swimming spot, if a little small. We'd been taking advantage of it almost daily.

"Because the beach is the beach!" I said. "Corn dogs and shell collecting!"

"Red tide and sand in your crotch," Elaine said. "Really though, I'd love to, but I just can't."

"Sure you can," I said. I began harassing her about it, jokingly at first, but as I got more insistent about it, I began wondering what I was doing. I'm ashamed to say that it was not that I wanted Elaine to come along that badly, though I did. I didn't want to leave her for three days alone with Geoff. I had this flash of nausea and horror when I thought about coming back from the weekend and finding his stuff moved into her room.

"I'll work all next week with you to make up the lost time," I said.

"I don't want you doing that," Elaine said. "Come on, Luke. Give it a rest."

"Tell me what is so utterly important that you can't afford three measly days," I almost barked at her. Boy, could I get out of hand fast.

"This isn't a forensics match," Elaine said icily. "I'm not going."

I stopped for a second and looked at her. "I'm sorry," I said. I took a long breath. "I just think you deserve a vacation after almost eight months of backbreaking work." She was staring at me as though I might be contagious, one eyebrow raised just enough to say it all. I crossed my arms and leaned back against the kitchen counter. "Now—correct me if I'm wrong. Isn't this a little bit lazy? Routine, routine. You're so deep into this farming business that you can't stop yourself."

"I can't believe you're using that against me," she said, chewing the inside of a grin. "Pulling out my garden philosophizing like this. It's like taping me singing in the shower for public broadcast."

"Don't give me any ideas," I said. "Now considering all that you said to me, don't you think you should go?"

"One point for a rebuttal to Luke West," she said. "Although going to Virginia Beach isn't exactly expanding my dull horizons."

"One more point for me," I said. "Sarcasm gets you nowhere on the debate floor."

"Look who's talking!" Elaine said.

"And actually, you should lose a point for incorrect factual information, because the house is in Sandbridge. So—three days, rent free, sun, waves, midnight strolls on the beach, hot tub. No pruning, no weeding, no roto-tilling. Come on—close your eyes, imagine the surf—"

"Luke! Okay, okay. I'll think about it." A little while later, after I'd pulled her suitcase up from the basement, she began packing just to shut me up.

* * * * *

"Now aren't you glad I was such a pest," I asked Elaine while I rubbed suntan lotion on her back, gliding my fingers under the Lycra-spandex straps. She smelled like a pina colada.

"Yes," she said, muffled by her head being dropped down for clear access to her neck. "Remind me to always listen to you." I was very pleased that I'd gotten up that morning to call in sick to work.

It was hot, the kind of hot that makes life unbearable anywhere but at the beach, where relief is just a few steps down off the loose dry sand onto the harder, cool sand and then into the slightly stiff foam at the water's edge. Diane was still up at the house, but

Claudia and Doug stretched out next to us on a faded flowered sheet. She was reading a magazine while he was fiddling with the dials on his radio. He seemed like a nice guy, the little I'd seen of him since the night before when we drove down together. He was a tad California, or maybe wacky ex-fraternity pot-head guy—ponytail hair, either dirty blond or just dirty, broad awkwardly bony shoulders. He managed his newcomer position well—none of the four of us had much to talk about at first, except the subject of catering, and he listened while Elaine and Claudia traded Margitte stories and I occasionally interjected with my own. He didn't seem to feel out of place, talking just enough to let everyone know that he wasn't uncomfortable. He'd been generous with his baggie of pot the night before, although Elaine wouldn't smoke any—she never did—and I suspected he'd been at it already this morning.

Elaine nestled back on to our sheet and handed Claudia the lotion when she asked for it. "What's keeping Diane?" Claudia asked.

"I have no idea," Elaine said. "I think she's got some kind of bug. The upstairs bathroom door was locked."

"God, I hope I don't catch it," Claudia said.

We lounged around for a while, soaking up enough heat to make the inevitable trip to the water as intense as possible. I was reading some Henry James novel (they're all the same, apparently, but I think it was *Portrait of a Lady*) that I'd brought—I'd vowed, when unpacking my stuff at Elaine's three months earlier, that I wasn't going to buy a new book until I'd read all the stuff I was supposed to read in college. It was going very slowly, and Henry wasn't helping. I should've brought some piece of fluff, but I didn't want to break my self-imposed rule, and I'd already read *Wuthering Heights*.

"What do you do, Doug?" Elaine asked.

"What am I doing now, or what do I want to do?" Doug said. Elaine turned and

smiled at me. Score one for Doug, maybe.

"Either," Elaine said.

"I sell toaster ovens at Best for minimum wage." Doug sat up and propped himself on his hands. "It's not a dream come true. I don't think I'll make the rock star dream, either, so I'm sort of waffling. I think I'd like to be sort of a carpenter-poet-philosopher, but I don't see a lot of openings in that field."

I squinted at him in the bright sun to see if he was serious or not. He was. "Good luck," I said.

"He wants to do something with kids," Claudia said. "He's been a Big Brother for a while."

"Good for you," Elaine said enthusiastically. She was definitely warming up to him.

"I love it," Doug said. "You've got these little kids, about ten years old. They're scared to death of you at first, and in about ten minutes, they're clinging to you and telling you about some fort they built out of shoe boxes or something." Doug opened up, with little or no prodding, in a way very few people I've met before do. That's a dangerous thing, because you're just assuming that people like you and are interested. Confidence is a precious thing. "I had this one kid who was pretty fucked up—he was over my head. But the other two have been so cool. I was thinking about bringing Todd, my little brother right now, but I decided not to. His mother is real wary of me. She acts like I'm some spy from Social Services just waiting to whisk the kid away from her."

I listened with interest. Those I-want-to-make-a-difference-in-the-world people fascinate me, the ones who were doing something about it. I mean, I did too, but what? I just wasn't a Special Olympics volunteer or Peace Corps kind of person, although I sometimes wished I was. Doug told us some more about being a Big Brother, and then

we hopped in the water for a while. The water was too warm to offer the startling relief I was hoping for, but it still cooled us off, and the four of us migrated to deeper water. We chatted lazily while treading water, and then Claudia and I went back to the beach while Elaine and Doug tried to body surf. The waves were too small for much more than fizzling, short rides, so I wasn't up to trying for long.

Diane finally joined us. "Man, I've been feeling sick. I must've eaten something bad," she told Claudia and me. She looked shaky. "I don't know if I can stand this heat," she said.

"You want something to eat?" I offered.

"Ugh. I had a bowl of Cheerios that just made me nauseous. I hope that milk wasn't bad."

We spent the whole day baking and swimming and reading. When Diane started feeling ill again in the late afternoon, Doug got her to go back up to the house and have a small anti-nausea smoke, but it didn't seem to help her much. "Should we take you to a doctor?" Claudia asked.

"No," Diane said. "It'll pass."

It did pass, but only briefly. I was all for taking her to the nearest emergency room, but Diane didn't want to go. She tried not to put a damper on our mini-vacation, but I think we were all worried about her. Elaine and Claudia got into this bizarre little competitive nurse dance together. Ex roommate vs. new roommate—who knows Diane better and can take better care of her? It wasn't anything that blatant, but it wasn't Elaine's usual style. I don't think she was aware of what they were doing, but every time Claudia left Diane's room, Elaine would head right back in immediately to see if Diane needed anything. She'd come back out, and Claudia would be fixing Diane a piece of toast or glass of soda water, and then they'd discuss what they thought would be better

for her. Elaine and I had developed a pretty good system over the years of catering to each other's colds and such—run to the store for orange juice and the appropriate Robitussin formula and a new box of Puffs and leave it at that unless there were any special requests.

Finally Diane tried to get up and join us out on the porch, but Elaine and Claudia wouldn't let her. It cracked me up. Elaine and Claudia weren't arguing, by any definition of the word—they were "discussing" what Diane needed. But in front of Diane, they presented this united front and sent her scurrying back to bed, threatening to take her to the hospital if she didn't rest and feel better.

I was looking forward to spending at least one night strolling around the glare of Virginia Beach, but I knew I wouldn't be able to drag Claudia and Elaine away from their charge. With nothing else to do, feeling that we definitely couldn't leave the sick house, Doug and I entertained ourselves with some Yahtzee dice that we found. We couldn't locate the score sheets, so we had to agree on the proper point values for small straights and full houses. We integrated a complicated system of tequila shots and sips of beer into the game, and the last thing I remember was being slumped in the downstairs bathroom of the house, falling asleep on the floor next to the toilet, just in case. I left Doug on a couch somewhere.

I woke up on the downstairs bed, sweating and groggy. It was really hot already. I lay there, coming in and out of sleep for a while, putting together the pieces of the previous night. Someone had gotten me to the bed—I vaguely remembered Elaine making me drink water and swallow aspirin sometime in the middle of the night. I was glad of it, too, because I didn't feel half as bad as I deserved. Doug showed up in the doorway a while later, looking severely rumpled, with sheet creases in his face and that dirty blond hair looking dirtier out of its ponytail.

"Morning," he croaked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Where are the girls?"

"They're not here?" I asked. Doug shook his head, and I hauled myself out of bed. I was still wearing my dried bathing suit from the night before. "What time is it?"

"It's about eleven," Doug said.

"They're probably down at the beach already." We went into the kitchen and poured cereal. I wasn't thinking clearly yet, but I was sly enough to notice that no coffee had been made. Or they'd drunk it all and dumped out the grounds, but that was unlikely. Elaine *always* made coffee.

"Oh man," Doug said. He was in front of the refrigerator, reading. "They took Diane to the hospital."

He handed me the note, and I guessed it was in Claudia's handwriting:

WE'RE TAKING DIANE TO

HOSPITAL. I'LL CALL.

7:30 A.M.

"Shit. I hope it isn't serious," I said.

"Me too." Doug got the milk out of the refrigerator. "But would they have taken her if it wasn't?"

"I don't know. I hope they were just being overly concerned." I knew Diane didn't have any health insurance. That's not one of the benefits of bartending. They must have dragged her there kicking and screaming. Diane was into herbal teas for health treatment. The only drugs she'd put in her body were recreational, and that wasn't so frequent. She had this idea about purity that I never really got a handle on.

"She didn't seem that sick to me," Doug said.

We munched out cereal in silence, like we'd known each other for years. I'd planned to head out to the beach early, but that didn't sound so fun while I was thinking about Diane. Doug and I rehashed the evening before. "I don't normally drink that much," he said. "You're a bad influence."

I started cleaning up the kitchen, crushing our empties and washing dishes, while Doug walked around the house with a trash bag. We'd made a hell of a lot of a mess for just two people. While we were cleaning up, I heard car doors slam, and when I looked out the window, I saw the three of them coming inside. I was more relieved than I thought the amount of worry I'd felt would allow. I've always liked Diane. They were moving slowly.

They trudged inside and stared blankly at the two of us. I was wearing a bathing suit, Doug was in boxers and a t-shirt, and I'm sure we both smelled like rancid sheep.

"What happened?" I asked.

"How're you feeling, Diane?" Doug asked.

Elaine flashed me a severe look that said "Don't ask," and I noticed Claudia doing the same to Doug. I noticed that all three of them looked pretty bad, not just Diane. Elaine had definitely been crying; I couldn't tell with the other two. In a flash, a list of the worst fatal diseases possible shot through my mind, and I felt my stomach churn around the remaining tequila and Cheerios.

"Oh, I'm just dandy," Diane said, throwing her purse down on the couch and heading into the kitchen. She shouted, "Just fucking dandy!"

"Diane. . . ." Claudia said, soothingly.

Diane joined us at the table, and then I could see that she'd been crying, too. I was dying to ask her what was going on, but I had to wait. She was about to start crying again. "No, I'm not sick at all." Her eyes watered up, and she was trying to smile to

hold back any more tears, but it wasn't working. She said, "I'm just pregnant," and then she was crying again, the four of us non-criers looking at each other and then down at the table, with nothing to say.

Chapter 14

That afternoon, when the mood had lifted a little and Diane was over the initial shock, Elaine and Claudia began acting in tandem again, this time more like cheerleaders than nurses. Once Diane had made it clear that: a) she wasn't considering anything other than keeping the baby, and b) it was definitely Geoff's, the three of them started talking on the porch. Doug and I were mute most of the afternoon, listening and fetching beers or making food. The more I heard, the more I wished that Geoff was at the beach with us.

"Geoff will be fine," Elaine said. "And he's making a mint."

"Don't worry about Geoff so much. Think about yourself," Claudia said.

"She's right," Elaine said. "Give yourself some time to let this all settle before you add Geoff to the equation."

"I don't see how I can do that. You all don't understand. A year ago, things started getting bad between me and Geoff. Not horrible exactly, but not good." Diane sipped a glass of ice-water. It was kind of funny that, in a matter of hours, we were all treating her differently. Without acknowledging it, no one offered her any beer, caffeine, or pot any more. "So in that year, we've split up, moved apart, and then started seeing each other again. This is just going to force something to happen that isn't ready yet—like us either breaking up or sticking together."

I wondered if Elaine was mentally adding the fact that she'd slept with Geoff in that year. I did.

"I'm not ready to be a mother. I can barely take care of myself. I can't afford having a baby and I certainly can't afford raising one." Diane gave an exasperated laugh. "I don't know shit about babies! I was always afraid of them when I babysat. I would just pray that they'd stay asleep the whole time."

Elaine said, "You are going to be fine. You'll be a great mother. And you aren't alone with this. You've got Geoff. He's one of the most responsible people I know. Picture him with a baby. He'll be a good father. I wouldn't expect him to jump up and down with joy when you tell him, but I bet he'll be okay with it."

I thought about it. She was probably right. I wouldn't want him to be my father though. He'd make you sign contracts about keeping your room clean.

Elaine continued, "And your parents live in town."

"Oh God, my parents," Diane said, with an exaggerated moan.

"And you've got me," Elaine said.

"Me too," Claudia added.

"So there's two babysitters. I don't know squat about babies either, but I'll be willing to help. Luke would, too. Right?"

The three of them looked at me. I gulped, "Sure."

"He doesn't sound enthusiastic now," Elaine said, mock threatening me, "but he will be."

"Right!" I said. "Uncle Luke! We'll go to the circus or something." My experience with babies was pretty much limited to Baggy. Doug sat silently at the end of the picnic table bench. I don't think he knew Diane well enough at that point to offer or be volunteered.

"Thank you," Diane said, "but this is all little ahead of me right now."

"Sure it is," Claudia said. "We just want to make sure that you know that you've

got a lot of support."

"Right," Elaine said.

Diane said she was feeling ill again, but not too much. The four of us practically fought to get her something, a refill of her glass of water, anything. "It doesn't seem as bad. Maybe because I know what it is. Luke, would you move that beer? The smell of it is just grossing me out."

I obliged and moved to the end of the porch, where I'd been smoking all afternoon. Suddenly I didn't want to be blowing smoke all over Diane.

"I don't see how I'm going to pour drinks for a living," Diane said. "I puked at work on Tuesday night, after I smelled some buffalo wings and melonballs. I thought it was just a fluke."

"They say it goes away pretty quickly," Claudia said.

"There's so much to worry about!" Diane said.

She felt guilty about ruining the weekend, which we all immediately and profusely denied, but that night she made us all go on a walk down the beach.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Claudia asked.

"The next person that treats me like an invalid is going to be drowned," Diane announced, and with that, we set off down the dusky beach.

A bright half-moon lit the sky and the water. We walked near the top of the ridge where the sand sloped down to the ocean, examining horseshoe crabs and clumps of seaweed rotting on the sand. Occasional beachcombers passed us walking the other way, and we avoided small groups of people sitting on the beach, talking in hushed tones. It had been an odd day, but I was keenly aware of the bond Diane's news had brought to our little group. We were all comfortable together, regardless of how well some of us knew each other, the way I've imagined that siblings must feel. It would be different if

Geoff were here, I thought. Geoff and Diane would have paired off separately to talk about her being pregnant, the other four of us sitting restlessly on the beach wondering what they were talking about. Maybe that would have been better, to spare us that false sense of intimacy that we'd generated. In the long run, it would have been. I think it was that night that accelerated the mess on the Farm, the first pebble tossed carelessly that started the avalanche. But that night at least, I wouldn't have traded that feeling for anything, that feeling of being connected and belonging, something I'd experienced plenty of times with individuals, but almost never with a group.

"Diane, I think you're being incredibly brave about this," Doug said, after we'd all been silent a while. That's the kind of statement that normally made me uncomfortable, unless it was me drunkenly confiding it to someone when the mood hit me. But not that night. "I had a girlfriend in high school who got pregnant. She didn't tell me about it until after she'd had an abortion."

"What happened?" Elaine asked him.

"Nothing. We broke up. It was weird. I had no intention of being a father, but I would have liked to have known before she did that. I felt cheated I guess."

Again, that sense of group safety kept me from retreating from the conversation as it got serious. Doug, I would find out, had a way of making every conversation serious.

"You've never told me that, Doug," Claudia said, quietly.

"I don't know if it's brave as much as naive," Diane said.

"No, it's brave," I said.

"I used to worry all the time about getting pregnant," Elaine said. "I had all these elaborate schemes of what would happen, different contingencies depending on who the father was, where I was living. Then I stopped a few years ago. I sort of forgot it was

a possibility." I wondered if she would have said that if Geoff was there. I, of course, had never had to worry about it. Not just the wrong plumbing, either.

"I know what you mean," Diane said. "It was this huge fear in high school and college for me. Then I just stopped worrying about it. It's not like I got careless or anything, but it just didn't seem as much of a worry."

"Yeah," Claudia said. "I think it's when you realize how many other things there are that could ruin your life."

"I always just planned to wait until I was thirty," Diane said. "I never saw myself as a young mother."

"You'll be 26," I said. "Is that so young?"

"I know. Exactly," Diane said. "I just planned to be a wife first."

We didn't talk for a while after that, the only sounds around us the surf, our feet kicking at the hard sand, and occasional quiet voices hidden in the shadows of the bulkheads. I breathed in the salty fish smell and wondered if I would ever get married, if I'd ever want to.

"Let me suggest something," Elaine said suddenly. "You could move out to the Farm and live rent-free." I'd been wondering if she would suggest that.

"With Geoff?" Diane said. "I don't know that that would be such a hot idea."

Elaine began speaking excitedly, and I could tell that the ideas were being formed the same moment they came out of her mouth. Usually, I find that sort of thing a little dangerous. In this case, it was. "We'd run it past him first. Think about it. There's plenty of room for you all to live sort of separately, but it'd be a chance for you two to also sort of live together. If it didn't work out, you'd do something else. You could quit Uncle Buddy's when you wanted to and not have to worry about money. Think of all the money you'd save between now and when the baby'd be born. I've still got plenty

of money left. I can't think of a better place to spend it than getting ready for a baby. Who needs health insurance?"

"I don't know if I would want to live off of your charity," Diane said. I thought back to our arguments about rent with Geoff—I guess the idea of taking freebies just doesn't disturb me like other people.

"Don't think of it that way," Elaine said. "I wouldn't be doing it because I'd feel sorry for you. I could blackmail you by forcing you to make me godmother or something. And you know what? I got that money because someone died. Why not use some of it to give someone birth?"

We were all quiet once more after that sort of logical non-logic. I liked the idea of living with Diane again. The three of us had plenty of space in that house. I couldn't imagine that one more would be a problem, especially Diane, who was undemanding almost to a fault.

"I couldn't leave you in that apartment," Diane said to Claudia.

"You should consider it, Diane," Claudia said. "That's a deal. I could find another roommate."

"You could break your lease and stay with me, Claudia" Doug said.

"I *could* move in there, couldn't I?" Diane said, mulling it over. "Depending on what Geoff thinks."

"Yes!" Elaine said. "As soon as you wanted. It'd be perfect!" She added, "Depending on what Geoff thinks, of course."

* * * * *

Work on Monday was agonizingly long, one of those days that by eleven in the morning felt like quitting time. I think I checked my watch and the corner of my computer screen at least every five minutes, groaning each time I realized how little time

had passed since my last glance. I even sat staring at the screen, watching the colon on the clock blink away the seconds, synchronizing it with the hands on my watch until I had the two of them reading the exact same time, down to the second. Between lunch and the end of the day, my watch was off by almost two seconds.

I was more nervous than I had cause to be about that evening—I don't normally get wrapped up in the tiny personal details of my friends' lives, but Diane and Geoff were going out for dinner that night, and she was going to tell him about the baby. I was curious about his reaction because I wondered if my guesses about how he'd react were correct. I figured he'd be in shock for a few minutes, try to assign blame for faulty birth control (hers or his), complain that this was all coming at the worst time possible when he was still studying for the bar, and then tell her they should get married, without asking her. He kicked into this amusing dad-in-control mode when pressed to make decisions, and I could just see him making up his mind in a matter of seconds, committing himself fully to whatever he decided without giving it a lot of time. To his credit, he was a pretty swift thinker and didn't make a lot of bad decisions, as far as I knew.

I ran over to the *Alternative Times* after work to pick up my check that I hadn't been able to get on Friday and go over changes Ranger Rick wanted to make to a piece about kid's cereal commercials with cartoon spokescharacters. Ricky hadn't given me any sort of veto power yet, but he was beginning to trust my instincts, and as long as I could justify, to his liking, a reason not to make a change that he proposed, there was a good chance he wouldn't do it. I was almost a regular item, appearing in six of the last seven issues. He'd even asked me if I wanted to write other stuff for the newspaper, but most of those ideas involved calling people or going places or making sure my facts were straight, and I wanted to keep all the necessary pieces in my head and my television. People could disagree with me, but there was little chance of me being wrong about

anything as long as I was only dealing with my subjective interpretation.

Judy was sitting at her computer in the largest of the three Alternative Times offices. She looked like a hefty Pat Benatar, with spiky black hair and streaks of red across her cheeks, her overly large head settled atop a short Weeble body. She was almost always there, and I'd grown to appreciate the enormous amount of work that she and Ricky did on the paper. They did 99% of the work on the paper and always managed to put the thing together, every two weeks. Judy alternately smoked and ate barbecue pork rinds while she was reading something, and she waved at me when I came into the dark room. I'm certain that all three of those offices and the people in them would have disintegrated to dust and ash if exposed to sunlight.

"Hey there, Adman," she said and began crunching a pork rind. I could smell the salty paprika from across the room. "Got any new copy for us?"

"Nope," I said. "Running a little short this week?"

"Mm-hm. Ricky wants me to toss together some kind of editorial thingy for the back page, and I'm just not up to it."

"I'm sure you'll come up with a winner," I said. Judy wrote these little essay-type things to fill space, usually focused on how the world was going undeniably to hell because of talk shows, Jerry Falwell, education cuts, or some other complaint du jour. They were rants, but usually entertaining rants or at least intelligent ones. Ricky loved that stuff. "Is he in?" I asked.

Judy nodded at the door to his office rather than speak through a mouth full of pork rinds, and I stuck my head in the door. He was squinting mole-like at the computer in front of him. The bare light bulb on the ceiling and his desk lamp didn't do much to combat the gloom of his office. They seemed more like bright stars than actual lighting.

"Howdy Ranger Rick," I said. I'd finally confided the nickname to Judy, and

she'd thought it was hilarious and told Ricky. I tried not to show how embarrassed I was when he first called himself that in my presence.

"Luke! Just who I was looking for," he said. "How would you like to do a piece for me on this guru guy who's going to be in town next week giving a talk at the college?"

"Guru?" I asked.

"I can't even pronounce his name. Apparently he's going to be telling about his experiences with astral projection and self-healing. He's gotta be a real loon. Look." Ricky shuffled through the pile of folders beside his computer, and he pulled out an 8 x 10 glossy and slid it across the desk to me. The picture showed a very wrinkled bald man sitting lotus-style on a pillow. Across the bottom was printed the name Shri-va-Ti Kinivashu in Kon-Tiki style print. He looked like a cross between Ghandi and Mr. Clean—not that they're all that different anyway—a beefy bald prophet, posed robed in front of the bottom half of an enormous statue of either a cow or a horse. I guess it could have been a water buffalo. He had that combination of weathered skin and wrinkles that kept me from being able to tell his ethnicity. I've always thought that very old people around the globe look pretty much alike.

"Heh," I said. I'd never had all that much faith in funky religious stuff, from Moses to Jimmy Swaggart, including esoteric robed mysteries of the Orient.

"His press release says he has been called a modern prophet and an inspiration to millions," Ricky said. "I need a good cynic to go listen to him."

"Why thank you," I said. I'm no cynic. The world's just fucked up. Well, maybe I am. "I don't know, though. I don't know the first thing about that kind of stuff."

"Which makes you perfect," Ricky said. "I don't want some slobbering piece by

a disciple. I want irreverence."

"I mean that kind of writing. What—do I tape him? Interview him? Ask him how the rent gets paid while he's floating through the nebula?"

Ricky laughed at me. "That seals it," he said. "You're doing it."

It's hard to dissuade that kind of faith in your abilities. I liked the being the best of anything, even if it was professional grump. I thought about sitting in a crowd of freaks for an hour listening to the little man in the picture in front of me. What on earth did I have to bring to the table, other than utter disbelief? Of course, that was what Ricky wanted. But what if I messed it up? Got the *Alternative Times* sued for libel?

"It's perfect timing—you go see him, rush me out some copy by tomorrow, and it'll make Friday's paper." The *Alternative Times* had a problem printing newsworthy stuff that was also current. Biweekly papers have a tough time doing that. It's like the *Time* and *Newsweek* editors must feel when someone gets assassinated the same day that the latest issue goes to press. Just plain flat out of luck. "I'll promise you a hundred and fifty bucks if I headline it," Ricky said. That was half again the usual head-liner price. Again, flattery is a tough adversary.

"And what if you don't print it?" I asked. I had this upper-hand feeling with Ricky that I don't normally have. It was an illusion that he carefully maintained, but it felt good.

"Then you've earned a free night of mysticism," he said. "But I want it, and I'm betting you won't disappoint me. Be a sport."

A sport. That's what they call you at tee-ball if you want the coach to call your mother because you keep hitting the tee instead of the ball and start crying. Words are more powerful souvenirs of misery than smells. I mulled it over.

"I could threaten to never publish one of your inconsistent, bitchy reviews again,"

Ricky said.

"You are no gentleman," I said.

"Hell no," Ranger Rick told me, with a cackle that dissipated into a cough. He reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out an envelope. "Here is your check for the last issue, and two tickets inside to the exotic evening of the year. Take a friend." He handed it to me with a smirk. I bet that's what older brothers are like. "The guy, Shritavablahblah has a couple of books out—if you want to buy one ahead of time, I'll foot the bill," he said.

"See if I ever show my face down here again," I said. I snatched the envelope out of his hand. It occurred to me that I really needed a foothold in the real world, a job where you weren't cajoled into doing things against your will by pushy coaches and feeble cardigan-wrapped mothers. Ricky made me a copy of a little pamphlet the guru's press people had sent out.

"I'm not going to ask you anything ever again," Ricky said as he pulled out the copy I'd come to look over with him. "I'm just going to tell you."

* * * * *

Too hot a night to be outside, Elaine and I were on the sitting room couches when we heard a car pull up the gravel driveway. We were sweating in front of two fans in the windows, our dinner dishes soiled with hamburger grease scattered on the coffee table. It was too hot for the grease to have congealed, even hours old as it was. It was after eleven, and Elaine had pulled out the blender after dinner for frozen drinks. We were on our third pitcher of peach daiquiris—fresh Farm peaches, small but tasty. Baggy galloped from her spot on the floor to the front door to wait for Geoff to come inside.

"Oh—and don't mention anything about living arrangements," she told me, hoarsely whispering after we'd heard the car door slam. I raised an eyebrow. She said,

"Diane and I talked about it this afternoon."

We'd been trying to avoid the topic all evening, and ended up with little else to talk about, so we hadn't been saying much. I'd invited Elaine to go listen to the guru guy with me, and she was all up for it. "It'll be a hoot," she'd said. That was Geoff's little catch phrase that she'd co-opted.

The screen door banged and Elaine called out, "Hey Geoff."

He didn't answer, so we sat waiting nervously for him to come find us.

"Daiquiris in the freezer if you want one," I said. We both felt guilty about Diane, I think because we'd found out before he had, even if by mistake. And he'd know that we knew, there was no way around that. At least I felt guilty.

Geoff appeared in the doorway, still in his suit from work but sans tie, the tip of which was poking out of his jacket pocket. He looked shaky and smiled feebly at us. If it'd been any month other than August, when the three of us were at peak tans, he'd have been a very pale boy.

"Congratulate me," he said, fidgeting.

Elaine rushed over to him from the couch. "Congratulations, Dad!" she said and hugged him while he stood there, limp.

"Congratulations," I said.

"I'm having a baby," he answered, walking into the room. It was kind of nice, a human touch of confusion that I'd never seen in Geoff before. He sat down next to me on the couch.

"Tell us what you think!" Elaine said. "Drink?" Geoff shook his head no and then nodded after rethinking the offer. Elaine disappeared into the kitchen and I heard the freezer door open. We'd been arguing earlier about who got the privilege of getting drinks and standing in front of the chilly, open freezer.

"You're going to be a dad," I said.

"This is wild," Geoff answered. I heard Elaine clinking glasses in the kitchen and then the whir of the blender.

I asked him, "So is this a good thing? You're excited?"

"Wait! I want to hear," Elaine hollered from the kitchen.

Geoff groaned. "I'll be excited when the shock wears off. Maybe," he said. "I sat there in front of Diane for ten minutes, saying, 'You're kidding, right?' over and over."

"What?" Elaine yelled. "Hold on!"

Geoff rolled his eyes at me, and we sat quietly until Elaine brought in a heavy-bottomed beer mug full of tan slush. "Tell me if it's too weak," she said.

"I'm sure it is," Geoff said, and he sipped the top of it. "It's fine." He was almost moving in slow motion, and he was avoiding our eyes.

"So what do you think?" Elaine asked.

"Jeez, Elaine, give him a break."

She turned to me, about to say something, and then stopped. I sort of bugged my eyes out at her, by which I meant: Come on, give the guy a chance to relax for a minute before pumping him for information, because he's obviously flipped out. I don't know what she inferred, but she sat back on the sofa without saying anything.

"I'm just kind of out of it," Geoff said. "This was about the last thing in the world I expected. It's just so weird."

"But are you happy about it?" she asked.

"Diane tried to warn me that you were going to grill me," Geoff said. "She offered to let me stay over there, but I told her I could handle you."

"You're stalling," Elaine said.

"I should've stayed at her place tonight." Geoff took another gulp of his daiquiri and then winced and pressed his fingers to his eyes. Slurpee headache.

"I'm just excited about it," she said. "Two of my best friends are going to have a baby. None of my friends have babies. It's an amazing thing."

"Give me a few days to get to where you are. This isn't just any baby. It'll be mine." He paused. "I assume."

Elaine's mouth widened. "You don't think there's any—"

"No! Elaine, please—I was kidding. You remember. Humor?"

"I hope you didn't say that to Diane."

"Give me a little credit for being a nice guy," Geoff said. He told us about his dinner with Diane. It didn't sound like they'd done much more than stare blankly at each other. He disappointed Elaine—he didn't have much to tell her, and I couldn't blame him. That would freak me out. Not that there was a chance in hell of me being a father, me of the lifelong drought.

Elaine got disgusted with Geoff's reticence and headed up to bed. There were dishes in the sink, so I left Geoff to himself with both fans blowing on him and Baggy at his feet. I felt kind of bad for him. He was so good at planning his life out, and then BAM! Time to regroup and figure out a new plan.

While I was attacking some burnt cheese on a skillet, Geoff wandered into the kitchen and offered to split the last of the daiquiri with me. I told him to take the whole thing, and then I thought I'd be nice and wash out the blender for him. He plopped down at the kitchen table and stared at his mug, running his finger down the side to connect the sweat droplets on the glass. I could tell he wanted to ask me something, so I took an extra long time washing out that blender, giving him the chance to speak. It took him most of that last mug to say something.

"I asked Diane to marry me," he said quietly.

I winced, standing at that sink, and then stopped what I was doing and looked over at him.

"She said no, of course," Geoff said. "Not 'no' like never, just not now. I think she was pleased that I asked."

"That's probably a good thing," I told him. "Her saying no, I mean. Were you serious?"

Geoff sighed into his drink. "I thought I was," he said. "I was, though, in a way. Maybe I was moving a little too fast, huh?"

"That would be my guess. Or just bad timing," I said. I wiped my hands on my pants and then sat across from him.

"I don't know what to do," he said.

"Of course you don't," I told him. "Who would? I wouldn't worry about it—you don't need to know what to do right this moment. You've got time to work things out. Hell, you've got at least seven months or so to think about it."

Geoff smiled lazily and then looked over at me. He poured the last of the peach daiquiri into his mouth. "This is not how I pictured my life."

Chapter 15

The heat that had been uncomfortable a week before began to grow unbearable, a thick, pervasive cloud that left everything hot or wet, my car interior a convection oven and my armpits a swamp. Shifflettsburg was up against the Blue Ridge, so all sorts of unpleasant weather that came to visit usually stuck around for a while, from blizzards to heat waves. This was the kind of weather that made you appreciate working in an office, just so you could sit in an air-conditioned cubicle and listen to a dozen complaining voices around you talk about the weather outside. When you opened a door, a blast of wet heat hit you like a tree snapping back in your face—thoroughly annoying, making you want to turn back. When I wasn't at work, I was either finding an excuse to spend time in stores or sitting on the bottom of the Mawmannock in the little swimming area west of the Farm and wishing the water was colder. It was about a degree cooler at the Farm than it was in town, with all those trees out in the country cooling things off, but the house didn't have any shade trees around it so it got blasted for fourteen hours a day from a sun that really should have had better things to do. The offices of the Alternative Times were slightly cooler than the air outside, but the war between Tilex, Lysol, and mildew down there made my lungs want to curl up and quit.

In that week, Geoff had gotten back to his normal self—busy, efficient, and planning for contingencies every waking second. He was determined not to abandon Diane, to be valorous and protective and a good provider. He was driving her crazy, in a nice way. Talk still hadn't been mentioned of Diane moving in with us, and I

wondered if she had decided against it. She had a new power over Geoff; the slightest thing that she wanted, she got, usually before she could finish her sentence. Elaine had become a little bit the same way around her, calling her all the time, inviting her over for every meal of the day, constantly asking if she needed anything. I don't know whether Elaine was operating as a sister or a nurse. Elaine wanted to put window air-conditioning units in some of the rooms at the Farm. Just so Diane could sit there, cool and pregnant. Diane wouldn't let her. Diane wanted everyone to treat her like usual, and she latched onto me as the sane one in the house. She made me sit and smoke next to her without getting up and walking a few air-clearing steps away, and whenever Geoff and Elaine got too pushy, she would ignore them and just talk to me. It tickled me.

* * * * *

Shriva-Ti Kinivashu's speaking engagement was on a Wednesday night, and when Geoff found out that it was taking place in MSU's air-conditioned Dylan Auditorium, he suddenly began to think that the old fake might be worth going to listen to after all. Diane had wanted to go from the start, but Geoff had groaned his way out of it. Enter physical comfort, and the four of us headed over to our old stomping grounds around campus. It was funny living in the town where you went to college, for me at least. After school, I felt awkward being in the town—I felt like one of the older doofuses (or is it doofi?) who hung around my high school parking lot, trying to cash in on the good old times without growing up, sort of Fonzie/Peter Pans. I didn't like going on the school's campus for the first year or two out of school, and I avoided anything that had to do with the school. But over my years in Shifflettsburg, I stopped feeling defensive about worrying that I had been just hanging around town doing nothing with my life, and I started going to concerts or movies or such at the school without feeling uncomfortable, out of place, and old. And it's easy to feel like a twenty-five year old codger when you

start being around seventeen and eighteen year olds again.

The air-conditioned lobby of the auditorium was full of people enjoying the coolness. Their numbers surprised me—I'd never heard of this little guru-man. Had they? Were they coming to gawk at the man or were they coming to be enlightened? There was a little write-up about him in *The Newsleader*, the mainstream Shifflensburg newspaper. In their typically bland style, *The Newsleader* had said that he mixed ancient philosophy and beliefs with modern practice, the result an astounding mixture of wisdom and spirituality. Methinks they copied it out of a press kit and forgot to use quotation marks. *The Newsleader* was chock full of errors that set my teeth grinding when I read the paper. They'd omit final lines from AP wire stories or jumble the order of cartoon blocks. There was always a column somewhere in the paper that slanted off the edge. My first year out of college, I'd amassed a stack of clippings from *The Newsleader* full of errors and idiocies that I'd circled in red. I was going to send the clippings to them with a scathing letter but never got around to it, and I lost the clippings at some point.

We were waiting to meet Claudia and Doug. I was keenly aware of my job there as a writer for the *Alternative Times*, but I didn't quite know what to do. I had my little pad of paper and tape recorder that Ricky'd lent me in my backpack. "I hope you're at least going to give this man a shot," Diane said when we'd picked her up.

"No way," I said. It occurred to me that someone into herbal teas as a means of health care probably was a little more receptive to guru charms than I.

"He's not a guru," Diane said. "He considers himself a teacher." She'd read the little pamphlet I'd shown her about the speaker.

"Let's hope he levitates for us," I said.

"You're too skeptical, Luke," Diane said. I'd like to be able to believe in that crap, but I just can't. Prove its existence to me, and I'd be happy to nurture my chi.

I looked around us at the fairly large crowd of people, most of them striving for a slightly dressed-up look but still trying to wear as few clothes as possible because of the heat. A lot of MSU students milled around, mostly along the crunchier end of the spectrum, in batik skirts, tie-dyed t-shirts, and Jesus footwear, but there were also plenty of non-students—people that I knew, some my age and some older, the less traditional adults around town who could often be seen at readings and tiny gallery openings.

"There's Claudia," Elaine said. "Ugh—look." The other three of us peered in the direction of her head-nod, and I saw who the ugh was directed toward. Claudia and Doug were standing next to a water fountain, talking to Margitte and Paige. I wasn't at all surprised to see them there—Margitte loved that kind of stuff, and I thought that if anyone's chi could use a little fine tuning, it would be Paige. Poor Claudia had to work with them. I wondered if it would be fair to criticize the little guru for the crowd he attracted.

We shuffled over to Claudia and Doug and said hi as a group. That didn't keep Margitte from exclaiming, "Elaine!" and giving her an enormously showy hug. Then she saw me. "Luke!" Simpering smile, double kiss, smile, retreat. I *hate* that. I made eye contact with Paige, and nodded to her. She made no response. It shocked me to see that she was actually in the middle of some sort of conversation with Doug. I didn't think she talked to anyone.

"Goot to see you bote," Margitte said. She had on this enormous caftan, a flimsy white thing that was hand-painted with faux children's art, and she had these bulky cubes hanging from her ears that were supposed to look like building blocks, with colored letters and drawings of animals on them. B is for Bear, A is for Alligator. I don't know where she found that kind of stuff. "You know thees Kinivashu? Or thees iss your first time?"

"We're Kinivashu virgins," Elaine said. Then she nodded at me, and I swallowed, hard. I knew she remembered, and it made me crazy. "Luke's writing a piece on him for the *Alternative Times*."

"Maybe," I said.

"Oh, Luke—I love your little writings in dere! So funny!" Margitte said. "But I hope you don't be so mean witt Kinivashu. I read hiss buke last year. I saw myself in dere, ant eet vass so true."

So someone in the room had heard of the man before. A little woman in a maroon robe was sitting behind a card table stacked high with books. It didn't look like anyone was buying them. People began filing into the auditorium, and I took an aisle seat next to Diane so I'd have some elbow room for taking notes. Margitte and Paige were behind us, and I heard Paige laugh when Doug said something. My god. That was an ear-opener. I had to turn to make sure it was actually her, because I don't think I'd ever heard that sound before. She was smiling, faintly to be sure, but definitely smiling.

When the lights dimmed a little in the auditorium, a nervous looking woman came out and announced that this was the final night of the MSU Summer Lecture Series, and in the fall, MSU would have the pleasure of welcoming such speakers as blah blah blah. I got out my recorder and clicked it on. I hoped it would pick up more than my breathing. She droned, and I recognized her from somewhere around the school, probably as a professor I hadn't had, but I did not catch her name. Then she introduced the man we'd come to see, and he made his way out onto the stage. He was old and tiny, but hefty-tiny. He was wearing the same sort of robe thing he'd had on in the pictures I'd seen, but I could see a little dark razor stubble on top of his head. I made a little note to myself that he wasn't really bald. I flicked off the recorder and then replayed the last few seconds to myself. It was picking up the sound fine. I clicked it back on.

He spoke for over an hour, never moving from behind the podium. His only action that whole time was to pick up a little plastic cup and sip water from it or pour into it from a pitcher. I was expecting an accent, maybe of India or somewhere northeast of there. What I heard was a slightly clipped English accent, and I'm sure it was fake. There was an undeniable inconsistency to it, like high school actors in a Restoration comedy, and I think a touch of California in his accent as well. I'm certain the name he was born with was closer to Bob Jones than Shriya-Ti Kinivashu. He spoke for over an hour, and here's the Luke West Cliff Notes version of what he said:

I'm here tonight not as lecturer or speaker, but as a teacher, as one who does not instruct, but one who enlightens by example. My sixty-two year journey is my lesson, and I have spoken extensively of it in my book. I cannot hope to recapture in our hour together what is a lifetime. If you are interested in more, look into your hearts for the answer. Ask yourself the questions I ask of myself in my book, read the book, come to self-understanding (*shameless sales plug*). . . . A man sees his reflection in a calm pond and asks of the image, "What kind of creature are you?" There is no answer, because the man asks outside himself. When the first rain comes, the image is ruptured and then man has no one to asks his question to. He does not ask the question again (*The modern parable, the dense allegory, the point at which I found myself nodding off*). . . . We must seek to change what we can. The direction of our lives is in our hands. Does the rider let go of the reins? Does he not train the horse well? (*I know Elaine's loving this part*). . . . In my search for community, for family larger than blood, I must ask myself whether I value myself above that community before I begin to create one in which I see myself as center rather than part. . . . Can the flower become the fruit without the tiny bee? Can the heart live without

the hand? (*What?*). . . . When we reject others, do we not reject ourselves? Extend your hand to your enemy before you must then offer the other cheek. Do I not live to recover the world lost to me through vanity and shame? Can I look to the world as that which feeds me, or must I look to myself as that which feeds the world? This is what I must do (*Ricky'll love this part*). . . . Laughter is healing and harming (*Blow it out your ear*). . . . Is the game played until someone loses? The true power lies in playing until both have the same number of pieces left, in restoration of balance. Do we seek to conquer or to understand? Do we not confuse the two? (*Could he be any more purposefully obscure? Did MSU really pay him to rattle this crap off?*). . . . Ultimate knowing is the bonding of one soul to another through the body, the willing marriage of one mind to another flesh. Carnality is an illusion of the world that seeks to keep the individual from knowing his community, one that prevents union (*Is he calling for an orgy? So John Holmes was a spiritual master?*). . . . Are not the roof, the wall, and the window suffocating rather than protecting? A boy went to his father and said, "I must go build my own house and make a man of myself." The father told the boy that first the boy must become a man. No house would exist as but an obstacle until then (*Could you repeat that? And make sense this time?*). . . . The war against evil is fought in small personal battles. Does not the moving of one stone move the earth? (*Oh, spare me! Does not someone else have to move that stone from wherever you decided to toss it?*). . . . Out of darkness, we must create our own light. The candle burns the wax that was once life, the tree that become oil, the tallow that was once flesh. Life is given to extend life. Without cooperation there is darkness.

The room thundered with applause. I was writing a note to myself instead of

clapping, and that clapping went on for a long time. The war against evil is fought in small, personal battles my ass. Like I can do anything about third world dictators and Jerry Falwell. I put away my pad, and people were still clapping. Diane, beside me, emphatically slammed her hands together and kept it up as the noise died down and the lights came up. When she stopped clapping, her mouth hung open a little, as though she'd been gaping through the entire hour and had lost the muscle strength to close it again. I clicked off my mini-recorder.

"What d'you think?" I asked her, chuckling to myself.

She said, in a hushed tone of reverence, "That was all so *true*." I squirmed for a moment. I hate it when people I like say stupid clichéd things. I build up all these expectations for them, and then poof.

"He's a good speaker," I said.

"He's a genius," Diane answered. Geoff and Elaine, on the other side of Diane, had gotten up and were stretching a little. I tried to read their faces, but they were talking to each other, their faces hidden from me. "I want to get that book," Diane said.

Most of the auditorium was now standing and people were talking to each other or filing down the aisles.

"Vell?" Margitte tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned. "Pretty interesting shtuff, eh?"

I shrugged. "He's a good speaker."

She frowned a little. "You listen to *vat* he said, or how he said it?"

"Both," I answered. Margitte turned away from me and began talking to Paige. I wanted a drink, and I waited for everyone to get to the business of leaving the auditorium so I could suggest it, but they were all deep in their conversations. I was curious about what Elaine thought, and I walked down a row and over so I could talk to

her.

She was talking rapidly to Geoff. They were both searching for their favorite parts, for the most enlightening things he'd said, repeating the little guru's words and just basically gushing. Even Geoff was, which surprised me. I felt like I'd heard a different speaker than the one who'd completely engaged everyone in the room. I can't swallow any of that crap, and especially not all of it. If I thought the world worked that way, I'd quit.

"Wasn't he great?" Elaine asked me.

"Not particularly," I said.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Well, he's a good speaker, if that's what you mean."

"That's not at all what I mean. Luke! You didn't like it at all?"

Geoff butted in. "You had to get something out of that," he said. "I don't buy all of it, but it makes you think, nonetheless."

It made me want to puke, but I wasn't about to tell anyone that. They might have lynched me. But that came later. "It was all right," I said. "Anyone want to go for a drink?" Diane, Geoff, Elaine, Claudia, Doug, Paige, and Margitte were too engaged with each other to be listening to me. I looked around the auditorium, trying to gauge what everyone else had thought of him, hoping that maybe that applause had been just politely thunderous.

"It's still early," Elaine announced. It was before nine, but most of us had to work the next day. "Everyone want to come out to the Farm for a drink and maybe a swim?" Ugh, I thought. She just invited Paige to our house.

* * * * *

The eight of us, stripped to our underwear, were sitting or squatting in the river

downstream of the bridge, underneath the light pole, mosquitoes and moths swirling in the yellow light. It was too dark a night to head up to the little swimming hole, so we'd brought a cooler full of beer and cheap white wine down to the bridge. Baggy romped around in the water, splashing and muddying. She loved company. There were too many of us, and many of the others didn't know each other well enough to skinny dip comfortably, which was a damn shame. Still, I kept glancing at Elaine and Claudia and Diane sideways, furtively, knowing I wasn't supposed to be looking. Paige was suddenly looking feminine, her baggy, torn jeans replaced by lithe legs more appropriate to a Botticelli than a snarling Sapphite. This scared me. You're not supposed to get worked up over lesbians or pregnant women or other guys' girlfriends or your own house-mate. How many times had I been swimming *au naturel* with Elaine and Diane after work at Uncle Buddy's? I wished I could bring that back. I didn't want to know what Margitte kept under those billowy robe/dress atrocities, so I kept my distance and concentrated on my beer.

The water was too warm to be a great relief. It almost felt thinner than water was supposed to be as I splashed it over my arms and dunked my head in. I was feeling more than a little excluded by everyone, like I'd walked into a party where everyone was stoned but me. They were all still raving about the little guru, and the more I heard, the more determined I was to write a doozy of a slam article. Claudia and Geoff were talking to Paige, and that just threw me. Paige was about the most sullen person I'd ever met, yet here she was having a good old time talking to people. She knew Claudia through work, but I wasn't sure that she'd met Geoff before. Go figure, I thought.

I sipped on my beer and kept to myself when I remembered that Ranger Rick wanted the copy by tomorrow to make the next edition. It was my first real deadline as a budding little journalist, and I liked the picture of myself slaving over the review by

lamplight. I enjoyed the grudging sacrifice of having to leave the fun and go work. Plus, I wasn't having that great a time being the leper of the group. And it wasn't all that fun, if you took away the wine. So I excused myself and went inside to write up my article. I don't think I was greatly missed.

Up in my bedroom, I had a fan going in the window, and through its humming drone I heard occasional shrieks and laughter and splashing. I wrote in a stream of angry spite, my mind racing ahead of my pencil for synonyms for naive, silly, ludicrous, ridiculous, hopeless, absurd, preposterous. I first tore apart what he'd said, listening to my little mini-cassette, and then I attacked his looks, accent, and demeanor. I made fun of his entourage and his audience. The humor was weak and juvenile, but Ricky had said he wanted something irreverent, and I didn't have that much time. Plus, I just didn't get why people fall for that crap.

After I'd streaked through eight handwritten pages of first draft, I took a breather and rubbed my cramped right hand. I watched the revelers through my window, able to hear them better than I could see them for all the play of shadows on the water and the semi-submerged bodies. Baggy barked at something, followed by a group laugh. Just my luck to miss the orgy, I thought. Maybe they're taking this guy really seriously. I'd been missing out all my life, I figured, so one more night really didn't matter that much. They were all quiet, and I lowered the fan speed to hear better. I could hear Elaine's voice, not her words, telling them all something. Then they were all talking again, and then it was Claudia speaking, I think, and then the group again. I was curious about what they were discussing, and the way they were discussing it, and I turned off the fan to listen better, but I still couldn't make out words unless someone yelled something. I started sweating again, turned the fan back on full blast, and went back to my writing, trying to ignore them.

I had no idea how to write a newspaper article. I'd never written one before. My reviews for the *Alternative Times* were basically like book reviews—I'd identify my target, and then talk about it. This was different. I agonized over how to put it together, and then decided to let Ricky just have that raw material. He could put it in shape if he wanted to. He was the journalist guy, after all, and I was a blind novice. I just started typing.

I was a slow typist, and it took me almost two hours to get those eight pages into my computer. I was messing around with my sentences and words, which made it take even longer than usual. After I had it saved, I looked at my watch and then looked out the window. It was two-thirty in the morning, and the river party still seemed to be going strong. Two bodies were lying on the grass bank, at an angle to me, so I couldn't see who they were or even make out their gender, and I didn't know if they were asleep, passed out, or resting. I thought about rejoining them, but that sense of exclusion I'd felt was safer and less frightening if I kept my distance. I went to bed before three, exhausted, my mind jumping back and forth between my article and the informal party that I'd missed. Sometime during the night, a very wet dog joined me in bed. Nothing else disturbed my sleep.

* * * * *

I had to drag myself out of bed the next morning, exhausted on only four hours of sleep, and running late at that. I jumped in the shower and afterwards tossed on the clothes lying on my chair. I usually liked to sit and have a cup of coffee and breathe a little before dashing off to work, but I didn't have time. I'd have to fight for a cup of coffee at the office. It was first come first served with the coffee pot in my section, and unless you hung around the pot, waiting for it to brew, you could almost never get any. Plus, the women I worked with liked it much weaker than I, and they complained at me

when I made the coffee like a normal person. So I had gotten into the habit of bringing my lovely red and white 32 oz Marlboro mug to work with me and nuking it when it cooled throughout the morning.

When I got downstairs, the lights were all on and the front door was open. And I smelled coffee. I tried to find my big mug, but it wasn't in the dish drainer where I'd left it. I poured myself a cup and raced for the front door. If I didn't get stuck behind someone slow on the county road heading east into Shiflettsburg, I could be on time. The screen door slammed behind me, and on the porch I saw Claudia and Doug sitting in the metal rocker facing me and Elaine and Paige sitting in the porch chairs. They all turned to look at me.

"Morning," Claudia said, and the other three laughed a little. They were obviously still up from last night, messy clumpy hair dried tangled against their heads. They all still had on their underwear with shirts on over top, but that was all. It was already pretty hot that morning.

"Well, well," I said. "The party continues."

"We have almost solved all the problems of the world," Elaine said. She was still a little drunk.

"We have turned over new leafs," Paige said to me. She spoke a whole sentence to me, and I didn't detect a sneer. I did, however, notice that she was drinking out of my big mug.

"Don't any of you have to work?" I asked.

They all laughed again, that group laugh like teenagers in a school cafeteria. "I'm not on til this afternoon," Doug said.

"Where are the others?" I said.

"The parents to be are asleep, plus Margitte. What time is it?" Elaine asked. I

told her it was ten after eight. "You're running late. We need to get Geoff up," she said.

"There's no catering today," Paige said, I guess explaining that she didn't have to work.

"Ah," I said. "Well, I've got to run. Office job and all that."

"You should quit," Claudia said.

"I *should* get my butt to work," I said.

"Enjoy," Doug said. "But don't compromise yourself."

I snorted and said goodbye to them all and then headed to my car. As I started backing up, I remembered my review copy lying on my desk, and I threw the car in neutral and got out and ran past everyone on the porch and up the stairs to my room. Papers in hand, I banged on Geoff's door on the way back downstairs. "Rise and shine," I said and stuck my head in. Whoops. Double nudity on the bed. Diane and Geoff were tangled together, uncovered by the sheets. I didn't need to see that so early in the morning, that final reminder of exclusion. I quickly removed my head and yelled, "Geoff, get up. Work." I didn't have time to wait for a response, and I bolted down the stairs and out to my car.

"Go to bed," I called to the porch revellers.

"Don't drive too fast," Elaine yelled. "It's not worth it."

* * * * *

I dropped off my copy with Ranger Rick at lunch, and I didn't have time to go through it with him the way I would have liked. Marjorie had busted me for being late the minute I'd arrived at my cubicle that morning, and I couldn't risk it twice in a day.

"It's really rough," I told Ricky. I was feeling a little more ambivalent about it by that point, and I hadn't even had a chance to read it since printing it out. "Have your way with it."

"Don't you worry," he told me. "I'll get it all juiced up this afternoon. Oh—and I'm putting your laundry detergent piece in this issue."

I'd done a review of four detergent ads, comparing and contrasting the way that the detergents are used as metaphors for the road to domestic redemption. I liked that one, especially how I claimed that the Whisk ad, repeated almost unchanged for twenty years, had become sanitary, stain-free catechism of the American Dream, that ring around the collar the ironic reversal of priestly vestments.

"Two pieces in one issue," I said. "I'm quite popular, huh?"

Ricky chuckled, that strange little mole chuckle that involved squeezing his eyes closed and clamping his chin to his chest. "Popular. You're the only one who'll write for me at what I pay," he said.

I scanned through my guru article as fast as I could and didn't have time to get half-way through it. "Just change whatever you want and don't worry about me getting upset over a complete re-write. It needs it." I headed out of his office.

"I'll call you with any questions," Ricky said.

I was back at the office with a few minutes to spare, so I made sure to parade past Marjorie's office twice so she'd know I was there. Claudia's right, I thought, heading back to my cubicle. I should quit. This is bullshit. I wondered what they were all up to. Sleeping it off? Elaine was probably up and spot-checking various trees around the orchard to see how the apples were coming along. It was late August, and most of the apples were still green but getting large. Elaine didn't know what kinds of apples she had—some of them were reddening, some were turning a rich yellow. She'd wander the rows climbing and picking and taking a bite out of some. They were all sour and still too small, but she'd found a man at Southern States who'd said he could probably identify the different breeds if she brought them in when they were ripe. The peaches

were still coming in, but they grew pretty sparsely on the trees. Harvest time was right around the corner, and Elaine still didn't know how she was going to do the harvest or even where to sell her fruit. She had time still, but it was getting close. I was tempted to call the Farm a couple of times that afternoon, to see what she was doing, but I decided against it. Maybe if I'd paid better attention last night, I thought, I could astral project out there and check for myself. I wonder how different my life would have turned out if I had stayed in the river with them.

I called Ricky after five to see if he wanted me to stop by the Alternative Times. I wasn't looking forward to heading home. "Come if you want," he said, "but I've got everything under control. Luke West's scathing insights into con artistry and guru-hood on page one. It's a good piece. I've been wanting more of this topical, semi-political stuff instead of who's screaming bad poetry at what coffee house." So I hung up after talking to Ricky and sat in my cubicle for a few minutes, just staring. I was usually out of that place at five o'clock on the dot. I felt like I was missing something, like I'd lost something. Maybe it was just a slight depression mixed with too little sleep, but I wasn't tired. I called Geoff's office to see if he wanted to go for a drink after work, but he couldn't come to the phone, so I didn't leave a message. I drove over to Uncle Buddy's for a drink. I could use a little of that severe attention that Diane could give. The place was safe from herds of college students only so many weeks during the year, and the two weeks between the end of summer session and the start of the fall semester were one of those times.

It had gotten steamy hot, thick, a foreboding of either a miserable night or a thunderstorm that would cool things off. Uncle Buddy's was mostly empty, skeleton shifted between late lunch and dinner time. I didn't know if Diane was even working that night—she came on at six—and I didn't ask. The place looked the same as it had when

I worked there, except now staffed by what seemed to be very small very young children. I sat at the end booth by myself, hidden from the door and the bar, and ordered a bourbon shot and a beer at happy hour prices from a waitress I'd never seen before and opened the book I'd brought. I was still trudging through Luke West's unfinished college reading materials, and this was a book from my class on Colonial America, about the Salem witch trials, one that gave a Marxist spin on the event. Pretty dry. Tituba the disenfranchised worker, a slave, the ultimate removal from ownership, poisoning the minds and bodies of the daughters of owners and management, prized possessions. And so on. Shriya would have approved.

I ordered another round, and then another before Diane came in just before six. I heard her voice, and then I peered around the booth at her. Voyeur of pregnant women. I really didn't want to see her and didn't want her to see me, I realized then, and I was suddenly a little embarrassed to have seen her naked that morning. We'd lived together for two years, so it wasn't any huge deal, but still. That had been years ago, and it felt like more. I sat there staring at my book, thinking about the night before and why it had bothered me so much. I knew I was taking the whole thing too personally, but I felt excluded by all of them, marginal, and I don't like that, not one bit. Paige, for Christ's sake, had been sitting there in the morning. And we don't like Paige, I thought. We. I didn't like Paige. It wasn't just that I'd had work that I'd had to do—I liked that part. I wasn't a part of the group down by the river, and I wasn't a part of it after the speech. How could anyone actually be moved by the stuff that guy had said? Get taken in by a phony? Even if he was genuine, how could Elaine and Geoff, at least, have any relationship to that garbage? Diane had always had an affinity for that stuff, and I didn't know Claudia and Doug well enough, but Geoff? And Elaine? I ordered another round, and while I sat there, finishing it off and musing, I thought about my article and what

they'd all think. Oh well.

I felt like a fool, but after I'd asked for and paid the check, I spied around the corner of the booth, waiting for Diane to head to the back room so I could walk out unnoticed. What would I have said if she'd seen me? It didn't matter, because I made it outside without that happening. I got to my car, four beers and four shots under my belt, and decided to be very careful when driving home. It just doesn't seem as dangerous when it's still light out, and it wasn't even six thirty yet, but I was more than a little looped. I swear I didn't do that a lot.

Chapter 16

When I pulled down the long driveway of the farm, I stopped at the crest of the hill. To my right, far off and down a ways, Elaine was standing by the tractor—Paige was sitting in the driver's seat, and I could see Doug's head poking over the top on the other side. I watched them for a minute. Elaine and Doug backed away from the tractor, and then it leapt forward and stopped, probably stalled. Then both ran over to Paige and talked to her, and then moved back again, and the tractor jumped forward, but kept going. Elaine and Doug ran alongside of Paige, Elaine shouting directions at her. Then the tractor jerked to a stop again. I couldn't figure out what the hell they were doing, but I honked as I went past, and they waved. I pulled onto the island and stopped the car, excessively pleased with myself for not killing myself or other drivers on the way home. When I got out of the car and stood up, the liquor that hadn't gotten a chance to kick in before did so.

Claudia was in the kitchen drying dishes from the dish drainer and putting them away.

"Buenos noches," I said as I walked in and hopped sloppily onto the counter.

"Hey! You're back," she answered. "How was work?" She was smiling brightly, and either she could function on no sleep or she'd napped.

"Delightful," I said. I hadn't talked to anyone other than the waitress in the past hour or so, and I thought I would be slurring, but I wasn't. My father called it being well-greased.

"You hungry? We all had a late lunch and there's leftovers in the fridge."

"Nope," I said. My stomach didn't want anything in it. "Who's we all?"

"Me and Doug and Elaine and Paige. Geoff and Diane are at work and Margitte went home this morning. They're all out on the tractor. Elaine's giving free lessons."

Ah, that explains it, I thought. It didn't, but I was well-greased. "You must be beat," I said. I was trying to think through my foggy little brain. Doug had said he had to work that night.

"We slept a few hours. I feel great." Claudia had a coffee mug in her hands, trying to find its home. I pointed her to the upper cabinet beside the sink.

"Didn't Doug have to work?"

"He called in sick," she said.

That surprised me. He seemed more like the show-up-at-all-costs type. "So what'd you all do last night?" I asked.

Claudia rolled her eyes. "We missed you. We talked and talked and drank too much. Except Diane, and we all talked about her baby. Boy do I love this place. It's like being on vacation coming out here."

"Yeah. I was surprised to see Paige out there this morning," I said. They missed me. I wondered if that was politeness or truth. "I didn't think she and Elaine got along so well."

"Really?" Claudia said. "They got along great last night." A picture formed in my mind of Elaine and Paige together, and I shuddered. Claudia continued, "Paige is a sweetheart. She's shy, but once you get to know her, she warms up."

I didn't need to hear any more. I had enough to worry about with Geoff in the house.

"We even talked about you last night. All good things, of course."

"Great," I said, curious but afraid to hear.

"You want a beer?" Claudia asked me. She was being awfully nice, like it was my birthday or she just found out I had terminal cancer or something.

I shook my head. "I think I'm going to go take a power nap," I said. "I'm bushed. Wake me if anything fun happens."

"You want to go take a dip first?" she said. "I'm burning up."

"No thanks," I answered and headed up the back stairs. It was hot in the house, and when I got upstairs, I turned on my fan that swiveled and blew warm air across the room. The air was too warm to do much more than tease the sweat on your skin into evaporating, which only made the humidity that much worse, probably. I looked out my window and scanned for the tractor lesson. I could hear it rumbling away somewhere in the orchard, but I couldn't see them. I didn't know how to drive the tractor. Then again, I really didn't want to.

I thought I'd be able to sleep, but I couldn't for some reason. I was feeling a tad nauseous, I was thinking about Elaine, and my mattress was sticky moist the minute I'd gotten on it. Here's what I was thinking: I wish it would rain—I should quit my job, leave town, go be a miserable expatriate somewhere where they have cheap whores and cheap wine, I should forget about Elaine, I should stop drinking, I should apply myself (that's one of my mother's pet phrases—if you'd just apply yourself, sugar, she'd said a bazillion times, with a sigh), I should I should I should. This repeated itself in my head, unwelcome and going nowhere, for about an hour.

"Knock knock," Elaine called outside my open door, in a sing-songy voice. I would have closed it, but it was too damn hot, so I was lying there shirtless with just my smiley face boxers on. They were a birthday present from Elaine some year. I was praying for a thunderstorm to break the heat. She peered her head around the door jamb

to look at me.

"My life sucks," I said, with my head tilted to face her. She hated it when I complained.

"I'm sorry," Elaine said, coming in. "Bad day?" She pulled my desk chair over next to my head and sat down.

I'd been lying there for so long that I sort of forgot I was drunk. At least it didn't occur to me as one of the reasons I physically felt so crappy. I liked the fact that she'd come into my room when there were people around. It meant she liked me.

"Not particularly," I said.

"You want a back rub?" Elaine asked.

"You're not toying with me, are you?" I asked. "Because I'd love one." I rolled over onto my stomach, feeling the change in temperature as my slippery back hit the breeze from the fan.

Elaine climbed up on top of me. "I hope we didn't keep you up last night," she said, and she began kneading my neck. "You're sticky."

"Sorry about that. You can stop when it grosses you out." I thought for a minute. "You didn't keep me up. I was up til three writing, and then I zonked."

"Good." I started sweating where Elaine was sitting on me, and it was almost too hot to enjoy the backrub, but I lay there.

"I finished my article," I said, picking my head up and turning a little to better enunciate off the pillow.

"What'd Ricky think?"

"He liked it," I said. "He'll probably have to make a lot of changes." We were silent for a moment.

"You're not at all tense," Elaine said. She leaned down and sniffed my neck.

"Hm." Then she sniffed again. Bourbon leaves a trail stronger than peanut butter or Fritos.

"Yeah, yeah. I had a couple of pity drinks after work," I said.

"I didn't say anything," Elaine said. "I wasn't exactly teetotalling last night." She dug the heels of her hands in beside my spine. I felt them slip on my slick skin, and Elaine sort of fell on me. "Whoops. I wished you hadn't driven, though. I would have come and gotten you." She propped herself back up and continued massaging my very limp muscles.

"I was fine," I said.

"I worry about you," Elaine said.

"I worry about me too," I said.

Elaine ran her short nails up my neck and across my scalp, which for some reason felt cooling.

"We were talking about you last night," Elaine said.

"So I hear from Claudia. Anything I should know about?"

"Don't tense up," Elaine said. "It was all very complimentary."

"I was most surprised to find Paige downstairs this morning," I said.

"Shh," Elaine whispered. "She's in the kitchen."

"What's the deal? I thought you couldn't stand her."

Elaine spoke quietly. "I know! But I swear, Doug and Claudia were telling me that she was just really shy. You saw her last night. She was pretty cool—smiling and talking. It was weird—I've known her for about three years now, and then all the sudden she just had this personality. I always thought she hated me. I think it was the two of them actually paying attention to her. And what Shriya said about extending your hand really made a lot of sense to me. Who needs all the negative energy?"

I tried to rush past ole Shriva. "I've paid attention to her before," I said. "She was never anything but surly."

"That's what I thought," Elaine said. "But I was talking to her last night, and it was like the last three years of bad vibes just disappeared. I was thinking about it a lot. Maybe I never really tried to get her to talk before."

"Whatever," I said. "I'm not reserving judgement."

"Give her a chance," Elaine said. "You'd be surprised. You know, she said she loves your stuff in the Alternative Times. She thinks you're very perceptive."

I mulled that one over, and tried to match it up with the Paige that I'd dealt with over the years. "I can't imagine that she's really changed so much that—"

"Shh. She'll hear you. Do me a favor and try talking to her sometime and try to forget that you don't like her. I think you'll agree with me. Doug is really amazing. He's so good with people. He's natural."

I agreed with her by not saying anything, accessory by reason of muteness, and I tried to concentrate on nothing other than her hands on my skin. Elaine kneaded my left upper arm with both of her hands and pulled it out of the shoulder a little. Then she dropped it and it thudded loosely onto the bed. She started on the right arm.

"You're awesome," I said. "You can stop when you want."

"Okay." She worked her way down and then dropped my right arm and went back to my shoulders. "I want to tell you a few things," Elaine said, after a moment.

"Shoot."

"We did a lot of talking last night. About Diane being pregnant. Margitte and I had this little weeping session about catering—I apologized for quitting and she apologized for taking advantage of me. And we talked about Shriva. He brought up a lot of things that made me think. You know, he basically repeated what I was saying

about inertia and people being lazy."

"Basically," I said. I mentioned it in the article.

"Claudia asked me if we'd ever slept together. You and me," she said. "Now don't tense up and ruin all my work here." She karate chopped just under my shoulder blades a few times. I tried not to talk, to let her go on and say whatever she needed to say. "She said we played and argued like lovers. I told her no and she asked me if I wanted to." Lover—there's a word to avoid if at all possible.

She stopped talking and just rubbed. I couldn't take the stilted pace of the conversation. "That was a little nosy," I said, unable to keep my mouth shut.

"Not in the conversation we were having. Everyone was being really open."

"A little Eastern mysticism will do it every time," I said.

Elaine laughed. "Right. That was probably part of it. We were all really connecting, though." *Connecting*, when used that way, was one of those buzz words that put me on edge, like *inappropriate* and *beat yourself up* and *voice your concerns*, but I was trying to listen and not talk. "I told her I'd thought about it, but I'd, or we'd, never done anything about it. She asked me why. I had a hard time coming up with an answer." Elaine stopped talking for a moment, and I forced myself to be silent for once in my life. I was intensely aware that my breathing had changed, had become conscious and irregular, and I knew Elaine could tell. I was glad we weren't face to face, and I could only guess that she was too. I wanted to ask what her answer to Claudia was, but I waited. I was torn between staying there listening and running away.

"Everyone was curious about it," she continued and then stopped again.

"What'd you say?" I couldn't help it. She'd thought about it!

"This is a bizarre little conversation to be having," Elaine said. "Say something funny, or something."

"I know. How about closing the door?" I said, and then I mentally sealed my mouth shut with crazy glue.

Elaine got up and closed it, then restraddled me. Her heat on the small of my back returned. "Okay. I told myself I'd tell you this, so I'm going to just do it. I told Claudia that yes, I'd thought about it, and wanted to. But we've known each other for six years—" I wanted to interrupt her and tell her it was seven—"—and nothing's ever happened. I told her that, and then Paige jumped in and said that wasn't much of an answer. I had to agree. Then I told them that things were just impossible to explain between us. We have this whole long relationship that's never had anything to do with, well, sleeping together. Sex. I don't talk about my love life with you. Not that I've had much of one over the years, because of, well. This whole thing." Elaine was extremely uncomfortable saying this, and I felt bad for her, but I wasn't about to let her get away without speaking her mind. I was little stunned, and that helped with my self-restraint. I wondered about Geoff. How non-existent was that love life? "I don't know if things have changed over the years. I used to have the biggest crush on you that first summer. But you seemed so unapproachable, you know?"

She shook my shoulder blades a little, waiting for an answer. I said, "Mm-hm."

"But it's different now. What if we did it," Elaine laughed nervously, "and it ruined things? But that's not even really a worry, yet. So I said that I'd always hoped that you would initiate something. Margitte told me I was avoiding it, probably because I either really didn't want to or because I was afraid. But I think it's that inertia thing I was talking about. Maybe I've been lazy. You have to grab what you want. It won't just fall in your lap. So to speak." Another nervous laugh. She was moving her fingers along my sides, like typing. "This is mortifying, just saying all this. Anyways, there's something else. Now before I go on, promise me that you're not too drunk to remember

this conversation."

"I promise. It's sobered me up like nothing else could." As had her straddling my back, the combined heat of our contact.

"And feel free to jump in and expose what you think. Because the whole time I'm saying this, I'm thinking, Luke's just laughing at me right now, because he's obviously never been the least bit interested or he would have done something about it. I'm too obnoxious or fat or short, or he thinks of me like a sister or something."

She expected some kind of answer, but I couldn't say anything for a moment.

I held my breath and said in a rush, "That's not true at all, and I hope you know it."

She said nothing, but continued rubbing for a while. This was the longest backrub of my life. "You're much tenser than when I started," she said, with an honest laugh. "Well, good. Now I don't feel like a complete drooling goon. What I wanted to tell you was . . . oh God. I wish I had a drink." She sighed and then took a deep breath. "Correct me if I'm wrong, please, but you're still. . . . You know. Right?"

Every muscle in my body constricted into little tight fists, the way a limp starfish hardens immediately in water. I was as verbally responsive as a starfish as well.

"Well?" she asked.

I wasn't about to say anything.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of," she said, I thought a little too earnestly. "But you *are* still a virgin, right?"

I hated that word. And there, on my back, was the only person besides me in the world who knew to apply it to me, the same person that was partially responsible, the woman I wanted more than fame and fortune and that lung cancer exemption.

"Right?" She poked my back a little for a response.

One of many hazy nights after getting off from Uncle Buddy's, probably the summer before my senior year of college when we were living together, we were up in the mountains under a full moon, our feet in a chilly stream, with a cooler full of swindled beer and a box of filched lunch meat beside us on a dirty tablecloth.

"Luke?"

The other four people we'd come with had slipped off together, as usual, leaving me and Elaine there talking about everything under the sun. And out that word had come. Only once, but that's not the kind of thing you forget. She asked me why, and I said the opportunity had never presented itself in a way acceptable to me. She looked shocked but told me that it was kind of cool, and I said it was the bane of my existence and we dropped it. I'd always hoped she'd forgotten. She'd never again mentioned it, until now.

"Hey, please answer me or something. Blink twice for yes, once for no." Elaine stopped rubbing.

I'd had a handful of opportunities, drunk girls at the beach and parties when I was a teenager, stoned girls in college, obliterated older women in bars groping me. Always sloppy on some chemical, never anything that promised more than me left with a truckload of guilt and self-loathing. And I already had plenty of that, thank you very much, so no thank you.

"I'm sorry I brought it up. You don't have to answer that."

It grew easy to stop thinking about on a daily basis, but impossible to forget. I lied to myself—genital warts, AIDS, sex shouldn't be casual, the right woman right time right place—but I knew those were only very marginally true to me. No, it wasn't Elaine's responsibility, but she had a lot to do with it. I'd always felt clueless about the world around me, to some extent, suspecting that there was wild romping sex behind

every closed door and every wink, but never sure. All I knew about sex I'd learned in Health and Biology.

I said, "Yes, I am," and I don't think I've ever been so glad in my life that I didn't have to look someone in the eye.

Elaine resumed this eternal backrub, silently.

"Go on," I said.

"I'm sorry I brought it up."

"Don't be. It's fine. I've had years to get used to it. What were you saying?" I wanted to move past this immediately.

"I forgot. Um, oh—anyways, that's part of it. Part of why I felt awkward about the two of us, you know, together. I couldn't approach you without feeling like this desperate obscene monster. And part of it is that you make me feel kind of gross, slutty, like I sleep around. I don't."

"You don't?" I asked.

"No!" I felt Elaine bolt upright and stop massaging. "Well, not a lot. You see? I feel abnormal because of this. I'm not."

"I'm not accusing you of anything," I said, but I was, because it was easier than accusing myself. "I'm just curious. Don't be defensive."

"You want a list?"

"No, no. I'm just wondering why you feel guilty about it. From my perspective, you've got it made."

"Well, I don't. I realized that last night."

We were both silent for a moment.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"Depends," Elaine said. "What?"

"Well, as long as we're being nice and honest and non-confrontational," now my turn to laugh nervously, "I have to ask you something that's been bugging me."

"Well? Go ahead."

"This is nosy. You don't have to answer. But—have you ever slept with Geoff?"

Elaine answered without skipping a beat. "Of course."

Of course? Nine months of neurotic fretting, for of course? I wished she'd lied.

"After my party. I thought you knew."

"You never told me!" I was sure of this.

"I told you I stayed there. Yes, I definitely told you that."

"We virgins don't necessarily assume that means carnal knowledge. That's not exactly telling me you boinked him." I felt the tide of the conversation turning, poisoned red tide. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way."

"Luke, give me a little credit, please. What was I supposed to do? I told you I feel . . . well, it makes me feel cheap, telling you stuff like that, hell—doing it does. When I know you've never—you know. I didn't want to keep it from you, but I couldn't just come out and say, hey Geoff and I plugged each other last night, right?"

"I know. It's just—well, I've been sick about it ever since," I said. "I'm really sorry. I honestly don't mean to be nasty, but you can't imagine—"

"It was only once," she said. "It was a bad idea, and we both knew it immediately."

"Does Diane know?"

"No. Which *I've* been sick about, believe me. Geoff promised me he'd let me know when he told her. He hasn't yet."

"They weren't seeing each other at the time."

"Like that makes a difference," she said.

We both stopped talking for a while. We could hear people talking downstairs, faintly over the buzz of the fan that blew hot air across my back. Elaine started massaging my back again. Without having to look at each other, I think we were both better able to handle this conversation, seven years in the making. It was like a confessional where you don't have to look at Father Absolution, I'd guess, from movies I've seen, or like lying on the psychiatrist's couch and staring at the ceiling.

"If you want to know the truth about Geoff," she said, "I'd rather that it had been you."

We were back to the calm that had started this conversation. Maybe I was learning to control myself through detachment. "I'd rather it had been me, too. But I believe I threw a hissy fit in public that night."

"Are you jealous?"

"I don't know what I am," I said. "Yes, I was outrageously jealous at the time. I invented little scenarios for castrating him."

"Judging from Diane, I'd say you didn't," she said, which broke the tension even further. God, I liked her.

I tried to pat my face dry on the damp pillow. "Well, you moved him right in with me not two months afterwards, and now here we all are."

"That was pretty manipulative of me," Elaine said.

I shrugged. "It all worked out. I've been obsessing about leaving the two of you alone."

"You don't need to worry about that. That's something that won't ever happen again."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. There was nothing there, except a lot of liquor, a festive mood, and

a long dry spell for both of us."

I wondered what would happen if that was the case between the two of us. If we actually tried to make love and just found a fizzle there. I asked, "Was that the last time? For you, I mean?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but yes."

"Even your new budding little friendship with Paige? No experimenting?" I wasn't sure if this was stepping over the lines of our conversation or not.

Elaine snickered. "Hardly. I don't see any pink triangles on my horizons. That's beside the point. God, I feel this huge relief! The whole time we were listening to Shriya last night, I kept applying everything to you. I needed to tell you this stuff. How're you feeling?"

I swallowed the smart little comment that I had ready. "Scared."

Elaine patted my back, the gesture of a backrub finished. "Well, that too." She climbed off of me and sat in the chair she'd pulled by my bed. I rolled onto my side and propped my head on my hands. We looked face to face for the first time in what seemed like hours. It was dark out now, though still hot. That rainstorm wasn't coming, but the fan air felt nice against my chest.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"There were a few more things I wanted to tell you," she said, smiling weakly at me, embarrassed. "But that can wait. I'd like to overcome inertia."

"Is that what those of you in the know call it?" I said.

"You're stalling," Elaine said.

"You're damn right. You mean now? Right here? On a work night? With people downstairs? With a gallon of beer in my stomach? Now?"

"Mm-hm."

I swallowed, hard. "Okay. Yes." I can't say what was going through my mind, because all of the sudden, as soon as I said yes, it no longer seemed incredible or out of the ordinary. It seemed right, like the punchline to a joke you've already heard. "If this is what Eastern mysticism brings, I approve."

"Two conditions, though. One—please don't apologize for anything, not the slightest thing, don't feel nervous at all."

"I can try," I said.

"And two—don't tell me you love me. It'll just be too forced."

I wanted to say—that's a Night Ranger song, and I do—but I said, "All right." I was sweating even more than I had been earlier, if that was at all possible. This was actually happening to me, Luke West. Me and Elaine. The pinnacle and culmination of my twenty-six sex-free years, and there was almost something comical about it. It occurred to me that that was okay.

"Can I talk? During?" I asked.

"Sparingly," she said. She flicked off the overhead light at the switch by the door. The room was black for a moment, and then my eyes adjusted to the faint light streaming in my window from the bridge. Silhouetted, Elaine came over to the bed and sat down next to me. I could make out her features, slightly at first, and then completely. "It's okay to think this is incredibly strange. Because it is. My God, is it."

She leaned over me and pushed me playfully onto my back. Elaine put her nose to the tip of mine, and we looked at each other for a moment. Then she tilted her head, closed her eyes, and kissed me. That touch, her lips against mine, was hotter than anything else, the hottest skin I'd ever felt. And this was Elaine. I stopped being nervous. That frozen hot kiss, at first tentative, lingered between us. Neither of us moved. Without a word, we both started shaking, heaving almost, our shoulders jerking

and our stomachs constricting. Our lips separated as our mouths simultaneously spread into broad grins. She collapsed on top of me, and we both roared laughing. I don't know what it was, but we just lay there, our arms wrapped around each other, hooting with laughter but not letting go.

"Does this mean it's wrong?" I asked her, when I could talk clearly, which made us both break up again.

"This means it's perfect," Elaine said, pushing herself up to better look at me.

"Absolutely perfect."

Chapter 17

The heat woke me up, sunlight streaming faintly through the window. I was sticking to Elaine, the sheets, the wall, and myself. The double bed which had always been luxurious was suddenly a very small place. I hadn't shared a bed with anything other than a dog since I was little enough to crawl in bed with my parents or get put to bed early with a second cousin at family reunions. I watched Elaine breathe for a while, afraid that if I moved I'd wake her. So the only things I moved were my eyes. She was on her left side, facing me, her head resting on her left arm, her knees between and atop my thighs like a dovetail joint. It had been dark in the room last night, and now I could really see her for the first time. Damp reddish-black hair fell across her face. Where her shoulder met her neck, there was a deep hollow between muscles, and her right arm, flung across me, pushed her breasts together. Her skin was dry where we weren't touching, tanned a reddish gold like walnut wood stain. I lifted my head a little to look at her hip, smooth and round with a slight dip where her leg was bent. She looked tiny next to me, and I tried to compare her to anything I'd seen before, but I couldn't. She looked like a wood carving that had never been made but should have been, a body that was too muscled and tight to be a rounded classical beauty.

My alarm clock, which I hadn't set, told me it was five-fifty. I put my head back on the pillow and looked at Elaine for a long time, and I didn't want her to wake up. I am dangerously attracted to her, I thought and smiled at the idea. I wasn't too hip on post-coital etiquette, but I had to touch her. My right arm was trapped between us, but

my left arm was free. My fingers combed her hair out of her face and then touched the hollow of her neck. A little "Mmm" rumbled in her throat, and I liked feeling that vibration in my hand. My fingers ran lightly down her arm. I touched her waist and her hip, at first with my fingertips and then with my palm. Coffee and a cigarette were no longer the first things I wanted in the morning.

I kissed her neck and then propped myself up on my right arm to get more comfortable. My legs were sore. I ran my hands all over her, kissing her, torn between waking her and enjoying her as she was. For some reason, I didn't think I'd wake her by touching her. I pressed myself against her bent knee between my legs, thinking how unreal this was. It didn't matter that I was about ten years behind everyone else in the universe. This moment alone was worth it, even if nothing ever happened again, and the moment stretched into an hour. So I didn't wake her up, I just lay there, enjoying being me in the goofiest way, and I didn't care in the least that I knew it. Elaine half-opened her eyes at one point and looked at me.

"Good morning," I said, quietly.

Her mouth curled into a smile, and she closed her eyes again and nestled into me. Everything is all right with the world, I thought, and I continued kissing her and touching her skin, lying there past the time I should have been in the shower and not giving a damn about it. I stayed like that for quite some time. I heard someone moving around inside the house, in the shower, and birds outside, but I just stayed where I was, with my hand on Elaine and a lazy morning smile on my face.

There was a rap on the door, and before I could say anything, Geoff popped his head in and said, "Rise and—whoa!" We made eye contact before he quickly removed his head and closed the door. The new and improved Luke West, fully sexual adult and man about town, didn't even care.

"Sorry! Um, I didn't. . . . Anyways, Luke. You're going to be late," Geoff said loudly but muffled, his mouth probably pressed to the door jamb.

"Thanks," I said. We're going to need some new privacy rules around here, I thought. Elaine stirred a little.

"What?" she asked, her eyes still closed.

"I'm supposed to go to work."

"Oh," she said, and wrapped her upper leg over and around mine. "It's hot," she said, but kept her leg where it was.

Screw it, I thought to myself. I'll quit Kushman and become a gigolo. I giggled a little at the idea, and Elaine opened her eyes.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost eight."

"We should get up," she said. She blinked her eyes, waking herself up more, and then she gazed up at me.

"Right," I answered.

"Not just yet," Elaine said, scootching onto her back. She raked her hand through my little clump of chest hair.

"Pushy pushy," I said.

"Just content."

"If I remember correctly, it's my turn to be on top," I said, not moving. Have you ever had anything go just perfectly, just the way you wanted it, no snags? I hadn't, I don't think, not before now. I didn't even have the slightest hangover, and I should have been exhausted from two days with practically no sleep. But nope.

"I believe you're right."

We didn't laugh this time, because we didn't need to.

* * * * *

At the office, I very politely told Marjorie to fuck off when she accosted me for being late two days in a row. I asked her to please fire me or leave me alone, because I was getting all my work done. She said rules were rules and disappeared quickly. I had this extraordinary feeling of calm, but an excited, active calm that nothing could disturb, a perma-grin slapped to my face all day long. Nagging worries bounced off of me all day, leaving my mood undampened: we didn't use any kind of birth control—I think I love Elaine; this staff meeting is tedious—I love that little hollow on her neck; she could be pregnant or I could have AIDS—God, that was better than I'd imagined possible; the stupid computers are down—I know I love Elaine. Ricky called me to tell me that my article had shaped up beautifully and would be decorating the front page of next Monday's issue. I was floating about two feet off my padded blue desk chair. Everything was perfect. It was payday at Kushman. It was even Friday.

I went to the store after work to get a bottle of champagne, and I sang corny early Beatles songs on the drive home at the top of my lungs, the windows on my car down as I flew along the back roads heading out to the farm. The sky had that grey electric feel to it, and I was certain that on this of all days, there would be a nice downpour. I hoped it would wait a few hours to start raining—if it rains too early, when the sun has a chance to steam things back up before setting, it just makes everything worse.

Elaine was out in the garden when I got to the Farm, bushel baskets plunked in the soil around her. There was more in the garden than we could possibly eat. The zucchini, squash, and tomatoes had been coming in by the wheelbarrow load for weeks and weeks by now, the last Friday of August, along with the beans, peppers, beets, peas, carrots. The corn was about to come in, as were the melons and pumpkins. The only disappointment had been the potatoes, which got eaten by something, probably moles.

Elaine and I had gone to Southern States for mole traps, and the only things we found were basically mole guillotines. She decided she would rather do without potatoes. She had enough produce to can as it was, especially since she didn't know how to put things up. The basement was full of baskets of vegetables and one small shelf with a half-dozen jars of canned tomatoes that scared me. Those wax seals didn't look so impervious. But she was learning.

I had this moment of gut-wrenching nervousness when I saw her standing there, bent over a row of something short and green. What if she wasn't feeling the same way I was? Nah, I thought. All is right with the world. Baggy came running up to me, wet, and shook herself dry close enough to soak me.

"Hey there," I called from the side of the garden. I still had my wing-tips on and didn't need to go trudging through the dirt, wet as I was.

"Well, well! And how are you this evening?" Elaine stood upright.

"Great," I said. There was no one else around but Baggy. We could do it right here, I thought. In the dirt.

"Me too. So!" She walked over to me, high-stepping exaggeratedly over the lush rows. She was sweating and smiling and wearing her gardening bra. "What's on your mind?"

"Only one thing," I said, grinning at her.

"I am so sore," she half-whispered.

That embarrassed me a little. I didn't know what we were and weren't allowed to talk about. She kissed me, and we wrapped our arms around each other and stayed kissing for a few minutes. Baggy leapt up and put her muddied paws on my white shirt, and we stopped kissing. I said, "I bought champagne."

Elaine laughed. "You don't need to get me drunk."

"Ah."

We stood there, looking at each other for a while. I didn't have a thing to say to her, or at least nothing I felt I could say. I wanted to tell her what I was feeling. Top of the World, King of the Mountain. And I realized I felt sort of shy around her.

"Well let me finish picking today's ton of vegetables and shower and we can pop that cork. By the way—I found an ear of corn that looked ripe to me. I have a lot I want to tell you. And I made dinner. Vegetarian lasagna."

"Ah, good. More vegetables."

"Ha! You should be used to it by now. It's just going to be the two of us tonight."

I liked that idea.

* * * * *

"Well I, for one, am a little terrified by the whole thing," Elaine said, pushing a small mound of lasagna around her plate with a fork.

"I guess I'm too happy to be that worried yet," I said.

Elaine looked over at me and smiled, and then we both quickly looked away. This was all feeling very silly at points.

"Good lasagna," I said. We both ate in silence, sipping the mid-class champagne.

"At least we both feel awkward," Elaine said. "I guess that's a good sign."

"I guess. You'll have to forgive my ignorance."

"Look. Let's just not talk about us for a while, okay? I say we just see what happens and wait til we're ready to discuss this without turning into a pair of bashful teenagers."

"Deal," I said, relieved. We were sitting across the kitchen table from each other, but I wanted to be outside on the porch or upstairs. I didn't have much of an appetite for

food. And everything either of us said seemed to carry this sexual weight with it that made me want to just stop talking. We didn't say anything, still.

"Ricky loved my article," I said, trying to remember whether I'd told her this already or not. "Front page."

"Good for you!" We were both immediately out of things to say.

"So how're the apples?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I wish I knew what I was doing better. About all I'm going to be able to manage this year is some kind of pick-your-own thing, I think. Maybe some pre-picked. They're almost ripe, though, especially the green ones."

See? Everything she said could be taken two ways. I felt like I did in sixth grade when I learned the second meaning of come and tittered (tittered!) every time I heard it.

"You'll do fine," I said. "Advertise them as organic, and you'll have every health-food fanatic in town out picking them. You aren't going to be able to pre-pick a whole lot, though. I guess I could help on weekends."

"Would you?"

"Sure."

"Well, actually, that brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about."

She wanted to go do it in the orchard! Swinging from the trees! I said, "What?"

"Let me run something past you. Actually, it's already decided, but . . . I hope this doesn't fall under the category of Elaine doing things behind Luke's back."

"Forget I said that," I said. She really couldn't do anything wrong, right then, as far as I was concerned, except tell me we wouldn't ever be sleeping together again.

"This is part of what I wanted to tell you last night, but I decided it could wait. It's something we were all talking about after Shriya's talk." Elaine stopped and chewed her lip.

I wanted to let her know that there were new lines of communication open between us, however putrid a cliché that is. Look what had happened so far, from just a little talking and honesty—great things! "Okay . . . so? You can tell me. So far I've wholeheartedly approved of the results from that night."

"You do, huh?" She looked directly at me, and I felt all scatterbrained.

"Yup."

"I've been thinking about it all day," Elaine said.

"I hope you have!" I said, "or else I'd be feeling mighty stupid right about now. But I thought we weren't talking about us."

"Right." Elaine took a sip of her champagne. "Let's go out on the porch," she said.

"Perfect," I said. I was enough of a goofball during these few moments of my life to be silently astounded that she could read my mind. As if we didn't almost always head out to the porch after eating. I grabbed my glass and ashtray and followed her to the front door, sideswiped by Baggy as I tried to walk out. The breeze as the door closed behind me was the only air moving in that valley. Elaine put her glass down on the porch railing and sat on the metal rocker, patting the space next to her. Normally, we would have sat facing each other. I sat down next to her, feeling a little overwhelmed by all the minute changes that added up to a completely different world.

"I've been wanting to kiss you again all day," Elaine said.

She had taken this different tone with me, this conspiratorial pleasantly insinuating tone that embarrassed and frazzled me. Whenever I went to answer, my throat constricted, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to get the words out. She held my hand, and I leaned over and kissed her. We adjusted ourselves to get more comfortable. This was entirely different from lying sweaty in bed with her last night and this morning, entirely

different from teenage and college kisses in cars and at parties. This was different, not only because it was light out, but because it meant something more than just the kiss itself, which is what I think it had always been. The sun, still well above the horizon, lit up the red in her hair more than usual. I surrendered momentarily to acting without thinking, and boy howdy.

"So I haven't been kidding myself all day," I said, pulling away.

"Apparently not," Elaine said. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I swung the rocker slightly with my feet. Hers didn't reach the porch floor unless she sat forward on the swing. I found this unspeakably cute of her.

"So you wanted to tell me somesing?" I nudged. Here's what I was thinking, or hoping: maybe she wants me to move into her room, or go on a Caribbean cruise with her, or tell me that she can't believe we wasted the last seven years not doing this.

"Right Siegfried," Elaine said, shaking her head a little as if clearing her thoughts, and I took a lot of pride in the fact that kissing me actually seemed distracting to her. I thought—hey! I *wowed* her. "Okay, let me just spit it out. I need help, very soon, with the orchard harvest. If I hire people and pay them decently, there goes the little of what's left of George's money. Geoff was right about the fact that I'm spending more money than I thought."

Geoff can be right about whatever he wants, I thought, because I got Elaine. I mentally stuck my tongue out at him, wherever he was.

"Paige and Doug have offered to be my hired hands for the fall. Okay?"

I just nodded and squeezed her hand a little. So what?

"Well, I made a little deal with them. Um, they can live here for free and work the Farm, and then I pay them a lot less."

I unsqueezed her hand and extricated my own.

"Paige is going to live here? And work on the Farm?"

"She's really great, Luke. Honest. She's tired of catering."

"But you can't stand her."

"Not any more. I tell you, it's different now."

"Whatever," I said. "But—Elaine, you know what a horrible worker she is. Margitte was lucky she ever showed up at all! She'd toss hors d'oeuvres at people. You told me that yourself. And now you want her to work for you? That seems crazy. I mean, you told me all those stories yourself about how horrible she was. I've never worked with her."

"This'll be different."

"Why? How?"

"She hates catering. She doesn't like working for Margitte. Margitte thinks it would be best for the two of them if Paige didn't work for her either."

"But she's done it for two years!" I wasn't the least bit angry—I was appalled by bad judgement.

"Exactly. We were talking about inertia, and Paige was saying how hard it—"

"Oh, Elaine! Inertia. That's—"

"No, come on. Listen to me at least. So she's a terrible worker. Then I boot her. Right?"

"Sure—after she's made you miserable and furious for the entire fall."

"That won't happen," Elaine said. She laced her fingers between mine and squeezed a little. "Trust me. Anyway, it's already settled. I'm just telling you, not asking. I don't mean that harshly, at all. I have to get people I trust out here if I want to do anything with this place this season. You know how much the Farm means to me."

I grumped a little, but let myself be coddled. Her thigh felt mighty nice pressed

up against mine. Remember, I thought—it's her place, it's her place. "I don't want you to do anything you'll regret," I said. "Wait—what about bedrooms?" There were only four bedrooms upstairs, and three were already full with me and Geoff and Elaine. I wasn't so sure Elaine and I were ready to share a room yet.

"The study off of Geoff's room could be a small bedroom."

Right now, it was full of junk, with the door closed. It was actually a nice little room, with a door directly onto the balcony over the sitting room. If I slept in there, I think I'd be afraid of falling down the back stairs that led to the kitchen. I said, "Okay, so that's a room."

"And we could clear out half the attic for another room if we wanted. Hell, we could use the sitting room for a bedroom and move all the furniture into the living room."

"All right, all right," I said. "But we don't need to do that. That's five already."

"That brings me to the other thing I wanted to tell you," Elaine said, laughing nervously. "Claudia and Doug had been talking about moving in together, and she'll be starting subbing again next week and the money's really inconsistent, so, um, she'll be here too."

I groaned. "Elaine! That's what?" I counted quickly. "Six people in one house? Six people?"

Elaine grinned. "It's seven."

"You, me, Geoff, Claudia, Doug, Paige the beast—sorry. That's six."

"Seven. Diane. Geoff proposed the idea himself. We were all honest and told him that we'd already considered it."

"Oh, God. You didn't waste any time, did you? Were you all doing drugs?"

"Like I said, we were all really connecting."

"That's eight with the baby, you realize. My God, would my mother just pass out

from the impropriety of the whole thing." I kind of liked that. "Diane'll probably have twins."

"Let's worry about that when we get to it. It's just temporary, anyway, or it can be. It's a good deal for everyone involved. There'll be some problems with stuff like the bathrooms, but we can work it out."

"This is all very weird. You sure Margitte doesn't want to move in?" I asked.

"Positive. She's got her own place." Elaine kissed me on the cheek. "You're a good sport," she said.

"I'm a pushover is what I am," I said.

"That too," Elaine answered, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. All my new roommates disappeared from my worries. It never rained, but we sat out on the porch kissing and watching the sun set like a pair of old people who'd been doing it for years.

Chapter 18

Elaine gave me fair warning about the hordes of new bodies moving into the Farm, but she hadn't told me that they were all moving in that weekend. I hadn't asked, so I don't think she was trying to keep it from me. While Elaine and I were testing out her bed, boxes were being stuffed with dishes and dresser drawers were being emptied. On Saturday morning, Geoff and Doug pulled up to the Farm in Elaine's truck, piled high with junk.

"Why are you all in such a rush to move?" I asked Geoff as I carried a lamp up to Doug and Claudia's new room, next to mine.

"Why wait?" he answered. There wasn't a whole lot I could say to that. Once the load was emptied, they went back for another.

It rained that afternoon, at about three. The sky darkened. Thunder boomed so far off we couldn't see the lightning, and then came the rain, for about a millisecond of comfort. Twelve minutes later, it was sickeningly hot again, an August-bright sky. By the time evening came, I was stationed permanently in front of the sitting room fan. Five truckloads of stuff had been unladed into the house, as well as a pregnant bartender, a substitute teacher, and a sour dyke.

"Hi Paige," I said, when she pulled up in her ancient, rattling Subaru, the back seat piled with clothes. She didn't have any furniture with her.

She just looked at me evenly and turned off the ignition, slowly, keeping her eyes on me as she opened the door. "Hi," she said finally, as she stepped out of the car,

warily, like she had mace handy. She spoke as though English wasn't her native language and she was searching for that greeting word.

Okay, I thought. Be nice. If Elaine can change her opinion, so can I. "Need any help?" I asked her, walking off the porch to her car.

"I've got it," Paige said, in a very definite way that didn't lead me to follow up my offer with an "are you sure?"

Forget her, I thought. It's not worth it. But as I walked away, it bugged me, and it was amplified when just moments later Doug came out of the house and Paige started talking rapidly to him. It's more than just shyness, I thought. She hates me, and she *is* a beast.

Elaine grilled hot dogs and strips of zucchini for dinner for everyone, and I didn't offer to help. I couldn't handle being near the heat of the coals, even if it meant being next to Elaine. The seven of us sat down on the front porch to eat. I didn't have much of an appetite, but the five movers did. I looked around at the mass of bodies on the porch, passing around the ketchup, mustard, and mosquito spray. There were too many of us for everyone to get a chair. Seven is a lot of people. There wasn't even a table big enough in the house for all of us. Seven people's dinner dishes can destroy a previously clean kitchen. Seven people's trash fills cans outrageously fast. Six people can blitz through a six-pack in an instant (Diane's doctor allowed her one glass of wine a day, if she wanted it). I put more cold ketchup on my hot dog, willing the steaming meat to room temperature. Even my mouth was sweating.

"I forgot to make a toast," Geoff said. "To all of us living together. May the plumbing handle it!"

We all laughed, including Paige I noticed, and drank to Geoff's toast. I was glad to see that everyone else was a little nervous about the mass of humanity on the porch.

I was afraid I was the only one who recognized it. Then I wondered if the septic tank would be able to handle it—there's nothing grosser than raw sewage leeching into the woods behind your house.

"And another toast. Just so everyone knows," Elaine said, patting my leg next to her on the porch step. "Here's to Luke and me for finally sleeping together."

My jaw dropped, and everyone was looking at me, cheering. Doug was whistling with his fingers. Then they just stared at me. Some sort of response from me was called for, and I could either be pissy or good-natured. At least I'm not a virgin anymore, I thought. "To knocking before entering," I said, and everyone continued staring. "A room, I mean." Everyone laughed and drank their beer. Diane was drinking something brown and carbonated and decaffeinated. What's the point?

"Hear, hear," Geoff said, winking at me. Either the rest of them were all very good actors, or Geoff hadn't said anything about walking in on us.

No one had any more toasts, so we went back to our dinners and smaller conversations.

"I'm sorry," Elaine said, quietly and only to me. "The mood hit me, and I didn't feel like making individual announcements to everyone."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Just don't do it again."

"Sleeping or toasting, my dear?" she said, raising her eyebrows repeatedly like Groucho Marx.

After dinner, we all went swimming by the bridge. Elaine announced that she was going to put a light up by the swimming hole so we could use it at night. The river water was the first complete relief from the heat I'd had since my shower that morning. The seven of us lazed in the water with Baggy splashing us. We joked and talked and cooled off for two hours before people started off to bed, leaving me and Elaine alone in the

water. We didn't have any moving or apartment cleaning to do the next day. Our bathing suits slipped off, lying on the river bank, we played around in the water enjoying the hell out of ourselves in the dark.

* * * * *

The Farm cleared out again on Sunday as our five other housemates headed off to clean their apartments. I knew what that job was like, and it surprised me to think that only three months had passed since I'd stood in my old apartment that one afternoon, cleaning and wondering what would happen. What *had* happened exceeded my concupiscent dreams. I enjoyed the calm of the last day I'd have quiet around the Farm. Elaine was off picking apples and pruning trees, and Geoff had gone into town to study for the bar. Baggy was even out somewhere playing Great Brown Hunter. I watched a little television, hiding from the heat. I considered moving the TV down to the basement, where the fifteen-foot ceiling kept the heat nicely away from the floor. But that was too much effort, so I just lay glazed in front of the television with my notebook, jotting down ideas for reviews. There seemed to be an awful lot of semi-nude bodies on for a Sunday afternoon, and I wondered where Elaine was. I clicked the remote around and considered a review about the magical powers ascribed to chewing gum in four different commercials. The phone rang, and it was my mother.

"I'm just checking if you're still alive," she said.

"Just busy," I said.

"You can't be too busy to call us at least *once*, Luke. Your father and I are just about going crazy worrying over you."

"You don't need to worry. Everything's fine. Actually, everything's great."

There was a pause. "Do you ever plan to come home?"

"This is my home," I said. "I live here. I've been living here for seven years

now."

"You know what I mean, Luke. The neighbors must think you up and joined a cult or something. You haven't been here in nine months! It just makes me shudder!"

Even though I told myself not to, I felt guilty. So I told her about the reviews in the *Alternative Times*. I sort of beefed up the amount of work I was doing for them so it sounded like a second job and I could use that as an excuse for never heading south. I told her how much people liked them, and how the editor had made me into a regular feature.

"Writing about commercials? But no one pays any attention to those, honey."

"Yes, they do," I said.

"I couldn't tell you a single one I've seen in the past year," she said. "I shut my mind off when they come on."

"Well, I guess I'm not writing them for you then."

"You don't need to take a tone," she said.

She wanted me to send her some copies of what I'd written, but there was no way I was even considering it. I told her I would. She begged me to come down and visit, and my only answer was that I lived in Shifflensburg now, and they could come visit me just as easily.

"We just might do that one of these days," she said. I knew she wouldn't.

I considered telling her about Elaine and about all the new roommates. The idea of some wild dago woman dating her son would flip her out, as would me living in a house with a gen-u-ine lezbeen. But I didn't tell her anything. I just wanted to get off the phone.

"Your father has an old set of golf clubs here for you if you come get them," she said.

Don't bribe me, I thought. "Tell him thanks," I said, and rushing her off the phone, I told her I would talk to her soon.

"I hope we *see* you sometime," she answered.

"You will." Just to get her off the phone. I said goodbye and hung up and then scanned through a few more commercials.

In a few hours, the new residents of the Farm began coming back, and I forgot about the call from my mother. I had to go to work again the next day, so Elaine and I slipped off to bed early. We could hear them downstairs, talking and closing doors, just making regular old noises, but five other people's worth. The era of peace and quiet at the Farm had passed.

* * * * *

As I drove over the bridge the next evening on my way home from work, the first thing I noticed were all the cars at the Farm. Seven people—seven cars and a mammoth truck. Eight vehicles in one driveway. It looked like a party or an apartment complex. I looked nervously up at the sky and pulled onto the grass. The sky was darkening with the storm that had been brewing for days and was way overdue; I welcomed it, but I didn't want to get caught out in it, at least not in my good shoes. I slammed the car door and heard thunder rumbling off in the distance.

Claudia and Paige were sitting on the front porch bent over and reading something together. The cloying smell of Paige's pretentious clove cigarette wafted over to me before I even got on the porch. My habit might be nasty, but not that nasty. I hate those things. They reek.

"Buenos tardes," I said, ducking under the roof of the porch.

They took a moment to respond, and Claudia looked up first.

"Nice article," she spat at me, bitter and startlingly hostile. I had to blink to make

sure that the words hadn't come out of Paige's mouth, but she was inhaling her foul little brown cigarette.

"I beg your pardon?" I said. I heard her, but I didn't have any response.

Claudia held up an issue of the *Alternative Times*. The cover picture was a reproduction of the 8 x 10 glossy of Shrivva from his publicity packet. Ricky had touched it up with faux graffiti—goatee and beret and John Lennon glasses scribbled on it crudely. Good picture, I thought. Underneath it, in about 64 point type, was printed EXPOSE: GURU GOBBLEDY-GOOK. Bad title, I thought. Claudia looked at me like she was going to send me to my room. I guessed that she had started subbing again that day.

"I haven't read it yet," I said.

"It's vicious and unfair," Paige said, in a cloud of clove. I believe that was the most she'd ever said to me at that point in our history together. "I don't want to live with someone who'd write a piece like this."

"I can't believe you'd write something this mean," Claudia said. "But I guess I'm just a blithering idiot, according to this." The wind started blowing hard and rattled the newspaper which she was pointing to.

I didn't know what to say, so I said something stupid, like "Jeez, give me a break," and went inside. I wanted to read the article, see it in print, but I didn't dare hang out on that porch any longer. There I was, thinking that I didn't know Claudia well enough to actually get into a personal argument with her.

"Your article really pissed me off," Elaine said as soon as I walked into the kitchen. She and Doug were sitting at the table, just staring at me.

"What?" I said.

"Why'd you write that? You practically came out and as much as said that you think I'm a, um. . . ."

"A blithering idiot," Doug said. He didn't seem to be quite as ticked as Elaine or Claudia or Paige.

I said, "Look, I don't see why—"

"Do you always have to be so cynical?" Elaine said. "So nasty?"

"It's just a stupid article," I said. "This is ridiculous." I didn't know if I was getting more mad or embarrassed.

"I thought we understood each other," Elaine said.

"A lot of people will read that," Doug said. "It wasn't even accurate."

"Bull," I said. Way to go, Luke.

"Why are you so damn skeptical?" Elaine said. "Why'd you have to pick *now* of all times to be like this? The last thing we need around here is a skeptic."

"I'm not!"

"Just because you don't believe it, you don't have the right to make fun of it," Doug said.

"I can't believe this! Look, it's just my humble opinion, okay? I have the right to that, don't I?"

"Not like this," Elaine said, narrowing her eyes. I couldn't believe she was this mad at me for something so little when last night we'd been in bed together. "You really screwed up." Her eyes worried me. They looked angrier than she sounded, like she was patiently trying to restrain herself from spitting on me.

I stood there, staring at the two of them. They were ganging up on me, and I hate that, and what's more, I was right. I hadn't said anything but the truth in that piece. Then I wondered if maybe Ricky had changed what I'd said. Maybe he'd added something I didn't know about, something that I should take a peek at. Although I knew I had used the words "blithering" and "idiot" in conjunction. And the phrase "lambs to

the \$14-a-ticket slaughter," among others.

"I'd like to try to explain what Shriya means," Doug said.

"I don't want to hear it," I answered. Christ, I thought, he can be worse than Geoff. I just wanted to disappear somewhere and read the article. And I didn't want to hear a lot of astral garbage.

"Oh, that's nice," Elaine said. "I believe that little sound you just heard was his mind banging shut."

I walked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs, and then I turned around and went out to the porch. Claudia and Paige were sitting back, finished reading, and they stopped talking as soon as I pushed the door open. The rain had started. The first fat drops hit the tin roof over the porch dully like rotting grapes. The two of them glared at me, and I swiped the *Alternative Times* off the chair next to Paige and went back inside. I saw Elaine and Doug again in the kitchen as I headed for the stairs, and I had an urge to tell them off, but I just headed silently upstairs with the newspaper in my hand.

I flicked on the fan in my room and sat down at my desk. I noticed something smelled bad, and I checked the bottom of my shoes. Both were clean, so I ironed out the wrinkles on my nose and ignored the stench. It was dark outside suddenly, like an eclipse, and I heard the rain pounding harder on the roof, picking up speed. I had to turn my desk light on to read comfortably. Rain and cool, wet air blew in through the window onto the buttery oak floor, but I ignored it and read the article. It took me a minute to skim the whole piece.

Yup. Every word in it was nasty and, except for the title, every single word was mine.

I smelled that smell again, faint under the rain smell, but I could identify it.

Sewage, raw and nasty, floating up to haunt me from the septic tank far back in the woods. It must have been overloaded from the number of people in the house flushing. The seepage was then released by the rain before it could sink odorlessly into the soil. Perfect.

I read it again and then read my review that had been printed in the same issue. Then I folded the paper back up neatly and put it with the rest of the papers that I kept in a stack in my closet as proof that my writing had been published. I sat on the edge of my bed and watched the rain come down, listened to it roaring around me. I thought of Elaine downstairs, mad at me. She's over-reacting. They all are. I realized that Diane and Geoff were somewhere in the house, and they were probably pissed off too. They'd been as moved by what Shriya had said as the four lambs who had already berated me. I pictured the electricity going out and all six of them climbing the stairs to my room in a mob, carrying torches and screaming for my blood.

Worse, I pictured Elaine and I in separate rooms, our doors closed between us. This wasn't some training affair, an educational romance, a romp with an experienced lover showing me the ropes. This was the real thing, and now it was ended, or changed at least, altered. I didn't want it to change before it had a chance to take on the shape of something permanent.

I told myself, she's not that mad. She has no right to be mad—I have the right to say whatever I want about whatever I choose. If she doesn't like it, then. . . . Then she can either deal with it or we're finished. That was a scary possibility for me to consider. Either or. Fifty-fifty. Those are terrible odds. I wouldn't bet my life's savings on a fifty-fifty proposition, and I certainly wouldn't jeopardize the most important thing in the world to me for even odds.

That was a damn nasty article, but it was also funny, I thought. So what if it's

nasty? I wrote it, and I still think it's good. But no one downstairs was laughing about it. And I felt very small as I admitted to myself that the article wasn't fair. Doug was right—it wasn't even accurate. I wrote the damn thing out of spite, and out of a sense of alienation. Hell, without Shriya, Elaine probably wouldn't have come in to my room four nights earlier. And I had Shriya to thank for my ten-year-late adulthood 101 intro to intercourse seminar with Elaine.

I wondered. If he's the catalyst, and I don't believe a word he says, does that make what's happened between Elaine and me wrong?

No.

The article wasn't just aimed at him. It was aimed at the auditorium full of people listening with a little mixture of awe and glee on their faces, something I couldn't get, aimed at their faith or willingness. It was aimed at the little party cooling off in the river later that night, laughing to my exclusion. But I'd excluded myself. Hell, they were talking about me, generously. Elaine had come into my room the very next night to include me. The ultimate inclusion. I was the one doing the excluding, more than just the article.

They all read the article correctly. They were right to take it personally. It had been meant that way. I wished I could take it back. Print a retraction. I wished Ricky *had* changed my words.

So what was I going to do? There were six people outside my door who were mad at me, including the one person I didn't want mad at me. And it was my fault. Why didn't I just stick to things no one gave a shit about, like commercials! Why did I have to give Ricky what he wanted?

Of course, I thought, they don't know that Ricky didn't change it. I could easily tell them that I was outraged by the way my editor had twisted my very fair article and

turned it into a piece of yellow journalism that offended my sensibilities as a responsible writer. Blithering idiots? Not my word choice—his. Lambs to the \$14-a-ticket slaughter? A Ranger Rickism, that bastard, not Luke West. I save my scorn for commercials, for things that deserve it. Not the principled and wise Shriya-Ti Kinivashu. He'd opened my eyes to the world around me.

That would be very easy to tell Elaine. She'd believe me, because she'd want to. No one would ever check with Ricky. A little white lie for the sake of peace on the Farm, for the sake of friendship, for the sake of love and sex. I went to my closet and retrieved the offending *Alternative Times*, unfolded it, and looked at the cover. A hundred and fifty dollars was not worth any of this.

I took a deep breath and walked out into the hallway. I shouted, "Goddamn it!" at the top of my lungs, punctuated by the slam of my door against the jamb. I hoped they could all hear my performance over the clamor of rain. I stormed down the stairs and into the kitchen and then into the living room and finally out onto the porch, where I found all six of them watching the rain. I thought, don't they have anything better to do?

"You hurt yourself?" Doug asked.

"No," I said. "Jesus Christ—no wonder you're all pissed at me. I'm furious after reading that article."

"What do you mean?" Diane said.

"I mean I can't believe that . . . that *bastard* wrote this and put my name on it." I was yelling, and the six of them were sitting very quietly, watching me. I think I was quite convincing. The man wronged. The rain came crashing down around the Farm, and it made lying a little easier by having to shout. Some disingenuousness and a few acting flaws might be camouflaged by the shouting, I thought to myself.

"You didn't write the article?" Elaine said.

"I wrote *an* article, but not this one!" I smacked the paper with my free hand.

"I would never write this kind of mean-spirited crap."

"So your editor wrote it?" Diane said.

"You should make him print a retraction," Geoff said.

"Man, I can't *believe* he did this!" I said.

"Why would he?" Paige asked me.

I was hoping not to have to answer a lot of detailed questions. "I guess he wanted something other than what I wrote," I said. Now I was just lying through my teeth, and it was coming out easily.

"Then why'd he put your name on it?" Paige said.

"What *did* you give him?" Elaine asked.

My head whipped around like a tennis spectator's, trying to answer all their questions and look at them and show them how deeply in pain I was about the whole thing. Water was pouring off the edge of the roof in sheets all around them, overflowing the gutters.

"Look, he wanted some kind of investigative reporting. I wrote up my impressions of the whole evening, trying to be neutral. I basically said that the audience was deeply engaged with what Shriya was saying. The only doubts I voiced were the practicability—if that's a word—of putting his ideas into action. I was trying to be critical, not cynical."

"I'd like to see what you originally wrote," Paige said.

"I would too, but I gave Ricky the disk. Boy am I going to chew him out." The lying just got easier and easier.

"I'm going to stop reading that paper," Claudia said.

"I don't blame you," I told her.

"I'm sorry I jumped on your case," Doug said.

Everyone else agreed with him, except Paige I think. I told them all not to worry about it. I told them I'd have been just as mad if I'd been in their shoes.

"Well I'm just relieved," Elaine said. She patted the wood floor of the porch next to where she was sitting. I sat down next to her, much as Baggy would. She touched my hand privately, then held it and squeezed. Attention slowly shifted away from me and back toward the rain, pounding the grass flat, rushing brown down the river bed.

"I'm very relieved," Elaine said, quietly, only to me.

I nodded. They believed me and I was safe. Things were back to normal. Only now I was beginning to feel a little sick. More than a little, actually. Wholly nauseous. It reminded me of sitting at my parents dinner table in high school and numbly nodding, silently acquiescent while they complained about welfare cheats or Jews.

Doug turned to me and said, "I'm interested in hearing why you think Shriya's ideas are impractical. It seems to me that you can live your life any way you choose and the first tenet is. . . ."

I listened to him and nodded and agreed with what he said. I wondered if that's how they got Patty Hearst.

Chapter 19

I told Ranger Rick what had happened, and then I explained how I'd just panicked and blamed the whole thing on him. I couldn't take the chance that irate phone calls or letters would come in without giving him a warning. He laughed.

"I think both the Alternative Times and I can withstand the attack of a bunch of disgruntled twenty-five year olds," he said. Something about the way he said it bugged me, even if he was right. "It's a shame you felt like you had to back down, though. I thought that was a good piece."

"It was a little negative."

"Luke, Luke. You think the guy's a con artist, right?"

"Basically," I said.

"Either you do or don't," Ricky answered, waving his hands in the air.

"Whatever," I said.

"It's important. I don't see anything wrong with lying to your friends for a little harmony around the house." I hadn't mentioned Elaine to him. "Just as long as you know you're doing it."

"Okay," I said. I looked at my watch. It was quarter to six, and I'd be heading back to the Farm in a few minutes. My stomach churned some.

"No, not okay. Come on—be honest with me. Did you write what I wanted to hear, or did you write what you thought?"

"Both, I guess. It's not that clear cut. I went in with a prejudice against the guy."

"Were your accusations in the article unfounded?"

"I don't think so, no. Look, let's drop it. This whole thing is giving me an ulcer. I'm just glad it's over. I never want to do anything like that again."

Ricky sat upright in his chair. "What! Why not?"

"Have you been listening? At all? I practically got lynched last night. This is a nightmare. Look, I almost lost my girlfriend over this." I said it. That stupid word that has always made me cringe. About Elaine. It was the first time. It didn't sound right—it implies malt shops, two straws in one glass, and that just isn't me. But I said it and I meant it.

"And you covered your ass," he said. "Look, I'll be happy to take the blame for everything you write. As long as you write it."

"No way," I said.

"But you're my child prodigy!" he said, trying to kid around with me and butter me up and not being the least bit subtle about it.

"Whatever," I said.

"Judy!" Ricky called out.

Judy waddled to the door of Ricky's office, glasses halfway down her nose and cigarette dangling gangster-style. She was as pale as Ricky. The two of them must have spent the entire summer down there in the basement, scattering like roaches when light came into the office.

"Tell Luke what a beautiful piece of slam writing that guru thing was."

"Beautiful," she croaked out of the side of her mouth. "But a terrible title."

"The title was mine," Ricky said.

"Obviously," Judy answered.

"Luke doesn't want to write any more," Ricky told her, as though I wasn't in the

room.

"I didn't say that," I said. "Just let me stick to my reviews."

"That's a waste," Judy told me. "That was a damn funny article. I read it on the can, laughing, and my husband wanted to know what was going on in there."

I didn't know she was married. I just couldn't picture it. I bet she smoked afterwards, and probably during.

"That's a compliment," Ranger Rick said.

"Right," Judy added.

"Thanks for the stroking, but that was my short career as a journalist, from start to finish. It's too hard. I'm out of my league."

"This is the *Alternative Times*, not the real *Times*," Judy said.

"You can do it—you already did do it," Ricky said. "Christ—you made two hundred and twenty-five bucks off that issue, between your two pieces."

"It's not worth it," I said, although I added it up in my head. An extra four hundred and fifty bucks a month. Damn. Five thousand a year, at least.

"Give it another shot," Ricky said. "Come on—didn't you enjoy writing that? Public venom? I'll make it worth your while."

I did enjoy it. "What happened to your shoestring budget?" I asked.

"Yeah," Judy said, looking past me to Ricky. I wondered how much he paid her.

"My budget is my business," Ricky said. "I pay people who stick around more money."

"Hah," Judy croaked, exhaling a cloud of blue-grey, dropping her cigarette on the floor and stubbing it out with her surprisingly tiny green-sneakered foot. I don't think I'd ever noticed her feet before. I don't see how she balanced that bulk on them.

"I'll bump the reviews up to a hundred a pop. And guarantee them a spot every

issue, as long as you can keep putting out the same high-quality, insightful, humorous stuff. Great stuff it is, by the way." He flashed me a cheesy little mole grin, exposing teeth I didn't much want to see.

I thought about it. The money was nice, but I practically had that spot anyway. What was I thinking? "Thank you, thank you. But. My life is complicated enough as it is. I can't afford to have my name plastered all over town as Cool-Hand Skeptical Luke."

"It already is," Ricky said.

"So use a pseudonym," Judy said.

Ricky and I both looked at her.

"There you go," Ricky said.

I thought about it for a moment, smiling to myself. It was so, I don't know—*forties*. I pictured SCANDAL AT THE SZECHUAN PALACE—WHEN PAO MEANS RAT, by Scoop Smith or The Eye or something.

"He's smiling," Judy said.

"We used to do it with our restaurant reviewer," Ricky told me.

"That was me," Judy corrected him. She looked at me. "I went by the name Jack E. Gleason, for laughs. I got tired of being a guinea pig at vegetarian restaurants though. All that cheese starts playing havoc with you after a while." I laughed a little.

"So what do you think?" Ricky asked me. "Sounds like a perfect answer. You get anonymity and money, I get some decent writing. We're all happy."

"I don't know. I'll think about it," I said.

"That's a yes," Judy said, winking at me. "My work here is finished." She waddled back to her desk.

"Glad to have you aboard," Ricky said. "So what name should we use?"

Uh . . . Mitchell St. Clair—something snooty sounding?"

I had no intention of using my father's name, regardless of the irony. "Nope."

"Well, maybe a Steel Hunter or something—tough and masculine." Ricky eased back in his chair, settling his hands on his little gut, thinking.

"Nah—I'd like something a little more, I don't know—goofy. And obviously fake. Like The Eye. How about Nosy Parker?"

"If you pick a name like that, people know there's a pseudonym and they start guessing. It didn't matter with the food reviewer, because everyone does that. You're better off with a real name. Everyone will just assume I've got a new writer, and they'd have almost no reason to ask."

"Something like Roger Evans? Just plain normal?" That was much less dramatic and interesting than I'd been imagining.

"We'll think of something. Nice to have you aboard, Roger." Ricky chuckled a little, chin to chest.

"How about a woman's name, for extra security?" Judy called hoarsely from the other room.

"You could do assignments in drag," Ricky said.

"I'll think about it," I said, looking at my watch. Time to go. I'd told my nosy roommates I was stopping by the Alternative Times office to chew Ricky out, and I couldn't be too long, to be on the safe side. "I need to head out of here."

"You are doing it, though, right?" Ranger Rick asked, standing up.

"Whatever," I said. "Talk to you later."

As I was walking out of the dungeons, Judy called after me, "Wanda Baxter!" and for some reason the name tickled me.

* * * * *

We were well into September, which sounds like whole new beginnings, second only to New Year's, fresh starts, but is actually just a steamy continuation of August. There were changes, like who used what bathroom—Elaine, Geoff, Diane and I had the upstairs one, Claudia, Doug, and Paige used the downstairs bathroom. It wasn't as crowded as I thought it would be—Geoff was still the only one trying to get into the bathroom at the same time as I in the mornings. Elaine was still getting up at the crack of dawn, tip-toeing out of whichever room we'd slept in that night and trying not to wake me as she went to oil the tractor or hose out dirty bushel baskets or something. Geoff was beginning to get nervous about the bar exam coming up.

"Forget it! There's no point in studying—either I know it or I don't," he said, slamming a thick book closed and heading for the refrigerator. Later, it was, "I don't even know why I'm taking this stupid test. It's a waste of my time. I've already got my degree. What do I need to prove? Right?" We learned to ignore and humor him, and he disappeared every night to his room while Diane was at Uncle Buddy's, so we didn't have too much to put up with.

The Farm-hands, as we were calling Doug and Paige, were happy campers. Doug had taken on this robust nature-boy attitude after quitting Best. He got a tree book from the library and took walks through the woods with it, coming back with leaves pressed between its pages. He ended up buying his own copy. He and Paige were working six hours a day on the Farm—that was what they'd agreed on with Elaine—and apparently, everything was smooth between the three of them. I wasn't around during the days, so I don't know for certain, but Elaine was pleased with the arrangement. Even Paige was working out. Although I'm certain she was still sticking voodoo pins into Luke dolls behind my back, I could actually see why people liked her. She never complained about anything—she did what she was supposed to do, and she was amazingly efficient. I

remembered thinking of her as this slow-motion moper who plodded through everything. I guess she had hated working for Margitte, who she was still seeing and who occasionally came out to the Farm in a cloud of loud colors and dangling jewelry, and while no warmth flowed between Paige and me, I felt we'd come to an understanding that we shared space and dealt with it.

When late September hit, Elaine and the Farm-hands went into a whirlwind of activity, working from before I left for work until after I came home. I'm not sure what they were doing the whole time, but I hardly saw them around the house unless they were sleeping and eating. The apples were ripe, and they were doing a lot of picking. The surplus piles of food around the house changed from tomatoes and squash to apples and peaches and melons, which was fine with me. I think fruit is harder to get sick of.

Crates of apples, sorted by color, began taking up floor space in the barn. Elaine was constantly telling me every night about the deals she'd tried to make with grocery stores and produce supply places. The big national chain grocery stores were a disappointment to her—they didn't buy from small-time farmers, just big ones that could supply their stores nationally, or at least regionally. She was having a hard time moving her apples and peaches. Doug and Paige were picking like mad. Pick ten, sell one.

She took a crate to the Salvation Army shelter and the battered women's shelter. They thanked her, and then refused the next donation from her. Apparently, there were still plenty left from the first delivery, in both places. I tried to explain to Elaine that even poor or distraught homeless people didn't want to eat free apples for every meal.

"I know, Luke," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not an idiot. I just thought they'd want them."

I tried to explain that most people thought about apples in terms of one or two, not bushel. She was fast getting frustrated. Her (or my) idea about touting them as

organic hadn't done much—everyone seemed to claim that their apples were organic. You could tell Elaine's were, because the skins were often spotted with a brown-gold fungus that didn't taste bad but looked dangerous to the uninformed and picky consumer.

PICK YOUR OWN APPLES AND PEACHES IN ELYSIUM, the ads said (Doug said that "you can pick from any tree—oh, but not *that* one" and I thought it was funny but I don't think anyone else got it). Elaine bought a scale and sold the apples at a price not much lower than those she pre-picked. She even tried to push some of her garden produce, late corn and melons and other things that were still coming in too fast and too plentifully for the seven of us to eat, even if we were eating for eight. Elaine was pleased with the turn out—people streamed into the Farm every day and she'd eventually started to work weekends as well—but the sales were all small. It takes a multitude of eight or nine dollar sales to make any money, and the multitudes just weren't there. Plus, most of the people who came were lazy, and they wanted to buy the pre-picked apples rather than head out into the glory of the orchard with a basket and a clawed apple-picker cage on a pole.

People called and asked, "Do y'all sell cider," and whoever answered politely (unless it was Paige, I guess) said, "No, we don't." We had all taken to answering the phone, "Hello, Elysium Orchards," day and night, which freaked my mother out the first and second times she called. Elaine decided that she need to start making cider. That seemed an ordeal, but she was determined. Besides—the crates in the barn had begun to take up more than just floor space. Sixty acres may sound like a small farm, and it is, relatively, but sixty acres of trees can put out more apples than I would have ever thought possible. "Just wait til I get bees," Elaine said. "I expect to bump the crop at least thirty percent." She used figures like that often, and I had the suspicion that she really didn't know what she was talking about.

* * * * *

I had my first article under an assumed name published in the first week of October. ABC Store Refuses Legitimate IDs, by Wanda Baxter. I was in there one afternoon, and I watched as the guy behind the counter refused to sell mid-priced gin to two girls about my age because both of them had Rhode Island driver's licenses. They had been giggling in the scotch aisle, were basically being obnoxious on purpose, and the guy behind the counter gave them a hard time, just to be equally obnoxious. They got into a yelling argument with him, dumping their purses open on the counter, showing him their graduate student ID's, insurance cards, gas cards, and a dozen other things with their names, but the guy was being a stubborn jerk and wouldn't budge. They were obviously, to me and the clerk, legal. So I wrote a little 350 word piece for the Alternative Times about it, and Ricky was thrilled.

"On the spot coverage!" he said. "Exactly what we need more of—expose bullshit everywhere!"

"Not exactly the Watergate conspiracy," I said.

"And Shifflettsburg isn't exactly Washington DC," Ricky said. "Keep your eyes open for me."

It was an innocuous piece printed on page three. Wanda Baxter. I bet the girls in the store were baffled about who had written the article, if they'd even read the thing, which was unlikely. I had been the only one there besides this suspicious looking bum propped against an unused cash register chewing his fingernails. I had called the clerk the next day, asked for him by name, and then asked him about the ID incident. He denied it ever happened—state employee covering his butt—so I went ahead and wrote the article. I liked the idea that those two girls were sitting at home with a six pack of O'Doul's drinking and reading my article and wondering who this Wanda person was to

be defending their cause. It sort of gave me superhero status, and I liked that.

It led me to consider a broader range of work for Wanda than I'd thought. There was plenty of investigative reporting to do that I already had an eye on—scummy landlords, questionably powerful magistrates, idiotic supervisors in large corporations, just for a start. Maybe a piece about the agony of owning a car in Virginia—license plate stickers, city or county stickers, city or county taxes, state inspection stickers. Maybe something about how large grocery store chains destroy small farmers by only buying on a national scale. There were more things to pick on in the world than there were bad commercials on television, and that insured me something to write about. I just wanted to keep Wanda a secret. Her name gave me the anonymous power of nasty unsigned notes stuck in people's mailboxes.

Elaine was curious about why I'd stuck with the *Alternative Times* after my editor had treated me so badly, and I told her that I just really wanted to get my reviews published.

"I'm never letting him talk me into *that* kind of writing again," I said.

"Good," Elaine said. "That kind of thing just creates negative tension for you and your community."

"Yeah," I answered, nervously. I hated when she talked like that.

"That paper could be positive and constructive. Instead, I think it just perpetuates a sense of disparity and unrest in the community."

"Don't you think there *is* that sense already there though?" I asked.

"People do what they want to do" she answered. "But—seek within."

I got a deal from Ricky to put an Elysium Orchards ad in the *Alternative Times* at a cut rate, a pretty big cut. It made Elaine happy, and I told everyone in the house that Ricky had done it just because of the big misunderstanding. They lightened up about the

evil man I worked for some after that.

* * * * *

When I got home one Wednesday evening, Elaine and the Farm-hands and Claudia were standing around Elaine's truck, poking at an enormous wood cylinder that towered out of the bed.

"We're going to need your help unloading the truck," Doug said when I pulled onto the grass. "That thing weighs a ton."

It was about eight feet high and five feet in diameter, old antique-looking wood, and it split into cross-sections, like a wood layer cake. A solid pole stood a foot out of the center on top of it, threaded with thick spiral lines like a big Flintstones screw. "What is it?" I asked.

"A cider press," Doug told me. "We got it second-hand over in the Shenandoah Valley from this orchard that got all modernized."

When Geoff got home, the six of us strained and groaned and heaved the press into the barn, and then we had to move it again so that it was in the right place. It did weigh a ton, but we finally got it set up, and then we all looked around at it and tried to figure out how to use it. There were six disks that fit inside, grated to look like trellis-work but a lot sturdier. Basically, you stacked mashed or cut-up apples in the bottom on a grate, then put a heavy circular wood grate over that layer and piled more apples, then another grate—you kept stacking the layers until it was full. Then the top screwed onto the threaded pole, locked, and you cranked this crossbar around and around so that the top mashed down all the layers, squeezing the juice out of the apples as it compressed them.

Once we'd figured out how it was supposed to work, then we had to figure out how to do it. The thing was enormous and would take bushels of apples—we had

bushels of apples, but they weren't cut up or mashed. They were whole. Elaine was all excited to run a trial batch that night, and she went inside for kitchen knives so we could spend our evening cutting apples and filling the cider press. Geoff declined and went in to study for the bar.

So we cut apples up, conscientiously at first into tiny cubes. The more we cut, and the less we saw it filling up even the first layer of the press, the larger we started cutting the apples. I had little cuts all over my fingers, stinging with apple juice running into them. It took over an hour, and I was extremely bored by the time we finally got enough piled into the cylinder of the press to start making cider, two layer's worth. Paige fitted the solid top onto the screw and then spun it down inside the cylinder until it met the layer of cut apples.

She cranked it hard, squeezing the apples, and then put a crank bar through the screw and she and Elaine started pushing hard. Nothing came out of the spout at the bottom of the press into the yellow plastic pitcher we'd placed to catch the cider. Doug and I grabbed hold of the crank bar, and the four of us strained and groaned to squeeze a little life out of the apples. It was hard to grab hold with so many of us.

"Maybe we shouldn't have cut the apples so big," Claudia said, and then she joined in trying to crank. I felt like an ox around a stone mill. We kept pushing, moving the bar maybe two inches with each surge, the wood creaking and us grunting. We heard a trickle hit the bottom of the pitcher, and we kept cranking and the inconsistent trickle continued, stopping and starting. We groaned and worked for ten minutes, and then the press just stopped. The wood had gone as far as it could.

Elaine ducked under our arms and grabbed the pitcher. She peered inside and bit her lip. She moved under the single light in the barn and swirled the pitcher. "It's chunky," she said. We joined her under the light, taking turns looking into the pitcher,

examining the meager liquid covering the bottom. It *was* chunky, with little dollops of apple flesh, red and green skin curls, and tiny black seeds dotting the bottom.

"It smells good," I said.

Doug said, "Let's taste it."

"Why don't we strain it," Claudia suggested.

"I can't believe we've been screwing around for the last hour and a half for a tablespoon of cider," Elaine said.

"The pitcher is half full," I said.

"Yeah, right," Elaine said.

Doug said, "It was a nice group effort."

We stood around peering into the pitcher, none of us moving to do anything with it.

"We should probably strain while it's being pressed," Paige said. "Put a big coffee filter or something in the bottom of the spout."

"That'll clog it," Elaine said.

"Let's worry about this later," Claudia said. The sun was setting, its pink and purple light barely filtering into the barn.

We went inside to the kitchen and poured five juice glasses of cider through a little strainer. We each had enough to wet our tongues.

"Cheers!" Doug said, and we all tasted. It tasted like cider, sweet but warm. We all complimented the flavor, though it was hard to say much with so little a sample.

"We'll figure something out," Paige said. "It'll be easier next time, and we'll make a whole batch."

"I'm going to call that orchard back tomorrow," Doug said.

Elaine put her juice glass by the sink and walked out of the kitchen. "This

blows," she said.

* * * * *

That was the first of the cider trials. Doug reported back to us that the man who'd sold them the press had laughed when he'd called. "He said that's why he sold the thing in the first place," he said. "All he suggested was to use cheesecloth to strain the apples. He wouldn't offer anything, and I didn't really know what questions to ask him."

We had to figure out three things—how to strain it, how to crank it without killing ourselves, and how to chop up the apples without paring knives. I don't know why I involved myself with it, but it seemed to make Elaine happy. I liked doing favors for her. Every evening for the next few weeks, Geoff disappeared into his room to study and the rest of us stood around the press trying to figure it out, including Diane when she wasn't pouring cheap beer at Uncle Buddy's. It robbed a lot of my time from writing reviews or churning out more Wanda Baxter pieces, but it was something that I'd started, and I wanted to at least help finish it. Paige came up with the first real solution, which was to make big bags out of cheesecloth, like lightweight potato sacks or pillow cases, fill them with the cut up apples, and places those in the press. It made cleaning easier—there was no flesh and skin ground into the press's disks or draining out into the pitcher. Elaine was delighted with this, because the bags full of pressed and de-juiced pulp could be fantastic fertilizer for next year's garden.

But our hands were still covered with cuts. We wore gloves and tried different methods. We tried putting the apples in whole, but that just increased the workload of turning the press a hundred fold. Doug and I tried one batch covering the cheesecloth bag with plastic and then jumping up and down on the apples wearing heavy-soled shoes. We mashed them up well but lost a lot of juice on the barn's dirt floor. We tried whacking the bags with two-by-fours inside the press, but that was awkward. Elaine was

rapidly getting frustrated, as were the rest of us. The season was coming to an end, the trees were still covered with apples, many of which were falling to the ground and becoming bee lures, and the barn was stacked solid with crates fifteen feet high, leaving a small area free for the press.

Elaine finally decided to call Mr. Canter, the old man she'd bought the Farm from. She'd forgotten about him, and she said she'd always meant to invite him out to see all that she'd done with the place. He'd moved into a retirement community in Harrisonburg, and Elaine said she had some questions for him about running the orchard and she wanted him to see what the place looked like. Doug and Diane and I listened to one side of the conversation Elaine had with him on the phone. From what we heard, he was pumping Elaine for information about changes around the place but was resisting her offer to come out and take a look for himself.

Doug whispered to her, "Offer to drive him out here," and when she did, it seemed like the tone of the conversation changed, and they set a date for two days later, on a Saturday.

Elaine hung up the phone and said to Doug, "You're very smart. I bet he can't drive himself around. I wonder what happened."

"A lot of old people can't. Poor vision, poor memory, jitters—there're a lot of reasons."

"He was too embarrassed to ask me himself," Elaine said.

"I miss seeing old people and babies," Diane said. "I spend my life dealing with nineteen year olds with fake IDs."

"I know!" I said, faking enthusiasm. "When you have your baby, we can borrow some of Doug's Big Brother kids and then invite some old people to live out here too!"

Diane rolled her eyes at me and patted her still flat stomach.

"I don't think so," Elaine said to me.

"I was kidding," I told her.

"I know."

* * * * *

"Good God, there's a lot of you," Mr. Canter said. The seven of us were squeezed cozily around the dining room table eating the late morning brunch that I'd offered to make—that was the day of the bar exam, and Geoff had disappeared early that morning with a look of determination and pain on his face. We'd wished him good luck, pressed orange juice and pencils on him, and sent him on his way.

"There's even one more who's not here," Elaine said, and Mr. Canter whistled.

He told us stories about living on the Farm for years and years. He was visibly impressed with everything Elaine had done in the ten months since she'd bought it. After lunch, she and I walked him around the house and he commented on how different each room was and told us what had happened in each room when he'd owned the place, what child had slept where, what certain scars on the hardwood floors had been caused by. I couldn't help wondering what sort of mental or physical feebleness had kept him from driving out by himself. He looked to be in pretty decent shape to me, just a little slower than us, but hell—he was about eighty.

He had the same penchant for talking, for telling stories unprompted that my grandmother had, that license that some people give themselves to tell the history of the world through their eyes. I didn't mind it in Mr. Canter, though—all the information with none of the moralizing. I think that's the difference. He had short bristly hair and vertical jowl wrinkles under his eyes like scars. Even as stooped and desiccated as he was, he was still a big man.

We rounded up Paige and Doug and went out to the barn to show Mr. Canter the

cider press. He burst out laughing when he saw it. "I haven't seen one of these things in twenty years," he said, rapping the side of the press. "It's like running a dairy by hand! Shoot—one hand, at that, you see.""

"Well, we've got a little surplus of apples," Elaine said.

Mr. Canter whistled and looked at the crates towering around us. "You sure do, young lady." He picked an apple out of a Red Delicious crate and bit into it, then stopped. "D'you mind?"

"Oh, of course not."

Mr. Canter crunched into his apple and closed his eyes.

"Have you ever worked one of these?" Paige asked.

"We had one for a little while back in the mid forties," he said, still chewing. "But we sold it. It was a little bigger than this one. Used it three seasons, then gave up. Too much work for me, and my wife was nervous selling it because cider turns fast if you don't put any chemicals in it. And you shouldn't ever do that. It'll turn into hard apple jack overnight. It gets what I call fizzy, and the next thing you know, you're tipping." He chuckled to himself and then scratched his chin. "Marilyn—that was my wife—took some of it to a church picnic once, didn't realize that it was turned. That didn't keep those ladies from drinking it, though, and from what Marilyn told me, it was a scene, you see. A bunch of the girls got all weepy. The minister's wife thought Marilyn had spiked it. I tell you, that was the last year we made cider on this farm."

Elaine waited a respectable length of time before forging ahead with her questions.

"Any suggestions on how to make it less work?" she asked.

"You mean cranking the press?" he asked.

Elaine nodded.

"Nope. That's just hard work you can't avoid if you want cider."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"You could rig a horse, maybe, or a tractor, to go around in circles and pull it for you. That might risk snapping the center thread."

"Oh," Elaine said.

Two women drove up who wanted to buy apples. One of them wore a blue skirt decorated with bright red strawberries and green apples, and they both had big sunglasses pushed up into their hair. Doug took them over to the shed that Elaine used for business stuff, armed with racks of bushel and half-bushel baskets and apple-pickers. They walked back almost immediately.

"These ladies would like some pre-picked apples," he announced to use, showing them to the crates that had been marked with different apple varieties. They asked him the usual questions about which were good eating apples, which were for cooking, which were tart, which were sweet.

Old Mr. Canter's face lit up, and he walked over to where the women were standing. He got into a long discussion with them about the virtues and vices of each breed, then pointed to one crate. "These aren't really Staymans," he explained, picking up a fat apple with a dusty skin and displaying it in an open palm. "They're Stayman-Winesaps, you see. A good all around apple, maybe a bit too tart for my taste. I can't stand a mealy apple though—give me a sharp one any day. People love 'em, too."

Elaine was agonizing over the distraction, I could tell, her hands clenched as tight as her thin smile. She was blockaded by this cider business, and she didn't like that one bit. She'd already decided in her mind that the cider was the solution to her apple pile-up woes, but the solution wasn't happening. I think a lot of times she pretty easily lost sight of her goals like that, and focused on the path somewhat obsessively.

The women finally left, carting away eighteen pounds of different apples in plastic

grocery bags. Nine dollars. A drop in the bucket in exchange for a tiny chunk of backlogged apples.

"Can you really tell one type of apple from another on sight?" Paige asked Mr. Canter.

"Nope," he shrugged. "Well, some of them I can, you see. I just know there aren't any pure Staymans on my farm." He looked down at his feet quickly. "*The* farm, I guess I mean. Pardon me," he said, suddenly looking much older and shorter.

"Oh, it's fine," Doug said. "Don't worry about it."

I felt bad for him. Even if he hadn't lived there in years, I can imagine he'd hated giving the place up, hazards and headaches and all. It was a different world from a planned, sedated retirement community.

"We'd appreciate it if you could take a tour of the orchard and show us which apples are which," Doug said.

"Yes," Paige said. "If those are wrong, there are probably others."

Mr. Canter perked up at this and said he'd love to do it.

"Another thing," Elaine broke in, "about cider. Did you and your wife cut the apples up by hand?"

He looked at her quizzically. "To fill the press?"

"Yes."

"Well good God, no! We'd still be here cutting." He looked at Elaine like he couldn't quite accept that she'd actually asked him that question. He carefully said, "Is that what y'all have been doing?" and looked around at the three of us.

"We're total novices," Doug said, and Elaine and Paige just nodded. I didn't feel the need to include myself in the gallery of cider fools.

"You need to get yourself a chipper machine, you see—a shredder?"

Elaine and the Farm-hands looked blankly at him.

"It's a machine you feed sticks and branches into. Get a gas one. Hell of a lot more hp's for the money. Shreds 'em into chips for mulch or whatever you want 'em for."

"You just drop them into a machine?" Elaine asked. "No cutting or mashing?"

"Right. It's got a spout on top, you see, and you just load the apples in, put something around the chute on the side to catch what comes out. Make sure you clean it good, of course, at first—you don't want bark in your cider, or three-two oil. They might even sell special cider machines at a farm supply store, but I bet they'd cost you."

Elaine had this huge grin on her face, that spark that the last few weeks of frustration had dampened. I wanted to kiss her. I guess I could have, but I didn't. "Oh, cool! Mr. Canter—you wouldn't believe the trouble we've had trying to figure that out." She looked at me and Paige and Doug, and as though we hadn't been there, listening, she exclaimed, "You get a machine to do it!"

"You sure do," Mr. Canter said.

"Then we're in business," Elaine said.

Chapter 20

The first frost at the end of October brought a small splurge of apple-pickers out to the Farm to enjoy fall before things started getting chilly. The only crop that season that Elaine was completely able to get rid of was pumpkins, also the only thing she'd grown that long warm year that was more decorative than edible. She kept aside one medium-sized pumpkin that she carved a scowl into and set on the porch, lit by a candle. No children came out to the Farm for trick or treats, so we passed around the bag of bite-sized Butterfingers that Doug had bought just in case. It was too cold now at night to enjoy the porch, and we retreated to the living room where it was too warm for a fire. We were drinking spiced, heated, and spiked cider. There was plenty to go around.

"Someone tell a ghost story," Claudia said.

"I know one!" Diane said, leaning forward on the futon.

"Should I dim the lights?" I asked.

"It's too scary for that—Once upon a time, not too long ago, there was a boy who worried too much. This boy worried so much about everything that he had nightmares and ulcers."

"Listen up, Luke," Elaine said.

I messed up her hair.

"Ahem. So he had nightmares and ulcers. People said—Hey, kid! Don't worry so much. So he said—But I'm going to be a father and a lawyer and I'm sure I failed the bar. And then he worried so much that his head exploded."

"Spooky," Geoff said.

"That wasn't what I had in mind," Claudia said.

"I liked it," I said.

"Thank you," Diane said, bowing a little. "It is a truly horrifying tale."

"Should I tell one?" Geoff said.

"I think not," Diane said.

"Is it about the apples that turned into cider that no one wanted and no one bought?" Elaine asked.

"It was about a pregnant woman," Geoff answered, "who got so large that when the time came—"

"Let's not do this," Doug said.

"Good idea. Please," Claudia added. They were snuggling on the floor, in a pile with Baggy. I wished they wouldn't. I liked them, but they didn't seem to have much of a sense of humor between the two of them. Doug always wanted to shift the topic of conversation, and for some reason, we let him.

"You're right," Elaine said. "That kind of talk just creates distance instead of communication."

I tried not to give any physical signs of how much that garbage set my nerves on edge. Inside, my eyes were rolling and I was groaning.

"I was communicating," Diane said, earnestly.

Doug ran his fingers through his hair, clinching it into a pony tail at the back. "Don't you think that kind of communication is more avoidance than communication?"

"I was letting Geoff know that I wasn't mad, but that I was concerned about him worrying so much."

"Yes, but your manner betrayed your intent, right? By tacitly acknowledging that

you are more interested in entertaining—by making a joke of Geoff's situation—than you are in communicating—letting Geoff know that you are worried—you automatically trivialize his predicament and your reaction to it." Doug let go of his hair.

Bullshit, I thought. I hated this discussion of a discussion that was not even two minutes old yet. It's like nostalgia about the good old times, say, last night, remember when we. . . ? I looked at the faces in the room—no one was outraged that Doug and Claudia were dictating rules about how people could talk to each other. I wondered if maybe they were all internally rebelling, like me, but not showing it. The possibility gave me some hope.

"Hm," Diane said. She downed the last of her mug of non-spiked cider. "Maybe I don't get why doing two things at once automatically makes the more important thing secondary."

"I don't follow you," Doug said.

"You said the fact of entertaining automatically negates the intent of what I was communicating. So the way I said it is more important than what I said."

"Right. Form affects content."

"That's what I'm not sure I agree with," Diane said. Go Diane, I thought. "Aren't you saying that form supersedes content?"

Doug chewed that one over for a second. I was so bored by this conversation that I wanted to put my hands in the shredder. Or better yet, Doug. "Think about it this way," he finally said, slowly and carefully. Every person in the room was listening intently to him. "Why didn't you just come out and say what was on your mind instead of covering it up as a joke?"

"I guess it's safer that way."

"Right—why?"

It was Diane's turn to think. "It's a buffer for me—it softens the concern that I'm showing. Oh! I think I see what you're getting at—why do I need that buffer? Right?"

"Yeah. It just gets in the way. It waters down your attempts at communication."

I looked at the grains of clove and cinnamon at the bottom of my mug, silty brown sludge turned cold. It was more appealing than the people in the room.

"Interesting point," Geoff said.

"I think so too," Paige said. "Doug—do you think there's any place for humor then?"

"Well sure. I like jokes. Jokes are funny," he said. "But if it's a shield, I'd say no—there isn't any place for it."

Paige continued. "But you are making a distinction between, um, something like lightheartedness and being flippant?"

"Exactly. Flippant—that's the thing that gets in the way. It alienates and excludes and breaks a sense of community."

I wanted to break in and tell them all that this was the most inane, naive, stupid thing I'd ever heard. But I couldn't. I felt like I'd be breaking my cover as a spy for non-believers in that cosmic Shrivu bullshit. I was heavily regretting backing down about that in the article. But then I looked at Elaine sitting next to me, her arm around my knee, her fingers tracing lazy circles on the back of my thigh. Some sacrifices are necessary.

* * * * *

People had stopped coming out to the Farm to pick apples or even buy them. The rows of trees were strewn with apples rotting on the ground or shriveling on branches, and the barn was full. Elaine and the Farm-hands couldn't make cider fast enough, although the shredding machine had sped up the process quite a bit. They bought two

gross of plastic gallon jugs to hold the cider, and they stacked the jugs precariously on planks in the shed beside the barn. When they'd filled their two hundred and forty eight jugs, they bought four more gross and started in on those. The apples in the crates around the barn slowly diminished, and the ones that were left began to take on this cloying smell that permeated the entire island. I could smell it in my room, and it was one of the first things I noticed when I got home from work each day.

Elaine had gone from orchard worker to saleswoman, trying to interest grocery stores in the apples and the cider. Some of them bought from Elaine, but in small quantities. I was sicker of apples than I had been of squash during the summer. Apple pie, apple crisp, apple cider, applesauce, baked apples, cheddar-apple omelettes, apple and raisin Waldorf salad, fried apples, apple cake, apple muffins, apple tarts, dried apples. At first, I'd enjoyed the difference between all the apples—some sweet, some crunchy, some tart, some mealy, sharp, tangy, firm, mellow, red, green, yellow, blah blah blah. It got so that when I bit into an apple, I gagged a little bit, and I had to consciously force my throat to constrict so I could swallow the bite. Nature's toothbrush, an apple a day—more like familiarity breeds contempt. I was trying to get into the spirit of the orchard for Elaine's sake, but man cannot live on apple alone.

We were lying in bed in her room one night, enjoying a little peace away from the numerous bodies in the house. Two months had passed since that first night we'd slept together, and I was enjoying a new level of physical intimacy between the two of us. There was no more ripping off of clothes in the dark and awkward moments of getting over the fact that it was the two of *us* doing *that*. I found myself actually thinking about us married, booting the others out of the house and having the place to ourselves. Elaine was depressed about the business part of her life, and while I couldn't blame her for it, I was trying to cheer her up.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Elaine said, talking about the orchard.

"It's the first year," I said. "You'll do fine." I told her, at least once a week, that she should think of this as a trial year, that she shouldn't expect everything to be perfect the first year around.

"I know. But I don't really know what I've learned this year. I don't have any idea what to do differently next year. This whole thing is a failure."

"No it's not," I said, giving her a little rub on the neck. "You know that."

"I should have just taken George's money and tossed it in the toilet for all the good it's done me." Money was running out of the place fast, salaries for the Farmhands, cider press, shredder, plastic jugs, etc. It wasn't near gone, but it wouldn't take too much longer for that to be a problem.

"Come on. Look at this place! This house is awesome. The land is incredible. So what if the orchard didn't take off the first year. It will, eventually—and besides—you don't even have to keep trying to run it. You could get another job if you wanted to. Or you could stick with the orchard til it's supporting itself."

"Even if I double what I make this year—that's still only about four thousand dollars, which isn't squat."

"You can do much better than double next year. You were worried about getting the apples off the trees. You figured out how to do that. Now you just need to spend this winter grooming places to sell. You're good at that."

"I hate it."

"You're still good at it. People like you. Anyways—I'm not going to sit here and tell you what you know. We'll come up with something different for next year. You've got *months*. Maybe you could invent some kind of gasoline that runs on apples or something."

"That's practical."

"Don't be so negative," I said. I couldn't believe I was saying that to Elaine. "The idea is to come up with something different. Plain apples and cider should sell somewhere—and if they don't, you could have a back-up."

Elaine sat up and propped herself up on pillow against the headboard. "Like selling them as mulch and fertilizer instead of as food."

"Yeah. That kind of thing."

She looked up at the ceiling, the way she always did when she was thinking. "I wonder if I could mix it with cheap wine and sell it as apple coolers."

"There you go," I said.

"I wonder if you can make beer out of apples?"

"You never know," I said, and then we didn't get to sleep for two more hours, Elaine running over different plans in her head, trying them out on me.

* * * * *

Apple coolers were bland. Elaine couldn't find anyone to tell her how to make apple beer, so she started trying to make apple wine, using the bounty of cider to make a batch. But wine takes a lot of time, and she didn't have the facilities for making huge industrial batches of wine. It was done in buckets and plastic trashcans, like a spiked punch at a fraternity party. I tried to stay out of it—there was enough going on with the three of them madly trying to do *something* with all the apples. When the beginning of November hit, the cider started turning fizzy and blew the caps off three of the jugs from the early batches of cider. Elaine moaned about the sharp, acid smell that seeped into the older cider.

"Why didn't I use preservatives in it or something?" she said. "All that work is going to be ruined. It's all going bad! I can't afford some huge refrigerator." Over fifty

gallons of cider had started bulging in the plastic jugs, and she and Doug and Paige had to unscrew all the caps to release the gas that built up, and then do it again the next day. Two of the jugs that they'd missed had exploded and drenched the jugs around them in a sticky mess of sweet.

They hosed off the jugs and then undid all the caps of all the hundreds of jugs of cider filling the shed, just to make sure.

"Maybe we should taste it," Doug said. We were all standing around in the shed, Diane and I watching the three of them work. "How bad can it be?"

"It doesn't go bad," Diane said. "It just gets hard. It's fermenting now, and getting stronger."

"Are you serious? Are you sure it doesn't go bad?" Elaine asked.

"Sure. I think. Hard cider—Mr. Canter was talking about it," Diane said. "The English drink it all the time."

"Let's taste it then," I said. I grabbed one of the jugs, still wet and cold from being hosed off, and popped the cap off.

"Be my guest," Elaine said.

"Cheers." I hoisted it in the air, about to sip.

"It's not like methyl alcohol or anything, is it?" Paige asked.

"What's that?" Diane said.

"Wood alcohol. The kind you shouldn't drink that makes you go blind."

I lowered the jug and looked at Diane. We all did. She was the resident bartender/hooch trivia expert, which is kind of funny for a pregnant woman.

"Of course it isn't. You get wood alcohol out of distilling wood."

"Oh," I said.

"And since that isn't made from wood, you're fine," she said.

I lifted the jug to my lips.

"I think," Diane said.

"Oh, come on!" The jug came back down.

"She was kidding," Doug said, flatly. I think there was a hint of reprimand in there.

"It's fine, Luke. The only wood that's touched it is the cask of the press, right? Go ahead."

"If you light something and get a blue flame, it's regular old drinking alcohol," Paige said.

Diane said, "I doubt we'll get a flame off of half-percent hard cider. You want me to try it, Luke?"

"No, I'll do it," I said. I hoisted the jug yet again, feeling a little worried. I didn't want to be blind if I could help it. Baggy was too wild to be a seeing eye dog. I'd have to learn Braille. I tasted it. It was kind of fizzy, with fine bubbles that tasted more acidic than felt carbonated. I swished it around in my mouth, rolling it over my tongue. I thought I detected a hint of that unmistakable liquor sharpness, but most of all, I just tasted apple, and I had to gag it down. I made a face and forced it down, and then shuddered a little. Appleness was getting more offensive than liver.

"Oh my God! Luke!" Elaine yelled, grabbing the jug from me. "Spit it out!"

"What?" I said. It was already in my stomach, and I felt a moment of panic.

"Is it bad? Is it poison?"

I stared at her for a moment, as did everyone else in the shed. She mistook my apple grimace. "It's fine," I said, slowly. "Just a little, um, *sharp*."

"Calm down, Elaine," Paige said.

"Well why'd you make that face?" she asked.

"I was trying to get attention," I said. "It's just gotten kind of fizzy. It's got a tiny kick to it."

"Oh. Should I try it?"

"You all should try it," I said. Elaine sipped from the jug and passed it around the circle. They all drank it without making faces.

"Pretty weak," Doug said.

"Strong enough to be illegal I bet," Diane said.

"Illegal? Having fermented cider around?"

"This is a business," Diane said.

"Like they'd bust me for having rotten cider around."

Doug said, "It's not whether they would actually, it's that they could if they wanted to."

"What?" I said. "Like there's some big conspiracy out there waiting to screw up Elaine's orchard."

"It probably will start fermenting hard now," Diane said, "now that it's gotten rolling."

"My wine book says the more sugar, the more alcohol," Elaine said. "What should I do?"

Paige made a little bit of a face when she took a second sip, which made me feel better for some stupid reason. "There's plenty of sugar in it now," she said.

"I need to get one of those little booze-o-meter things," Elaine said, "to check the percentage. I wonder what percentage it has to be to be illegal. I don't want seven billion gallons of rotten cider."

"Rotten?" I said

"Who wants to drink this nasty stuff?" Elaine said.

"Everyone," I said. "Every drunk bum, every high school student, every college student. Anyone who drinks for the proof would want it. You could sell it as liquor! You're selling cider at two ninety-nine a gallon. Cheap wine is about ten dollars a gallon. That's a hell of a lot more profit."

"That's a great idea," Diane said. "You wouldn't even have to do anything, I don't think. Just let it sit here and have nature do its work. Of course, it's totally illegal."

"We have eight hundred jugs," Paige said. "And right now over three hundred gallons already made."

"Three thousand bucks," Elaine said. "But if we filled up all the jugs—"

"Eight thousand," I said.

"More than that," Paige said.

Elaine and Paige started tossing around figures about how many jugs they had versus how many apples it would take and how many runs of the press at fifteen gallons per run at about two hours per run, maybe a little more. Numbers flew.

"I could probably make another ten thousand dollars off of this," Elaine said, standing there with her mouth dropped open a little, her eyes looking up, still calculating.

"Sounds like a pretty good haul for a bootlegger," Diane said.

"Could you really do that?" Doug asked Elaine.

"I don't see why not. I mean, I haven't thought the whole thing out yet, but—"

"No, I mean with a clear conscience. You'd manufacture alcohol? That's like growing tobacco. You'd be making a drug and a poison. You could do that?"

"In a heartbeat," Elaine said.

"Look," Paige said. "This idea is about five minutes old. Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves, either planning or worrying."

I knew, from the concentration on Elaine's face, that there was no way to stop her from doing either until she ran into some kind of obstacle. She was going to take this one as far as it could go. I lit up a cigarette.

"How could I possibly worry about it, if all I'm doing is making cider? Pressing the juice out of apples. I can't help it if it just wants to convert itself into alcohol."

"That seems a bogus argument," Doug said. "You'd be making it with the conversion in mind, first of all—"

"So what about the first three hundred gallons then? That was made blindly."

Doug said, "The point is that you'd be involved in the production of something that has a history of augmenting human misery. . . ."

Here we go again, I thought, taking my leave and heading back to the house. Doug kept on talking, and I could hear him through the kitchen window as I got myself a beer.

Chapter 21

While I was scraping thin frost off of my windshield in the mornings, I could hear Paige and Elaine and Doug already out in the barn running the shredder machine, shooting cheese cloth bags full of chopped apples to run the press. Cider production had become a full-time occupation for the three of them in the past week, running as many as three batches, or fifty gallons, a day. There was a growing mound of dejuiced apple pulp behind the barn. I rubbed Elaine's stringy, tight arms at night, like trying to massage a burl off a branch. I assumed Claudia was doing the same for Doug, and I actually felt bad for Paige—she didn't have anyone around each night to soothe the muscles that had been in constant action for six or eight hours every day.

Paige convinced Doug that making alcohol wasn't morally unacceptable. I'm not quite sure how she did it, but it impressed me that she had. I wondered if Doug had actually believed what he had said about it being the source of human misery, or whether he was just running his mouth. Sometimes I got the impression that he liked to treat his life like a logic puzzle and make it as complicated as possible by creating an inordinate number of rules.

I think that was probably my favorite time with Elaine, that fall, those nights in bed. She and Doug and Paige were spending so much time together during the days, in unbroken contact for hours at a time, that at night they disappeared to separate corners of the house to get away from each other. They weren't arguing particularly, just tired of each other and trying to keep from having it get out of hand. Paige left the house

sometimes, I guess to go to Margitte's, but she wasn't exactly volunteering her schedule to me, and I wasn't asking. So Elaine and I had as much privacy as we could hope for in a house of seven people and a dog. Dinners as a group had become irregular to non-existent, each of us feeding ourselves, grazing through the kitchen at odd times, or even side by side, preparing different things. It made for more mess but less discussion.

Elaine was plunged head-first into her hard cider *vendeuse* role, what Paige called it. She had that energy back, that optimism that had disappeared a little just after everyone had moved in with her and she discovered that the orchard wasn't going to run itself smoothly. Every night she told me about who she'd called that day to try and get word out about Elysium, the name she'd decided for the cider, stamped on a gummy label with a simple green ink on a white background. She said that the cider seemed to max out around nine to eleven percent alcohol—it stopped fermenting at that point, and she was able to re-cap the jugs. All she had to do was sell her stock, somehow and wherever, before the cider began making vinegar out of itself. She had months, she'd been told, and that only gave her more optimism about the project. Diane and Margitte had both agreed to try out the hard cider on their patrons and clients, to see how well people liked it. It got favorable reports, and Margitte bought five gallons to serve at a small MSU alumni cocktail party after a football game. They liked it, or drank it all at least, and Elaine was ecstatic.

I was pretty happy myself—Wanda Baxter's name appeared on another article, this time a research piece about tenant's rights that focused on some of the small-time landlords in town who didn't own enough units to be governed by the Virginia Tenant-Landlord Act. Vereker just happened to fall in this crack, and I wrote a long scathing piece about the abuses possible and actual under this situation. Ranger Rick loved it, and he even asked if he could write pieces using Wanda's name. I told him to go ahead. He

wrote an article about the apathy of art patrons in Shifflettsburg who never showed up for gallery opening no matter how well advertised and how free, and then complained about lack of culture in the area. I was flattered to see how Ricky had tried to copy some of my/Wanda's voice in the piece.

I had this great picture of Wanda in my mind, a dumpy fifty year old woman, with a bad greying perm and comfortable shoes, who ran around town snooping out injustice and then went home at night to write about it over a cup of coffee with a shot of Irish whiskey in it, maybe a marshmallow floating around on top. I don't even know if anyone who read the Alternative Times ever looked twice at her byline, but Ricky and I both thought it was highly entertaining. I was getting my reviews in, and the more I wrote, the more I liked it. I'd tapped a source that seemed unlikely to go dry. I was making a hundred bucks per review, no great deal but finally worth my time, and people were still loving them.

The first two weeks of that November were some of the happiest, smoothest times in my life, and I couldn't even get too bent out of shape by the innocuous-seeming phone call I got from my mother one evening after work.

"Everything's fine," I said. "I've been writing more for that newspaper I told you about. That's about it. Everything's just going really well."

"You still haven't sent me anything to read," she said.

"Really? I guess I just keep forgetting," I told her.

She told me about some new cabinet knobs she'd had put in the kitchen and a golf weekend that she and my father had taken to Orlando a few weeks earlier. I'd already gotten the postcard. She went on and on, and I think I realized for the first time how bored and frustrated she was.

"And so I'm just trying to get our Thanksgiving plans worked out," she continued.

"You are coming down for Thanksgiving, aren't you?"

I hadn't thought about it, but I knew immediately that I wasn't. I hoped Elaine was planning on sticking around the Farm. What I really hoped was that everyone would disappear and Elaine and I could spend it alone, like Christmas.

"I don't think so," I said, carefully enunciating each word so that she'd understand, and then I clarified it with, "Probably not, no."

She let out this long sound, like air released from a tire, ending with a tsk. "You're not coming home? Still? We haven't seen you in a year. Are you hiding something? Do you have long hair or an earring?"

"I'm not hiding anything," I said. "I just live here now. You two can come up here as easily as I can go to Atlanta. I've said that before."

"Yes, you certainly have, and every time I hear it I could just scream," she said. "Please come down. Gramma West is going to be on a gambling cruise in Mobile, so it'd be just the three of us."

I'd talked myself into believing that I wasn't seeing my parents to make a point, that they needed to make some effort to come see me, that I was grown up and things were different now. Basically, I just didn't want to see them, but I was kidding myself. "I'm going to be up here," I said.

"And Christmas? You're going to boycott us again for Christmas?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Well, good. Please mark your calendar that you're coming down here for Christmas. I'll give you plenty of advance time to arrange your busy schedule."

"We'll see," I said, and I tried to bring the conversation quickly to a close. She wore me out.

* * * * *

"I haven't thought about it much," Elaine said.

"I haven't thought either," I said. "I was hoping we'd spend it here together. Maybe even just the two of us."

Elaine had the press pulled apart, hosing all the sections down for another day of making cider tomorrow. It was chilly in the barn, made colder by the mist of water that shot out from under her thumb as she directed the spray at stubborn chunks of red skin stuck to the oak parts of the press. I was just wearing my work clothes, so I shivered. Elaine was wearing her work clothes, which got increasingly lumberjane-looking as winter approached—a heavy, lined flannel shirt, with a quilted red vest that looked like it had been ripped from the inside of a twenty-year old parka. She'd switched her shopping from Leggett's to Southern States.

"I was thinking I should head up to Boston, at least some time soon," she said. She'd only been up twice that I could remember since last Thanksgiving, once in the early spring and once for a wedding in the middle of the summer. "But I really don't want to leave the Farm unless I have to." She held her hand out, indicating the stacks of crates around her. They'd gotten much shorter from all the cider activity.

"Perfect," I said. "You can head up there some other time—it'll be us, here, for Thanksgiving."

"I'd like that," she said. "No problems with Baggy, this time."

"Right. Do you know anyone else's plans?"

She didn't, so I left her in the barn, hosing under the bare light bulb, while I hunted everyone else and tried to find out what they were doing for the holiday. Diane said she and Geoff were torn between his parents, her parents, and neither, but would probably go with her parents. "My parents are trying not to freak about me and a baby," she said. "But I think a nice family holiday might smooth things over with them,

especially if Geoff goes along. He's been a little out of the loop lately."

I knew what she meant—ever since the bar, Geoff had been working obscenely long hours. He still had a while to go before he heard back on the bar exam.

"But we may just bag it and go to a Chinese restaurant," she added. "Get some time alone."

That was what I wanted to hear—that whatever her plans were, they weren't for a nice relaxed Thanksgiving among friends. Paige and Doug were moving gallons of cider around the shed for some reason or other that I couldn't figure out and didn't care why. Paige was spending it with Margitte. "And she said to pass along an invitation to you and Elaine, and Doug, you and Claudia too, if you want to come," she said. "But she doesn't make a big deal out of Thanksgiving."

Doug said he and Claudia had no plans as of yet—all he knew was that they were going to be together, and they definitely weren't going to her parents' place. "They hate me," he said. "Ever since Claudia and I have been together, they've treated me like I was a criminal. I was considering staying here with everyone, but it isn't carved in stone yet."

"Ah," I said.

"That's a problem?" Doug asked me.

"No, no. Not at all. That's why I was asking." I wouldn't mind spending turkey day discussing the importance of communicating openly and honestly to create a sense of community and fight inertia. Blech. Pork lo mein with Geoff and Diane was sounding better.

Elaine and I talked about it, and we decided on a Thanksgiving spent with Claudia and Doug at the Farm.

"As long as it's okay with you," she said.

"That's fine," I said. As long as my plans had me with Elaine and not in Smyrna,

I could be happy.

* * * * *

Ricky wanted me to do a piece the week before Thanksgiving about the evils of a capitalist holiday that opened the doors of violence and aggression against the Indians, in Wanda's name, of course. Wanda had done a piece ragging on Christians who complained about Halloween as some satanic holiday, which came out in favor of Halloween. But I passed on the Thanksgiving piece. I've always liked the idea of Thanksgiving too much to rag on it—planting fish in rows of corn and tracing a turkey around your hand in school seemed much cooler to me, and more the point, than the kernel of some master evil. When Ricky said he'd write it himself, I said I'd rather he didn't use Wanda's name for it. He grumbled and agreed and didn't even put up a fight. Either he didn't think much of the idea, or he was giving my opinions a lot more weight. I preferred to think it was the second. Instead, I was preparing a review of poultry ads that were slightly off base but the closest thing to Thanksgiving marketing that I could see on television. Christmas would be easy.

"See if you can work some Pilgrims and Indians into it," Ranger Rick said.

"And cranberry sauce," Judy added. "Thanksgiving isn't Thanksgiving without cranberry sauce."

I headed home afterwards to scan the tube for a few hours and hunt for holiday-related ads. TV watching at the Farm had gotten easier for me, now that I was used to having what felt like hundreds of people buzzing around in the house behind me. At first I'd wanted to move the TV to the attic for privacy's sake. I used to take notes with my back to the wall, worried that someone would come up and read over my shoulder. They never did, and I grew accustomed to being interrupted and even having other people in the room while I switched channels. I was by myself in the sitting room when the phone

rang. No one got it, so I answered.

"Hello?"

"Is Luke there?" It was my mother. She always asked for me. Maybe she honestly didn't know it was me, but I doubt it.

"It's me."

"And how are you?"

"Fine." Nothing had really changed since the day before yesterday when I spoken to her.

"Well, good, because I have some news. I know you're going to be excited—your father and I have decided to take you up on your invitation—" She only gave a slight pause, but it felt like I had plenty of time to mull it over and start worrying. What invitation? "—so we'll be coming up for Thanksgiving in Virginia. You talked us into it!"

"You all are coming up here? To my house? For Thanksgiving?" I was spluttering. Talked them into it? I did no such. . . ." Then I stopped agitating, calmed, like my hands had been nailed to a chair and it was easier not to struggle.

"Yes. Now we can bring up the turkey if you need it, and I'll do all the cooking, or we could go out for a dinner if you want to, but I was thinking it might be rather nice to have a real Thanksgiving."

"Hold on a second," I said. "Elaine and I are planning to have it here on the Farm."

"Wonderful! And how is she? I hate going to restaurants anyway. One year, when you were, oh, let's see—not more than two or three, we ended up at that Italian restaurant in . . . where was it? It wasn't Jacksonville, that was another time. Charleston? I can't remember. The point is, I didn't like it."

"Well, we won't be going out to a restaurant," I said. I took a deep breath and swallowed my worries. "We'll take care of the meal, and we'd love to have you two come for Thanksgiving."

"This'll be fun," my mother said. "The whole weekend together!"

"And you can stay here, of course," I said.

"I should hope so!" she said. We talked for a while longer, figuring out when they'd arrive, no she shouldn't bring anything, and on and on. When I hung up the phone, I started worrying about whether or not I'd stay in Elaine's room while they were visiting. What would I tell them about Elaine and me? My mother'd been smugly certain for years that Elaine and I had been a couple and I simply wasn't letting her in on it. I wasn't looking forward to the visit, but I figured that at least I wouldn't have to see them for another year once the whole thing was over.

* * * * *

"I'm glad," Elaine said. "I met them after graduation for about five minutes, and that was it. I've always had a good time chatting with your mother when she calls."

"You realize that you're summoning demons beyond your control," I said. "You can't take words like that back."

Elaine snorted. "You need a more positive outlook on it."

"What I need is to survive through three whole days with my parents."

Elaine reached over to the drawer in her bedside table and pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. "Let's get your mind off of that," she said. "What should we eat?"

"For Thanksgiving with my parents? How about your vegetarian lasagna?"

"Luke. . . ."

"We can scare them away with vegetables," I said.

Elaine began writing. "Turkey. Stuffing. Gravy. Mashed potatoes. I wonder

how big a turkey we need for six people. Let's say about a pound each. A six pound turkey sounds puny."

"You're forgetting about the bones. Try a twelve-pounder."

"Much better. Let's say fifteen, for sandwich purposes. And cranberry jelly. And those little onions and peas in cream sauce."

"I hate those," I said.

"Me too, but they're part of the deal. Some rolls or bread. Green beans. Black olives. Oh, sweet potatoes."

"Black olives?"

"We always have them," Elaine said.

"Really? We never did. I think you're slipping a little Verona into my Plymouth."

"*Black olives*," she said, underlining them on the pad. "I guess a salad, too. The list is a little low on veggies. Do you eat salad?"

"I think she served it but I never ate it," I said.

"Salad," she said, writing. "Now isn't this better than worrying about your parents?"

"Much better," I said, "except where are they going to sleep?" Geoff and Diane would be gone for Thanksgiving Day, but they'd still be around all weekend, so their room was out. Paige only had a single bed, but her room wasn't a possibility anyway, because I wouldn't ask her. "Since I can't chain them up in the basement, there's my room or one of the futons in the sitting room. I don't think my mother can sleep in a room without a door, though."

"So, give them your room. You'll be in here anyway."

"I don't know," I said. "That would spook me out a little."

"Having them in your bed? Or sleeping with me while your parents are around?"

"Bingo the last one."

"It's your house, you're twenty-six years old. They can deal with it."

"I know. I just don't want it to be an issue," I said.

Elaine turned and wagged the pencil at me. "Please tell me that you've at least told them about us."

I looked at my toes.

"Luke!" Elaine let out a groan.

"I know, I know, but give me a break. It's not like I kept this from them on purpose. I just never tell them anything unless I have to. My whole mission in life is to get off the phone with my mother as fast as I can. Please don't take it personally. They don't know anything about my life. They don't ask, and I don't tell."

"Your mother never asks how you're doing or what's new? I find that hard to believe."

"She asks, but I don't think she really wants to know. Anyway, could we get off this? I thought we were trying to relieve my ulcers, not aggravate them."

She ran her free hand around the back of my neck. "Don't let it get to you," she said. "You'll sleep in here with me, like usual. They might not notice, and if they do, I bet they won't say anything. They'd be embarrassed, especially if your parents are as non-confrontational as you say."

"I never said that," I told her. "I just said I am."

Chapter 22

On Wednesday night when I heard a car crunching down the gravel driveway, I bolted to my bedroom window to see if it was my parents come to invade my peace and quiet. I couldn't tell from the headlights. Not until the car got under the light on the bridge could I see that it was just Paige. I went back to fussing around. Dust with a rag, rearrange the lamp on the table, gulp my bourbon and ginger. I'd agreed to clean if Elaine would cook. I couldn't stand the smell of the apple pie and spiced apples that she'd added to the feast list, flying around the kitchen with Doug and Claudia making an enormous mess that was sure to give my mother hives. My father said they'd be arriving sometime that night, and he hadn't been any more specific than that. He pooh-poohed the very specific directions I gave him, as though he'd be able to find it from the scent or instinct or something. I was sure they had gotten lost somewhere between Shifflettsburg and the Farm, and that would set the visit off on a nice tense little start.

My room looked as good as it was going to, so I wandered into the bathroom to make sure there was nothing embarrassing visible. The only thing messy in there was the ring from my highball glass on the window sill from when I'd been in there the last time fussing around. I wiped it up and then sat on the edge of the old claw-footed tub to sip my drink and calm myself down. My parents had been to Shifflettsburg exactly twice—August of 1984, to help me move into my dorm, and May of 1988, to watch me graduate. The first time had felt normal, the second time an infringement of my world that was very consciously separate from them. This time, it seemed obscene that they

were coming, an invasion by a barbarian horde of two.

I listened to Paige walk into the house and greet the chefs in the kitchen. All their voices rose up to me, muffled and meaningless, and I heard Elaine exclaim about something and then heard Doug say something to someone else in an explanatory tone. I finished my bourbon and ginger, but I stayed upstairs instead of going to the kitchen to refresh it. The last thing I needed was to be slurring when my parents arrived. They wouldn't notice a thing, but I would. I checked my watch—9:30. They'd planned on leaving around ten that morning. Even if they stopped at every Stuckey's and rest area along the way, they should have been at the Farm a while ago. I was worried.

I tried to read in my room, but I couldn't concentrate on someone else's words. I got out a stack of old *Alternative Times* from my closet, the oldest of them already yellowing, and sat down at my desk with them, looking out the window onto the driveway to watch. I leafed through my articles, glancing at what I'd written over the past six months, as both Luke West and Wanda Baxter. I had eleven reviews published up to that point, every biweekly issue since mid-July, and I had the guru article and three Wanda Baxter articles. I could tell from reading Ricky's Wanda articles that they weren't the real thing. She was mine.

I got absorbed in what I was reading, ignoring the voices downstairs and my earlier worrying, and I was pulled out of my reading by headlights reflecting on my windows as a car crested the hill of the orchard. For some reason, I knew it was them, and I saw as they drove across the bridge that I was right—a new car I hadn't seen before, a champagne pinky-grey Buick, but I'd recognize anywhere my mother's hand tossing her cigarette butt out of the window. She drove on long trips because my father tended to doze when driving for extended periods of time. One time on a car trip to St. Petersburg he dozed off in the middle of the day and drove us all, unhurt, up a steep

grassy embankment, where the car slowed to stop and then rolled backward onto the highway where we almost got hit by a construction van. My mother had a fit. After that, as much as she hated being seen driving two healthy males around, she was the family chauffeur, until two months after my sixteenth birthday. I was more than willing to take over, and the two of them became extremely alert in the car.

Remembering all of that as I trod down the stairs put a smile on my face.

"Man your battle stations," I called into the kitchen, and I headed out on the front porch to meet my parents. My mother had pulled up behind Elaine's truck and Paige's car, blocking them both in. I figured I'd move the car later. I walked across the browned November grass to greet them. When my mother's body appeared coming out of the driver's side, I said, "Hey! Nice new car."

She turned to look at me, her face oddly lit and shadowed from the various spotlights outside the barn and the shed and on the side of the house. "Luke?" she called.

I don't know whether she couldn't actually see me in the shadows or she was exaggerating the fact that we hadn't seen each other in exactly a year. "It's me," I said, shivering a little from the cold. My father appeared out of the passenger's side.

"You would not *believe* the traffic today," she said. "I was getting ready to pull off the interstate and start taking dinky back roads."

"Luke!" my father said.

"Howdy," I said, and I walked to the car and started taking luggage out of the trunk.

"You all got a bridge on your property," he said.

"I was scared to death to drive over the thing," my mother said. "You never know."

They talked about their trip and I listened as my father and I carried their bags

inside, and as soon as we were inside the front door, we were greeted by Baggy, jumping and licking, and then the mass of roommates, seemingly swarming from the kitchen or down the stairs. I think my parents were overwhelmed by all of the bodies. I introduced them to everyone, saying, "And of course you remember Elaine and Diane," although I'm sure they didn't, from sight at least. I worked with people my parents' age, but I still wasn't sure whether to introduce them as Mr. and Mrs. or Mitchell and Sonny. I went with their first names, a little victory for me. Elaine gave my father a hug, which I could tell he liked, and my mother immediately took center stage, regaling everyone with stories about the traffic, weather, accidents, and vanity plates that had been part of her perilous journey.

I got a first good look at them, in the light of the front hall. My father looked older than I remembered, with almost fully grey hair now, and the same wrinkles he'd always had around the eyes, but they'd gotten deeper and more complex, as had the web of red on his growing nose. . . . My mother's hair was still dark and young looking, but bottle dark. She had a heavy layer of lipstick smeared across her mouth, and this more than anything else showed me how much she'd aged—it was too bright for her, too much of an obvious effort to add youthful fullness to a mouth that was getting old and thin. I didn't want to feel sorry for them, getting older, or have to worry about them. They were in their middle fifties, still a healthy step away from codgerhood and retirement, but it bothered me to think of them old and miserable and cut off. I suppose they still had a more active social life than I did, but there was no doubt in looking at them that they had peaked and were moving away from it. I felt a twinge of guilt for our failed relationship, not responsibility but guilt nonetheless, and I carried their bags upstairs to show them to my room and the bathroom.

"What a gorgeous house," my mother commented as we climbed the stairs.

"Which of those girls owns the place again?" my father asked me.

"Elaine," I said, cringing, knowing that everyone downstairs could hear if they tried.

"That's the little dark haired one," my mother whispered over her shoulder to my father.

"Right," he said.

"This is my room where you'll be staying," I said.

"What a lovely room," my mother said. "I was afraid you were still living in that same kind of squalid place you had in college. But this is gorgeous! All those windows. Isn't it gorgeous, Mitch?"

"Mm-hm," my father said, putting my mother's little blue overnight case on the foot of the bed. "A double bed."

"We'll make do," my mother said brightly. She seemed to be infused with a girl scout spirit. They had a king-sized bed at home, and a double is a far cry from that.

"I could pull a futon up here or something if it's too small," I said.

"I wouldn't want to cause any trouble," my mother said, walking around the room, glancing at the sparse furnishings and peering in my closet. "Big closet," she said, almost greedily. "You don't find that in many of these older houses." Then she inspected my desk, a little pine student-type desk. I'd left the stack of *Alternative Times* on it. I really didn't want them reading my reviews or articles, so I ushered them out of my room and into the bathroom. While my mother was inspecting the bathroom, I popped back into my room and stashed the stack of newspapers on the top shelf of my closet and threw a blue sweater over them for camouflage.

"Are you all hungry, or thirsty?" I asked, coming back to the bathroom door.

"I just love the tile in here," she said.

"Got any bourbon?" my father asked, "and maybe some ginger ale?"

"Yes we do," I said, a little troubled to remember that that was my father's drink of choice.

"Bingo," he said.

"Just a splash for me," my mother said. "I'm so exhausted that any more than that will knock me out."

"And anything to eat?" I asked. They both declined, and I bounded down the stairs to get them drinks and leave them to get settled into my room.

"They don't seem so evil," Diane said, as I poured drinks in the kitchen.

"She's unpacking her pentagrams as we speak," I said. Doug snorted.

"They drink nasty bourbon and gingers too?" Elaine asked.

"The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree," Diane said.

"That is not the *least* bit funny," I said.

"I don't think it was meant to be," Doug said.

I rolled my eyes to myself and headed upstairs, balancing our three drinks in my hands.

"Perfect," my father said, grabbing his drink and downing the top third of it.

My mother sipped hers, carefully, and then stared at it. "Is there any liquor in here at all?" she said.

"You wanted it weak," I told her.

"She always says that," my father said, laughing. He took my mother's drink from her, gulped some, and then poured the drinks back and forth from his glass to hers until they both had half-full glasses of suitably potent ginger ale.

"Much better," she said, wiping a bit of the drink from her bottom lip. "Now, don't let us be in your way. You just go on about whatever it is you were doing."

"I was waiting for you all," I said.

"How sweet of you," she said. We all stared at each other for a moment, without anything to say. It was an awkward silence, but at the same time a nice one—it felt like it was okay for us not to talk, that we didn't have to. Maybe it was one of the more comfortable moments I'd spent with my parents in the last five years.

"I need to unpack and get myself cleaned up," my mother said. "I look a wreck."

"Well I for one want to get back downstairs with your friends," my father said. "Four young girls in one house might give me a run for my money." I was beginning to feel strange—this was the first time I'd ever been with my parents on my own terms, in my house, framed around my life instead of theirs. I didn't know what to make of it.

"You be good, Mitch," she said. I had this vision of them, sloshed with all of their friends at the beach and shamelessly flirting with other spouses or maybe the grown children.

"You know what they say," he said, winking at me. "Good guys finish last."

"Bad ones sleep on the couch," she said to him, clicking open her overnight case.

They were beginning to gross me out, so I said, "Well, I'll head on downstairs and you two do what you need to do. Make yourselves at home."

What I was going to do with them for the next three days was beyond me. I needed to find something to entertain them so we weren't just sitting around the house for the weekend.

* * * * *

I looked around the table silently at the five of them with their heads bowed, my father's voice droning about thankfulness at my mother's insistence. I was the only one not staring silently at my empty plate.

"Amen," my father said, from his seat around the side of the table. I was sitting

at the end, opposite from Claudia at the other end, sitting in the seat that felt like it by all rights should have belonged to my father. I had passed on carving the turkey, but Elaine insisted, quietly and privately to me, that I take that seat, for my own good.

"Amen," the rest of them said, my mother loudly and clearly, the rest of them enunciating more of a grunt than a so be it. I was silent.

"Mitch is probably going to be on our church development committee come January," my mother announced to everyone.

"Congratulations," Elaine said, picking up a large silver-plated spoon and dishing a few olives onto her plate before passing the tray.

I thought, our church? And what the hell church would that be? The idea that my parents were all of the sudden, out of the blue, not just going but heavily involved in church made me angry. "When did the two of you start going to church?" I asked my father, evenly.

He looked up at me blankly. "Years ago. How long's it been, Sonny?"

"Two or three," she said.

First of all, it meant they were getting old and would soon be tossing my feeble inheritance into the laps of televangelists. Second, the two of them in church, just sitting and listening, was about the most hypocritical thing I could think of—my parents, of all people, the one's who'd always said that too much religion was just as bad as none at all. And for them, going to church had always been too much. Third, it made me angry that there hadn't been a little more of that going around when I was growing up. Give thanks that they live very far away from here, I thought silently, pulling a roll from the basket my mother handed me and then handing it to Elaine beside me. My mother had insisted on boy-girl seating.

There were the usual jokes and comments around the table, as we passed around

plates covered with sliced turkey and dishes piled high with stuffing or sweet potatoes.

"That's enough to feed an army."

"I'm still full from lunch."

"I bet the turkey isn't too thankful."

"Remember to leave room for dessert."

There is nothing new under the sun, and few things make that more apparent than the goofy rituals of my family when exposed to public scrutiny. Except maybe the idea of the two of them crawling, hung over, into a wooden pew. I was trying to remember that my parents were not a reflection of or on me. I don't know why they made me so nervous—Elaine probably knew what I felt like, and I really didn't care what Claudia and Doug thought of me or my parents.

"We forgot the wine," Claudia said, pushing her chair back.

"Cider, anyone?" Elaine asked. She looked at my father. "We make it here and it's got a little kick to it."

"Then bring it on," he said. Elaine disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a plastic jug of golden brown cider. "Excuse the hideous container," Elaine said, unscrewing the cap and pouring my father a glass.

"You can't judge a book by its cover," he told her.

"I could go for the wine, Claudia," I said. She and I drank dry white wine while the other four drank the fizzy cider. I wondered if she was as sick of apple products as I was. Elaine put the jug on the table, stepped back and looked at it, and then disappeared into the kitchen with it. She came back a few seconds later with a plastic pitcher, filled with cider.

"Much nicer," she said, returning to her seat beside me.

"Hey! This is good stuff," my father said, sniffing and looking at the translucent

liquid.

"Wait, Mitch. Someone make a toast," my mother said.

"A Happy Thanksgiving to all," he said, raising his glass.

"And," Doug interrupted, "here's to a first successful season at Elysium Orchards."

"I'll drink to that," Elaine said. We all raised and clinked our glasses together and then drank. A very easy-going, relaxed sense of well-being and comfort with each other seemed to spread around the table. Church or not, I thought, maybe it was a good idea that they came.

"Mm. It is good. This is just so nice," my mother said. "I can't remember the last time I ate Thanksgiving dinner without having to lift a finger!"

"I don't think I ever realized how much work it was," Elaine said.

"You made this stuff?" my father asked, back on the cider.

"Our blood, sweat, and tears," Elaine said.

"With a little sugar and ethanol," I added.

"We pressed the cider," Doug said. "It turned of its own accord."

"I'd say it did the right thing," my father answered. "I'm ready for a second glass.

I *really* like this stuff."

"Good!" Elaine said. "I'm glad, because there's eight hundred gallons of it out in the barn, so have as much as you want."

"I don't mind if I do," he said, winking at her and pouring himself another glass.

"Everything is just lovely. You didn't tell us you were living with such good cooks, Luke."

"Shoot, Sonny. He didn't tell us he was living with anyone!"

"I'm sure I mentioned something," I said.

My mother shook her head. "I'm sure I'd remember if you had."

"I didn't want to alarm you, maybe have you worry that I was living on some apple kibbutz."

"A what?" my father shouted, his mouth full of sweet potato.

"Um, like a commune."

"More of a socialist work farm. It's a fascinating concept, actually," Doug interjected.

"Socialist? I thought it was Jewish," my mother said, a little suspiciously.

"It is," Doug said. I watched him for any reaction to her, and he was either unperturbed or not showing it.

"Anyway," I said. "I didn't omit mentioning it on purpose. I've just had a lot on my mind since the spring, I guess."

"With your newspaper job?" my mother asked.

"Right," I said.

"We read some of those old newspapers in your closet," she said.

"Oh. Great," I said.

"I thought they were good," my father said. "I liked them. I had a little trouble figuring out what the heck you were saying some times."

"A lot of the time," she added.

"Except that one about the little religious man. Now that was some good writing," he said. "I bet that little guy got all fired up when he read that article!"

"Those con artists are all over the place," my mother said, nodding. "We get them in Atlanta too."

I could feel both Elaine and Doug staring at me, waiting for me to say something. Claudia may have been staring too, but not as hard.

"You should do more of those," my father said. Well, I thought, someone liked

it after all. Way to go, Dad.

"Luke didn't really write that one," Elaine said.

My father and mother both looked at her. "What do you mean?" he said.

Elaine looked at me, prompting me to explain the story, yet again. I didn't want to. It was groveling. Plus my parents liked it. This was maybe a first.

"Why is your name on it if you didn't write it?" my mother asked me.

"It's a long story," I said, dismissively, but no one spoke, all of them waiting for me to continue. The only sound at the table was food being slowly chewed. "My editor changed my words around. A lot." I was going to leave it at that. I hated that they were going to go away with the idea that I couldn't write an article to save my life, that I needed someone to completely alter what I'd done in order to make it good.

"That's not a very long story," my mother said.

"I'd say he did a good job," my father added.

"Actually, Mitch, it was a pretty unfair hatchet job," Doug said. "Luke's paper ripped to shreds someone who didn't deserve it."

Claudia said, "We all went to hear Shriya speak—he's the man in the article. He had some really beautiful ideas to share."

"He sounds a little fruity," my father said.

Elaine turned to my parents. "That article makes him sound terrible. He had some great ideas about building community and extending your hand out to the people around you. He's a lot of the reason why we're all living out here together. He said a lot that I'd thought of before, sort of crystallized some important ideas. We all sort of think of ourselves as followers of Shriya."

"Not just sort of," Doug said.

"I beg your pardon?" my mother said. She put down her fork and looked like she

had a fish bone caught in her throat and then she glanced at me. I smiled and shrugged a little. There wasn't really any effective means of sending her the message, through body language, that I thought they were as strange as she did and that I kept myself out of it as much as possible.

"So you all are followers of this cult guy?" my father asked. He looked suspiciously at his cider, which cracked me up. That *is* how they got Patty Hearst.

"Yes, but not in that way," Elaine said. "He's not a cult leader. He's just got a lot of excellent ideas about how you should live your life. And also how you *can*. He talks about taking charge of the world around you and making sure that you do what you want to do."

"Cult leader is so pejorative," Doug said.

"I listen to him like I'd guess you all listen to your minister at church," Claudia said.

"I might listen to my minister," my mother said, "but that doesn't mean I'm going to move in with a house full of people devoted to him."

"It is a little extreme," my father added.

I was keeping my mouth shut and avoiding eye contact with both of my parents. I could talk to them later, explain. I don't think I've been on the same side of a political/religious conversation with them in my life, and I was enjoying the two of them. I give thanks for their close-mindedness, I thought to myself, and focused my attention on my gravy. People weren't eating as much as they should.

"I think you're pre-judging a little too much," Doug said. He looked over at me as if to say, I see where you get it from. "Shriva's message isn't to drop what you're doing and follow him. What he advocates is for people to take control of their physical and spiritual lives. It's more complicated than that, but that's the basic premise."

My mother put down her fork as though that had made her lose her appetite.

"Okay," my father said, "we don't know anything about this guy. So tell me, though—what have all of you done to change your lives as a result of this?" Good question, I thought, glancing at my father. He looked at me, and I looked down. I immediately wished I hadn't done it, implied guilt and collusion like that.

There was a silence around the table. "It's not that simple," Elaine said, looking at the ceiling and putting together something else to say. I was hoping she'd keep out of this—I wanted Doug to take control as spokesbuffoon and leave me with the illusion that Elaine was just along for the ride. "It's more like we. . . ."

"Let me ask you a question," Doug interrupted. "You two started going to church recently, right?" Once they'd both nodded, he continued. "How has that changed the way you act?"

"Well, let's see now," my father said. "I see your point, although I think the two are slightly different. I grew up with the ideas I'm getting in church. So it's more like a refresher course than something new." He was taking the question as an honest one, which it was, but the man I remembered as my father would have been more likely to dismiss it. "But, I'd have to say that it's changed the pace of my life more than anything. I like that time set aside once a week to remember the debt I owe to God for my life. That's too easy to lose sight of. So, the more I let that in, the more I'm able to hold onto it the rest of the week." My father, using the word God without *sake* or *damn* following it.

"And it's completely changed our weekends," my mother chimed in. "We set our tee time for later in the afternoon, or sometimes we don't play at all because of things going on at the church." That wasn't the most profound thing I'd ever heard, but I still didn't like the way Doug shifted in his seat, and I particularly disliked the way he glanced

knowingly at Claudia. That was my job.

He said, "Okay. So you've rearranged your schedule a little, and you spend more time thinking about, um, what you believe in. But has it changed the way you act?"

"If you mean not stepping on bugs and that kind of thing, I wasn't looking for something to change the way I act," my father answered. "But you still haven't answered *my* question." I thought he was being pretty sharp, and I don't think I'd ever heard him get in this kind of discussion without the threat of hostility creeping in. Maybe church *had* helped him. I was getting the impression that my mother went to church because she liked getting dressed up and she got to take home flowers.

"That was my answer, I guess," Doug said. "No, it hasn't changed my day-to-day actions. But it has impacted the way I think."

"It's certainly changed my actions," Elaine said. "Luke and I wouldn't be together now if it wasn't for Shriya." I felt my face flush hot immediately, and I nudged her with my knee under the table. She looked blankly at me. "What? Oh, it doesn't matter."

"Well!" my mother said. She made a dramatic show of putting her utensils on her plate and then clasping her hands in front of her on the table edge. "Was this some sort of secret you didn't want us to know about, Luke?"

"Let's talk about this later," I said.

"There's nothing to talk about," she said. "All you had to do was tell us. Nothing's new, you tell me, when I ask. Always nothing new. I've assumed for years, anyway, and now—"

"It's been recent," Elaine said. "Shriya helped us to see that we needed to be together." Then she, equally dramatically, reached over to me and put her hand on mine, which was clutching a fork. I was tempted to jab her with the fork, but I restrained myself and only pushed her hand away.

"This is quite upsetting," my mother said. "I might as well be a stranger!"

My father tried to soothe her. "Sonny. . . ."

"I'd really prefer not to have this discussion," I said, trying to again remove the offending hand on top of mine. Discussions of religion and public displays of affection were not things I wanted to participate in in front of my parents. "Doug, I believe you were telling us how enlightened you've become."

Doug looked evenly at me. My mother took a large gulp of her cider disguised as a demure sip, finishing it, and poured herself another glass. She wouldn't look at me. That last thing I wanted was to feel guilty about my life, but she could bring that feeling on in me like a pro. Elaine slowly removed her hand from the top of mine, and I couldn't look at her.

"That does remind me of a change I've tried to make," Doug said, still looking at me. "Or two."

"Please, tell us," my father said, trying to joke a little and release the little storm of tension that my mother had brewed over the table.

"I've been making an effort to avoid dishonesty in communication. I want communication to be honest and open, devoid of sarcasm and deception. I think that's the only way for people to get along."

"I don't think you need some oriental prophet to tell you that," my father said. "That's a good old Christian one." I wanted to lean over to my father and explain to him that the little guru was probably from Idaho or something, but I was more interested in keeping myself out of the discussion.

"Does he say anything about communicating with your family?" my mother said.

"But I practice it," Doug said to my father, ignoring her, "as opposed to your average Christian."

My father smiled at him. "You've spent too much time in front of the television getting fired up at the 700 Club. Don't you think it might be a little general to say that Christians lie a lot?"

Doug considered that. "Maybe. But I meant more along the lines of honesty in terms of means of communication. Not hiding your feelings with cynicism or protecting yourself with humor."

I swear he might as well have been saying it directly to me. He was beginning to really piss me off.

"Religious leaders have always taught in parables," my father said. "That's pretty dishonest, by your calculations."

"What he means," Claudia interjected, "is that the only way to communicate clearly is to be completely honest, in all ways. To say what you mean and to always be genuine and earnest."

"For example," Doug said. "Claudia—thank you but I can speak for myself."

Everyone at the table laughed, except my mother and me. She was stabbing creamy peas on her plate and swilling Elysium cider between bites. She was getting ready for another glass. Doug was really irritating me. I can't stand when people break their own rules, so I said, "Excuse me, but I believe that 'thank you' was disingenuous. I don't get a sense that you actually appreciated Claudia interrupting. That was either a facetious example—an excuse to chide Claudia, or it was a loaded and therefore dishonest way to praise her for more precisely saying what you meant. Right?"

"God, Luke, he was just making conversation," Elaine said to me.

"Look, I get that all the time," I answered, still not looking at her. I was trying not to be mad at Elaine for blurting out loud about us, but at the same time, I just *was* mad and I couldn't help it. The whole meal was going very strangely. Okay,

nightmarishly.

"No, Elaine, Luke's right," Doug said. "That's exactly the kind of thing I'm trying to avoid. I appreciate you pointing that out for me, Luke. Every little bit helps." He was serious. I forced myself not to roll my eyes. It would have been easier to loathe Doug if he hadn't always been so earnest. But then that made me agree with part of the crap he was saying—honesty creates a bond—so it was easier just to dislike him and not think about it.

"Criminy," my father said, loudly but good-naturedly. "I think you all are just a little looped." I'd have to agree with him, but I didn't like who he was including in the loop.

"To each his own," Doug said.

"Don't be mad at me," I whispered to Elaine out of the corner of my mouth, hoping that no one could see or hear.

"You're impossible," she said. "I am mad."

"So am I. You're no peach," I told her, under my breath.

"What?" my father asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I was just trying to communicate clearly."

"Well, I could go for some more of this cider," my father said, looking at the empty pitcher. He winked at Elaine. "I believe you said something about eight hundred gallons?"

The meal continued, at a different pace, my father and Doug and Claudia doing most of the talking while the other three of us listened. I switched my focus from the food to the wine in front of me, and I was starting to feel guilty about Elaine. She shouldn't have to keep my secrets, I thought. My father slowly brought my mother back into the conversation. I was fascinated with the two of them. I was wondering if they

had some new relationship or whether I was just more aware of the subtleties of it, the way they worked together. Maybe they were just getting along well because they were on vacation, or putting a show on for me. But I didn't think so. There was an easiness between the two of them that I envied. I think I'd always seen that ease as lack of caring or, to use an overused word, communication. But it wasn't that—their interactions were just on a different level, smoothly subterranean, like sonar instead of yelling. There were just too many people living in the same house for me to do that with Elaine.

Chapter 23

It was easy to avoid Elaine Thanksgiving evening, to distract myself with my parents and disappear to separate corners of the house. Everyone was pretty loaded after the dinner, even with all that food and all those dishes. All that wine and cider. Diane and Geoff returned late from dinner with her parents, and Geoff and my father talked about golf while I apologized to my mother for not telling her about me and Elaine. My mother was messing with her fingernails. Elaine was somewhere else.

"I'm just hurt that you didn't *want* to tell me," she said, a little sloshed and overly dramatic, gesturing with arms clasped to her chest.

"I know," I said, equally sloshed but trying to keep the discussion low key.

She sighed and pushed an orange stick against her cuticles. I'd forgotten how she constantly fiddled with her hands. "I don't expect you to tell me every little detail of your life. But I don't want to be excluded."

Between fermented drinks and too much food, everyone began making moves toward going to bed around ten that night, and I was faced with the prospects of talking to Elaine or sleeping downstairs on the futon. I knew my parents would think I was sleeping on the futon out of deference to them, so I wanted to be in Elaine's room, like usual. But I didn't particularly want to be with Elaine. I didn't like the way she manipulated me all the time, in subtle ways that I usually didn't notice. I wanted to tell her what I thought, but I didn't want to have to get into some long, boring discussion about it, so the only way to manage would be to keep silent. I decided to go up to her

room, like nothing was the matter, and see what happened.

I was already in bed reading when she came in from brushing her teeth. We made eye contact when she walked in, but neither of us spoke. Out of the corner of my eye, with her back to me, I watched her unbutton her blouse and toss it on her dresser and then unhook the top of her skirt and unzip it, the skirt dropping to the floor around her feet. She stepped out of it with one foot, then hooked the other foot in the circle of blue fabric and flung the skirt onto the floor near her hamper. A long line defined by shadow and muscle ran down the side of her leg as it bent, and I couldn't help thinking how much I wanted to run my hand along that line. Then off came the bra, still with her back to me. But I just kept reading. She slipped into a long yellow t-shirt that came to her knees and flipped her hair out of the collar. She came to bed. From the way she was moving, stiff and guarded, I guessed that we might not even talk that night.

I kept my nose in my book as she slid between the sheets on her side of the bed. She never pulled the covers back—she climbed on top of them. Then, perched on her pillow, she'd slowly extend her legs under the top sheet, and then push back on the headboard until she was lying down. Usually, I thought it was kind of sweet, but that night it reminded me of a four year old stirring a bowl of ice cream into sugar-milk soup. Elaine picked up a magazine from her bedside table and started flipping though it, the magazine propped on her stomach and her head propped against the wall. She was making a show of not reading, turning pages too fast to catch anything other than pictures, then going back to the cover and starting over. This, for clarity's sake, was pouting, as if I wouldn't know.

It was obvious to me that I was supposed to start, and it angered me how apparent this was, that she'd made that decision and expected me to abide by it. I thought, I'll be damned if I'm going to start talking, maybe even apologizing, just because she's acting

this way. So I lay there reading, occasionally flipping pages I hadn't fully read (and hadn't understood any of what I had read, my mind being elsewhere). It was worse than childish, of both of us, but I was locked into it. Maybe it was having my parents in the house that made me act that way. But then she had no similar excuse, and that confirmed my disgust even more. I wished I could bring myself to say something, but between my stubbornness and my inability to think of anything to say, I remained silent. I closed my book and flicked off the lamp by my side of the bed. It was my lamp, an old mod-looking desk lamp I'd brought in when I'd started sleeping in her room. For some reason, I wished there was more of my stuff in the room. It was agonizingly obvious to me that it was her room, with her things. I was not an organic part of the room, especially when I turned my back to her and closed my eyes without a word.

* * * * *

Cold, finger-stiffening rain poured down Friday and Saturday. We'd had some chilly weather already, but this was our first taste of winter misery that November. The river overflowed its banks at the west end of the island, reddish brown sludge creeping up into the grass just inside the borders of the garden, now lying browned and ruined. The stiff furrowed mud of the garden, just short of being frozen, occasionally filled with a thin streak of water that vanished into the soil, leaving it darker. The river water was filled with dead leaves carried from upstream, and the banks of the river were studded with clumps of soggy brown leaves that held fast to rocks and sticks protruding from the surface of the water. The river had gotten ugly, I thought, and it would only get more so as the winter progressed.

My plans for entertaining my parents for the weekend with outdoor strolls through the orchard were shot down, and we'd spent Friday just lazing around the house, doing absolutely nothing except making me feel like a terrible host. I couldn't take the weather

on as my own fault, but still. I couldn't find the first thing in the events section of the paper to take them to.

Elaine and I still weren't talking to each other, the two days after Thanksgiving, except for perfunctory comments, like "excuse me," as we passed each other in some narrow doorway of the house. I slept in her room, but we didn't talk to each other. My parents seemed perfectly happy sitting in front of the television watching the glut of Thanksgiving-oriented television. I knew that the other residents of the house were disapproving of how much time the television was on those two days, but I didn't care. In fact, that made me want it on all the more. We drank a lot and passed around bowls of pretzels and peanuts.

Occasionally, we looked out of the kitchen windows at the hordes of deer which had taken to milling around the island, helping themselves to the mound of pressed apple chunks behind the barn. We counted almost twenty deer, although I'm sure many of them were repeats. I guess they were coming over across the log foot bridge on the north side of the island. Any time someone in the house closed a door, we could see a couple of thin, tan deer leaping zig-zag behind the outbuildings and disappearing across the river into the dense trees. We kept Baggy inside most of the weekend; she either accumulated mud or chased the deer away. Elaine didn't seem to particularly care that the deer were eating what she was planning to sell as fertilizer or mulch (she wasn't sure yet which the apple would be better for). I could only guess that she was more interested in the cider now than anything else and that, like usual, she had excluded all other responsibilities and options while planning ways to sell the cider.

My parents left early Sunday morning to head back to Atlanta; for the first time in eight years I wasn't ecstatic to see them go. I wished they lived a little closer. I didn't want to see them all the time, but I wanted to have that option open. I hadn't

completely changed my attitude toward my parents, but I had a sense that I didn't know them very well and that, perhaps, after all those years of discomfort, I might finally be ready to get to know them a little better. My father had made some deal with Elaine, and as they drove off, there were ten gallons of potent cider in their trunk, which he paid for, I think at some discount. He'd always had an ear for get-rich-quick schemes, and he was planning to pawn the cider off on his friends and see if he couldn't maybe set up some sort of distributorship for moving Elaine's cider. I don't think she told him that it was illegal, but I'm sure he knew. The greatest relief when they left was getting my bedroom back to myself, not having to sleep in tension-filled close quarters with Elaine.

With all the mud and mess from the weekend of rain, there wasn't much that Elaine and the Farm-hands could do around the Farm. They'd pressed all the apples that Elaine wanted pressed. It was too cold and wet to work outside pruning the trees. The rush of activity that had preceded Thanksgiving slowed to almost nothing, and they were spending hours around the Farm during the days trying to busy themselves. I don't know what they did all day—I was working, and Elaine and I had simply stopped communicating and sleeping with each other. All I heard were the tidbits I picked up in listening to everyone else's conversations.

As the situation with Elaine stretched from three days into a week, I began to realize that if I didn't do something about it, we might just end up slowly dissolving the relationship through attrition more than through any big split-up. And I didn't want that, not in the least. Once my parents were gone, it was a lot easier not to be mad at her for being so manipulative and blabbing the details of my life to them. But at the same time, it was a lot harder to start talking to her after not doing so for so many days. I'd spent a good portion of the week away from the Farm as much as possible, finding things to do in town before heading home every night. I hung around the Alternative Times offices

and bugged Ricky and Judy or I went to the movies—anything to keep from going home and facing the awkward silence of the house. It wasn't that I was being shunned by the rest of the house, it's just that I was hibernating in my room to avoid Elaine. I sat up there wishing that she'd come to me first, but when a week had passed and she didn't, I decided that it was time to do it myself. Hell, I'd already crawled to her once after the article about Shriya had come out. Who needs pride? I wasn't ready for another dry spell.

Chapter 24

I came home from work Thursday night prepared to ask Elaine out to dinner. We spent so little time away from that house that I thought a bit of privacy in some mid-range restaurant would be helpful. There was a violet envelope on the hall table for me, a card from my mother thanking me for her the lovely visit she had and inviting me and Elaine down to Atlanta for Christmas. My father signed his name in a different pen. That meant something, although what I wasn't sure. Usually, she just signed his name for him.

Diane was in the sitting room, reading under a single bright light that radiated in the loose strands of her brown hair. I didn't see anyone else around, so I asked her where Elaine was.

"She and Doug took a load of cider into town," she told me, putting her book down, a thin white book about being pregnant. "I don't know where Paige and Claudia are. Geoff's working late tonight."

"A load of cider? She found someone to buy it?"

"I don't know exactly," Diane said. "People at Uncle Buddy's like the stuff, but I stopped taking it in when I realized how illegal it is. They could lose their liquor license, and Elaine and I could get seriously busted for doling out bootleg cider. I told her she should apply for a license to make the stuff. That's expensive though."

"She's got plenty of money left," I said.

"I think she's irritated that it's just another snag in her plans. She also doesn't

like the idea of being over-regulated and wasting all that time—months and months for the license paperwork."

"Yeah, well. I'd think that would be better than getting fined for what she's doing."

Diane raised her eyebrows. "She'd get more than a fine."

I thought about that for a minute. "Any idea when she'll be back?" I asked.

She smiled at me and then rearranged herself on the sofa, her left leg bent underneath her. "You're planning on actually talking to her?" I hadn't been sure the others knew that there was something going on between me and Elaine. I guess they couldn't not know. I shrugged, a little embarrassed, and she patted a spot on the futon next to her, more an invitation than the type of order Elaine would give me or I would give Baggy. I sat, and she folded the page she was reading and put the book on the coffee table. "I know she wants to talk to you about things that have been going on."

"She's talked to you about it?"

"Not really. Only a little bit. I just know her well."

"I thought I did too," I said. "I do want to talk to her. I don't like what's going on—or not going on—between the two of us. I want things back to normal, but at the same time. . . ." I wasn't sure I wanted to tell Diane everything, and I stared at my hands clasped in front of me, clenched. She didn't say anything. I find silent people a lot harder to manage than talkative ones, because I end up being the one to fill the conversational gaps. "Okay—Elaine does these things that really bother me. They're little things, but still, it just drives me up a wall. . . . She manipulates me. Well, it's not that really. . . . She does things behind my back. Not that she's being sneaky or underhanded, but I think she does things without asking me all the time. Not necessarily bad things, but things I think she should have asked me about. You know? I guess this

doesn't make any sense."

"Like what, specifically?" Diane leaned forward and pushed her hair behind one of her ears. She rested her forearms on her knees, and I noticed the swelling of her stomach for the first time. A tight, round bulge that was new. You couldn't tell when she was standing. It looked like a secret to me.

I tried to gather my thoughts, distracted. "Um . . . okay. Most recently—telling my parents about the two of us when she definitely knew that I didn't want her to. You should have heard my mother moaning and groaning about me never telling her anything. It put me in a terrible spot. I know Elaine wanted me to tell my parents—I wanted to tell them too, eventually. But that seemed like my job, not hers. I should be able to decide." I looked to Diane for a response, either agreement or rebuttal. She was just listening to me, intently. "That's just one example, the one that really made me mad. The most recent. But there're other little things. At the same time she did that, she also made me look stupid in front of my parents by telling them that I hadn't written that article in the *Alternative Times* about the little guru guy."

"Shriva," Diane said, patiently.

"Right. Now I know that I didn't write that," I said, gulping. Jeez, I thought. As long as we're being honest here. . . . Fat chance. "But she could have left my parents thinking I did. They liked the article. And I did write a lot of it, at least. Does this make sense?"

Diane murmured, "Sort of."

"Hmm. It's a lot of little things. And I feel stupid. They're things that have been going on for the past year. It's not like I've been saving them up to spring on her. They just bug me—exactly a year, actually. She hunted for and bought this house without a word to me. Now I know she doesn't have to tell me everything she does, especially

back then, but it seems like she could have said something. Then she moved out, and then. . . ." I thought about Geoff moving in with me and I considered for a moment confiding to Diane that Elaine and Geoff had slept together. She really should know, I thought. It isn't fair. But—that's not my place. I'm not Elaine, doing little machiavellian things behind people's backs. "Then she moved Geoff into my old place, without asking me. That's a perfect example—I didn't mind it at all. Geoff and I got along well. It worked out for everyone. But she should have asked me first. Like getting Baggy. I adore Baggy. I'm glad she got her. But still! She should have asked. Then there's other things, like she moved all these people in here without asking me—not you, though. I was there for that, for once. And I know it's her house. I'd still like to know these things. She bought me that satellite dish—very generous of her, and wonderful, but she could have consulted me." I took a breath. I hadn't talked that much in a week.

Diane made a thinking mouth and then said tentatively, "That dish was a gift though, right?"

"I know I sound petty. That's a bad example." I thought about getting mad about it when she'd bought it. And started feeling like maybe the whole thing was imagined or self-induced or psychosomatic. "How about the fact that we're even sleeping together? That was planned by Elaine the night before it ever happened."

"Luke, that was completely mutual. Beside, she was just talking to people."

"Then she told everyone the next day, without checking if it was okay with me to spread the news. It didn't matter or anything if you all knew, but it just seems like she could include me in things."

"She's always done that kind of thing though," Diane said. "Think about the midnight trips to the mountains she planned when we all worked at Uncle Buddy's. She

would just toss us all in her car with a cooler and off we'd go. That's part of what we liked about her at first. Right?"

Diane was confusing me. I thought she'd been listening to me, not defending Elaine. I suppose she could have been doing both.

"Yeah. I guess."

"So why do you think it bothers you now? When it didn't before?"

I turned my head as I heard a car rumbling across the gravel. It was loud, probably Elaine's truck. "You think I'm being controlling, don't you?" I asked her suddenly.

"I didn't say that," Diane said. "At all." She was silent for a moment, then raised her eyebrows, obviously asking the question—do you think you are? I thought she was about to say something, but she didn't. I looked out of the window over Diane's shoulder and saw the truck back into its space in front of the barn, its headlights glaring across the yard and into the window. I wondered if she could see me watching her.

"Okay, so you didn't say it. Do you think it?"

"That doesn't matter. This is about you and Elaine."

"Well, I don't feel like I'm being controlling, if that's what you mean," I said. "I think I'm maybe being overly worried about little things that don't matter, but I also think Elaine should change the way she goes about doing things."

"So you want to change her?" Diane said. "Has she ever tried to change you?"

That stopped me. I thought about it for a second, but no answer came to my mind. My first response was that yes, she had tried to do that. Then I couldn't think of any examples, so I thought maybe no, she hadn't. Then I wasn't sure all over again. I had the feeling once again that if I'd just been sleeping with people since I was seventeen, like everyone else on the planet, then I wouldn't be stuck on these little

problems now. I'd always envisioned myself more worried about performance.

"I don't know," I said. I thought about Shriya. That wasn't Elaine trying to change me as much as it was Elaine assuming things about me because I hadn't told her the truth. That's a convenient way of saying I lied to her. The front door opened, and I heard Doug's voice as they entered the house, then Elaine's voice overlapping his, talking quickly and excitedly. "I don't know about any of this," I said quietly. "I just need to talk to her, I guess."

"Sounds good to me," Diane said. "Honesty is the best policy."

I stared at Diane for a second. If that's the case, I thought, then you really should know that the father of your baby has slept with your best friend. I decided at that moment that if things didn't patch up with Elaine, I would pack my bags, get the hell out of the house, and tell Diane before I left. Or maybe not. Honesty in communication. Who were they kidding?

"Hello?" Elaine called from the front hall, walking into the kitchen. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet.

"We're in here!" I called. Then I stopped. That was the first time I'd spoken directly to Elaine in a week. Weird. I wondered if she'd avoid the room because I was in it.

"There's the opening line you were looking for," Diane said to me, quietly and with a little smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said, and Elaine walked into the sitting room, with Doug right behind her. Their cheeks were flushed from the chill of the cold air outside, and Elaine was wearing something I didn't expect. The lumberjane outfits which had become standard for her were replaced by heels, dark hose, and this little black sheath/cocktail dress that stopped a half-inch above decency. She even had on pearls, or fake ones, wore a

complete face of make-up that I'd only seen a handful of times, and her hair was back. She looked great, admittedly, but very un-Elaine. I sort of liked the dirty overalls-wearing Elaine. Doug was wearing a blue blazer and grey pants atop some black wing-tips. And a red tie, loose around the neck of a blue and white striped shirt, very Parents Weekend looking. His hair was also back. They obviously hadn't been to Southern States.

"Bongiorno!" Elaine called to the two of us. She had a huge grin across her face. Doug had that same look of intensity that he always wore, the pained concentration of an astrophysicist with a broomstick shoved up his ass. Or two. "Boy have we got some news!"

"We're in business," Doug said. "Finally."

"Tell us!" Diane said.

"Oh, I'm so psyched!" Elaine said, making fists.

"Totally," Doug said. He loosened his tie some more and then took it off.

"Don't keep me in suspense," Diane said. "Where were you guys taking cider to?"

I was trying not to say much. I didn't want to dampen Elaine's mood by bringing myself into the conversation. But I had to know why they were dressed the way they were. They looked like they were on their way to a fraternity/sorority mixer.

"Here's your tie," Doug said to me, the limp silk piled in his open palm. I took it and noticed the point on the small end was crumpled. You can't ever get them straight again.

"I hope you don't mind," Elaine said, giving me a bashful grin, which I interpreted as a look-I-did-it-again-aren't-I-cute grin. "I told him you wouldn't. Or the shoes, either."

I looked down at the shiny black wing-tips. Mine. Smudged and dirty at the

heels, as though he'd been sitting cross-legged on a dirt road. "No problem," I said. "My shoe polish is in my closet. Help yourself."

Doug looked down at the scuffed leather on his feet, rotating his ankle to inspect them. "Oh," he said.

"Anyway," Diane said. "What's the news?"

"Right," Elaine said. "Okay—guess who wants thirty-five gallons of Queen Elaine's home-brew? As a trial run? A starter kit!"

Diane and I rolled our eyes in sync. "Pat Robertson," Diane said.

"Close," Elaine said. She laughed. "More nazi though, and less self-righteous. Maybe."

Doug also laughed. Oh, right, Mr. Tie Thief and Shoe Scuffer, I thought, it's funny when she says it.

Diane looked at me, smiling. "God, what's more nazi than that?"

I wasn't playing, so I said nothing. Elaine's guessing games usually followed her doing something that affected me without my permission.

"Time's up," Elaine said. "Phi Upsilon Kappa is going to be having a rather large end-of-semester party next Wednesday, and we talked them into going with something a little different. Half beer and half cider. Isn't that great? Thirty-five gallons! And if they like it, they'll be coming back for more. And there are seventeen other fraternities at MSU who'll snap it up. It's so perfect!"

"You're selling to fraternities?" Diane said. "You hate fraternities."

"Not any more," Elaine said. "They are the solution to my financial woes. I love them with all my heart."

"No," I said. "You really hate them." Phi Upsilon Kappa, I thought. The PHUKs. The PUCKs. The PUKEs. The P-Us.

"So what?" Elaine answered, taking the band out of her hair, letting it fall to her shoulders. "I don't hate their money. And they have plenty of it which they're willing to blow on liquor that I'll sell them cheaper than beer. You figure one full half-keg is about fifty, sixty bucks."

"Only If it's nasty," Diane said. "It's a hell of a lot more for decent beer."

"Exactly. These boys only drink the worst," Elaine said. "So you figure a keg of PBR quality beer is fifteen and a half gallons, at about four percent alcohol. For fifty to sixty bucks. Five gallons of cider, at eleven percent is about the same amount of alcohol, but I'll only charge them forty bucks for it. What a deal! They even are going to pick it up themselves. We're all invited by the way, if you want to go."

Diane stared at Elaine for a moment. "You're crazy. It's illegal to sell it. I mean, going through me or Margitte who know the deal and will keep quiet about it is one thing. A fraternity?"

"They don't know it's not legal," Elaine said.

"Exactly," Diane told her. "That stuff is potent, and a lot more drinkable than warm keg beer. Especially for sorority girls who might hate beer. So once they get every girl on the guest list drunk, they'll start telling everyone about this sure-fire party drink that works better than grain but is legal. Soon everyone on campus will be talking about the stuff."

"And I'll be able to sell it to them," Elaine said.

"Yeah, and attract every ABC agent in the state while you're at it," Diane said, shaking her head. "This is serious."

"That won't happen," Elaine said.

"How?" Diane asked. "Are you going to tell them? I bet they could get their charter revoked or something for buying moonshine."

"I'll figure something out," Elaine told her. "Don't worry about it."

Doug interjected, "It's a big school. That kind of thing would never get back around to us."

"You're wrong about that. Let me tell you something—at Uncle Buddy's, about a year and a half ago, Happy Hour was doing terrible business. So we dropped Happy Hour prices on drafts from a dollar to fifty cents. We didn't advertise it at all, just put little table tents around the place. The second evening, we were *swamped* with people coming to buy cheap beer, every night. Word of mouth. Not three days after that, Billy what's-his-face, the ABC guy for Campus Row and most of downtown, Billy comes into Uncle Buddy's nosing around, making sure we're carding everyone. That's fast. You can be sure that it wasn't students calling him and saying they were concerned about the amount of Happy Hour sales at Uncle Buddy's. You don't know how fast word travels around a campus."

"That was a business," Doug said.

"Right," Elaine added.

"Elysium is a business," I said.

Elaine said, "Anyways, it's a done deal, and I just think you're being a worry-wart. What am I supposed to do? Let all the cider turn to vinegar? Sell pickles next fall? This is the best chance I've got to make some money this season."

Diane looked evenly at her and then shook her head and shrugged. "Look, it's not like I'm going to go upstairs and start making anonymous phone calls to the police. I just think you should know that you could get in trouble."

"You drive over the speed limit, don't you?" Doug said.

"Oh, spare me that one. God," Diane said. Sometimes she was just so cool. I was glad to see Doug getting on someone else's case and irritating them. "So anyway,

Elaine. You really either need to tell the fraternity that the whole thing isn't completely above board, or you need to not sell the stuff."

"Okay, whatever," Elaine said. "Thank you, Miss Pregnant Ann Landers."

Doug coughed and then sat on the edge of the futon and started taking off my shoes. Without untying them. He stepped on the heel of the left shoe with his right foot to get some leverage. More scuff marks.

"You think you'll be able to move the other seven hundred gallons?" I asked. It was my first direct question to Elaine in a week, the first thing that required a response from her, so I kept my eyes on Doug removing the other shoe.

"I don't see why not," she said. "As long as this goes smoothly." I wondered if she was looking at me.

"Maybe you'll hit a snag—like ending up in jail." Diane said.

"You don't need to be so negative," Doug said, stretching out his sock-clad feet. I heard his ankles pop.

Diane said, "I'm not trying to burst your bubble. I'm being practical. Anyone thought about dinner? I'm starving."

"I'll get you something," Elaine said quickly. "What do you want?"

"Forget it—I'll get us all something. When I'm too bloated to pull myself out of a chair, *then* you can fix me food." Diane picked herself up off the futon. Her little pregnant secret disappeared when she stood up, and I tilted my head to see if I could catch a glimpse of any hint of pregnancy at all. I guessed three or four months is pretty early. She'd be enormous soon enough, I thought.

"Where is everyone else?" Doug asked.

I shrugged.

"Geoff's still at work," Diane called over her shoulder. "I don't know about

Claudia and Paige."

"Paige is going to be thrilled that we're selling the cider, finally," Elaine said to Doug.

Besides the fact that Paige didn't get thrilled about anything, I couldn't imagine her being the slightest bit pleased about the orchard dealing directly with a group of guys who had a pretty bad track record when it came to coping with lesbians. But then again, I could never figure Paige out, so maybe she would.

"So why're you all duded up?" I asked. Doug looked like he might have tried to go undercover in the fraternity house, wearing those goofy college dress-up clothes, even with my snazzy tie and shoes. But not Elaine.

"Let's just say that I wowed them," Elaine said, laughing to herself. "I wowed myself, too. I hadn't worn this dress in ages and it's mighty tight."

"You're not fat," I said. "That's muscle."

"I know," Elaine said. "But still. I look like Helga the East German speed skating champ."

"You look wonderful," Doug said. "What do they say in the ad business, Luke—sex sells?"

"Something like that," I told him.

Diane called from the kitchen. "Anyone mind a big ole pot of spaghetti?"

We all called back that that was fine, and then the three of us looked around the room, not looking at each other. I wanted to figure out some way to get Elaine alone to talk to her before we all sat down to eat together and I lost the opportunity. How can I get us away from Doug, I wondered. Then I mentally smacked myself on the head and said, "Elaine, could I talk to you upstairs for a minute?"

She looked blankly at me and nodded, and I turned and headed out of the room

and up the stairs, listening to her following me. There was something very satisfying about hearing her steps behind me. Me here, she there, at my bequest. I guess that was a little psychotic. I walked into my room and then turned to watch her enter behind me.

"Door open or closed?" she said, brightly. I had a sinking suspicion that she might have absolutely no idea why I'd asked her in there. The thought depressed me.

"Closed," I said, a little harshly. "Please." She shut it and then looked at me, waiting. I stared at her for a moment, looking at her face. I forgot myself for a minute, studying the way a few strands of hair had pulled out of her ponytail, framing the sides of her face. Her winter-white arms looked strong, thick but not pudgy, dangling next to the black dress that snugged tightly from shoulder to thigh. The dress gave her cleavage which she didn't normally have, more a shadow than a crease. She raised her eyebrows, silently, which brought me back to the moment.

"I think we need to talk," I said. "We haven't done it in a week. Talked, I mean." I looked at my feet. I didn't want to joke through this.

"I know," Elaine said. "You're obviously still mad about something. I'm not sure what."

"You're not sure? Do you mean that—" I caught myself, restrained the torrent that was waiting to rush out. "Haven't you been mad about something?" I said, slowly enunciating each word.

"Yes," Elaine said. "I have been. I'm not any more."

"What were *you* mad about?" I asked, incredulously. I'd given her an opening to say that she was, but I didn't expect her to *be* mad. She had no right!

"I don't like the way you said that. Anyways, I was mad about the way you were around your parents. You were dismissive of me and you were dismissive of what I am trying to do with my life. Also, you were mad at me. That made me mad. You had no

right." She was very nonchalant and matter of fact, which just made my own temperature rise all the more. I prefer to be the calm one, but two calm people just can't seem to argue together.

"I was mad because you blurted out to my mother about the two of us when I'd specifically told you that I wanted to tell her on my own terms! You can't just decide that kind of thing!"

"That's what you're mad about? Look, Luke—I didn't plan it, okay? I just blurted it out by mistake. I didn't realize it would make you give me the silent treatment for a whole week." She sat down on the edge of my bed and then rested back, propped by her arms.

"So you're not responsible for what you say?"

"I didn't say that, I just said that it wasn't premeditated."

"Like that matters."

"It does! It was a mistake. Okay—I'm sorry. I'm sorry I told your mother the truth about your life."

"You saw the way she reacted," I said. "She didn't like that one bit. That really hurt her feelings!"

"Not that that's ever been an enormous concern of yours." She flashed me a quick look of apology. "Look—I'm sorry I said that. Forget it."

That little switch in the discussion allowed me to suddenly be infused with the feeling of calm that I'd wanted. Much better. "It wasn't your place to say it, regardless of intention. If it was an isolated thing, I don't think it would have made me so mad, but it's the kind of thing that it feels like you do all the time. You make these choices for me—not bad ones, necessarily, but still. That should be up to me."

Elaine closed her eyes for a minute, like she was thinking and the sight of me

broke her concentration. "So this is no new argument," she said.

"No. I guess it isn't."

She opened her eyes, even rolled them a little toward the ceiling. I definitely was gaining the upper hand, which did nothing other than make me feel better. "Well, it is from my point of view," Elaine said. "I feel like I've got *some* right to make choices for you. We're sleeping together for God's sake!"

I took a deep breath, which brought me even more calm. Maybe I was miserable fighting with Elaine, but it was better than not talking to her at all. "I'm not talking about whether you make my eggs scrambled or over easy. I'm talking about some major choices. Like how I live my life. Like what I want to decide to tell people. You blurted to everyone the day after we slept together that we had done it." I stopped. That suddenly sounded very juvenile. "Made love." Ugh—that sounded even worse, very days-of-our-lives. "Now it was no big deal—I'll admit that. But you shouldn't have done it without checking with me first."

"Why do you care who knows about the two of us? Are you ashamed that we're together?"

I became almost patronizing, which I could see irritated her even more. "It's not that at all. Those are just examples, to prove my point. They happen to be similar. I don't care who knows about us, at all. But I don't think it's your job to tell my mother things that I want to tell her."

"I never said it was! I said it was a mistake! God!"

"You just said you have a right to make choices for me. I don't think you do. It's like the way Doug is constantly criticizing what I say or how I say—and not just me." I felt like I'd slipped, made a mistake by bringing Doug into this.

"I happen to agree with him," Elaine said, with what I'm certain was a triumphant

gleam in her eye.

"Whatever. Let's leave that aside. Look, I feel like we're just playing debate team here. My problem is that I don't like you doing things that affect me without checking with me first."

"Fair enough. My problem is that I never know what I can and can't do with you. You always react so violently to the littlest things. I never know what will set you off."

I stared at her.

"Okay," she corrected herself. "Not *violently*. Irrationally."

"You don't think I'm at all justified in getting mad about this?" I asked.

She sighed and took in a deep breath. I loved the way the light hit her collarbone when she breathed like that. "No, I do," Elaine said. "I think I totally do."

We stared at each other for a moment, and I felt the tension suddenly break, like a tooth through an apple skin. I don't know what it was. "So what are we arguing about, then?" I ventured, with a small smile.

Elaine didn't smile immediately. She scratched one arm with the other, absently, and looked up at me. I couldn't read her face for a minute. She looked like she might laugh, and she was biting the inside of her lip. Her voice wavered as she said, "I don't know. Something stupid." She was about to cry, I realized finally, and that made me feel terrible. I was being very foolish about all of this. I watched her flare her nostrils slightly and set her jaw, trying to stop from crying, but tears pooled in her eyes anyway.

"I'm sorry I get so mad so easily," I said. A first tear slipped over her brimming eyelid and ran down her cheek.

"No, no you should! I don't see how you put up with me. All week long I was afraid that this was it, I'd screwed it all up by doing something wrong." She stopped talking, crying hard now, and I sat down next to her on the bed and put my arm around

her shoulders. I couldn't believe I'd made her cry. I wanted to take back everything I'd said to her, feeling like a monster for doing this to her.

"It's not your fault," I said. Elaine melted into my shoulder a little, resting her arm against my side.

"It is. Everything you said is true. My big fat stupid mouth."

"Look, I shouldn't have gotten so mad about those dumb little things. I'm just not used to people stuff like. . . . I've never really been a part of a couple like this before. I'm not mad at you—I just need to get used to this. You know?"

Elaine nodded, wiping tears from her eyes. "I hate crying! I feel like a baby. You promise you're not mad at me?" She looked over at me. The end of her nose had gotten red, matching the blush on her cheeks.

"No."

"No you're mad, or no you're not mad?"

"I'm not made at you, Elaine." Not anymore.

"I'm glad. I want to be a couple again. This has been a miserable week."

"Yup," I said. I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I was overcome with relief, realizing that this wasn't the end of it all. I wasn't going to have to pack my bags and move out. Elaine and I belonged together, I knew then, and we could get past the little things. I inexplicably found myself blushing, felt the heat of embarrassment rising up my neck. I wanted to tell her something that I'd been keeping quiet for almost three months, the thing she'd asked me not to say. My stomach churned. I'd never said it before, to anyone other than my parents. And this was very different.

"Do you have any Kleenex?" she asked.

I looked around my bedroom, fairly certain that I didn't. I sprang off the bed and out of the room, returning immediately with a large wad of toilet paper in my hands.

"Will this do?" I asked.

"Thank you," Elaine said.

"You know what?" I said.

"What?"

I waited until she was finished sneezing and wiping her eyes. This wasn't the right moment to say it, but I didn't care. I had to. I gave her a squeeze with my arm, and she looked at me. I took a breath, ignoring my blushing, and said, "I love you."

Elaine's mouth dropped slightly open, and then she threw her arms around my neck. She sobbed happily. "I thought maybe I was kidding myself, making up all these scenarios in my head about the two of us." I was glad that I'd said it. The difference between her face when she'd been crying and now, flushed and happy looking, excited, the Elaine that I loved, made me want to keep her like that for as long as I could. "But I'm not! You feel the same way! Not to be repetitive or anything, but I love you too."

It was said, and it sealed our relationship more than that hot night back in August.

Chapter 25

The deer were all over the island, scattering in a dozen directions when we pulled up in our cars or slammed the doors of the house. Word of the mountain of apple peelings behind our barn must have spread through the entire central Virginia deer community, because the one or two deer we were used to seeing around the orchard had turned into something more like forty. Our front yard turned into a nature show. They were around so constantly that we stopped worrying about Baggy, figuring she'd either get sick of them or get kicked and learn her lesson. I even saw a pair of them trotting across the cement bridge, taking their sweet time. There seemed something overconfident about that. I told Elaine about it one night shortly after our mini-reunion, and I was surprised to find that she wanted to get rid of the deer.

"I don't really care if they eat the apples," she said. "I mean, I would like to sell it as mulch, but it'll be just as easy to get rid of it by having the deer eat it. I doubt I could make much off of mulch or fertilizer anyway. But I'm afraid they're going to start taking over."

"Like a coup?"

Elaine rolled her eyes at me, a little Dougism that I wasn't going to pick on so soon after our last fight. "Right. No—I mean they could be a problem, especially over the winter and the spring. What happens when they run out of apple mush? They'll start chewing on the bark of the trees during the winter. That'd kill the orchard. Then spring comes, they eat the blossoms and the leaves, and I have no apples. Plus, they'll ruin my

vegetable garden next year if they're still around. They'll just get used to being here, and then they'll stick around."

I mulled that over. I kind of liked the deer. They were pretty, especially from a distance when you saw them running through the orchard or grazing between two trees. And I liked looking out of the kitchen window and seeing them all the time. It made me feel like I was in the wilderness. The only thing I didn't like was the idea of one of our deer leaping out in front of my car at dusk on my way home from work. They didn't restrict themselves to the island, and you could total your car on a deer, I'd heard secondhand. I didn't want to find out firsthand.

"Seems like it'd be a shame to chase them away," I said,

"Chase nothing. We could add a ton of smoked venison to the pile of veggies in the basement. Then we'd really be living off the land."

So much for Shriya's call to vegetarianism as a mode of respect. "I just don't picture you running around the north woods with a rifle and deer piss smeared all over your clothes."

"I wouldn't," she said. "I'd sit quietly on the porch and take pot shots at them."

"You think you could actually kill a deer?" I wondered—Elaine could get pretty monomaniacal about things, but I couldn't see her killing deer. Maybe I could.

"I think I could. I mean, I hope that if we killed one, the rest would get the hint and take off."

"I don't think they're that smart," I said. "You could really shoot a deer?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe not. I could always get someone to do it for me."

"Count me out," I said.

"You wouldn't want to be Luke West, Big Game Hunter, for me?"

"Nope. And what if you shot Baggy?"

"That's getting a little ahead of ourselves," Elaine said.

"I think you should chase them away. Killing them seems so . . . I don't know. Brutal. I bet you'd feel guilty as hell if you actually killed one."

"We'll see," Elaine said. I took that as a yes.

* * * * *

A van followed me down the country road leading to the Farm, tailgating me obnoxiously close. The sun had slipped below the horizon, so I couldn't see anything other than the van's headlights and a vague silhouette of its shape. I slowed down as I got closer to the Farm, not wanting to hit a deer that might leap out at night, and I bet the van wasn't even a full car length behind me when I got to the entrance of Elysium. I felt my heart race when I pulled into the driveway and it turned right behind me, following me. Shit! I thought, this idiot is all pissed off at how slow I am driving. As soon as I was heading through the orchard, the van left a greater distance between us, and I was trying to figure out what I was going to do if some drunk asshole, probably with a van full of guns and ammo and empty Miller cans, wanted to give me a hard time. I watched the van nervously in my rear view mirror as I pulled over the bridge. Four or five deer dashed across the front yard and disappeared into the darkness. For a moment, I planned to run from my car to the house. Then I thought about circling the driveway and heading back out to the road. I ended up pulling my car onto the brown grass slowly, waiting to see what the van would do.

It pulled up beside me, and in the dim light coming from the barn I saw ΦΥΚ painted in big white letters on its side. Oh, I thought, it's just the PHUK boys. I let out the breath I'd been holding unaware. Who'd have thought I'd ever be relieved and happy to see a van full of fraternity guys? I climbed out of my car and watched four guys

unload from the van, looking around and talking loudly.

"You here picking up cider?" one of them asked me.

"No," I said. "I live here."

The guy climbed out of the driver's door didn't apologize for tailgating. "You all got a lot of deer running around," he said to me.

"We do. You might want to take it easy when you're driving out of here. They'll jump out in front of you and mess your van up."

The driver PHUK boy laughed. "That's what insurance is for."

Another one of them called to me, "Is Elaine around?"

I wanted to ask him how the hell he expected me to know when I'd just gotten there as well, but instead I told them I'd check. I didn't want to mess up Elaine's business by being rude to the customers, even if they deserved it. I was concerned about leaving them alone outside for some reason, but as I turned to go into the house, Doug came out.

"Rob, Dave," he said to two of them. I didn't know which.

"Doug!" one of the guys called to him, a high-five implied in his voice. "Man, you got some serious deer out here."

I left Doug out there with the PHUK boys and went inside the house. Elaine passed me in the hallway. Once again, she'd shed the lumberjane look in favor of something a little dressier that I guess would make the guys happy customers, jeans and a sweater with that same string of pearls over the top. And again, she was made up and her hair was brushed. I didn't care that she dressed up for them and not for me, but I thought about it all the same. I think I actually preferred her in her grubby clothes.

Heading for the sitting room, I passed Paige in the kitchen, looking out the window at the transaction going on between Elaine and Doug and the PHUK boys.

"Apple-picking makes strange bedfellows, doesn't it?" I called to her.

She turned to me and half-smiled. I expected her to say something, but she just nodded and left the kitchen, heading upstairs to her room. I think she might have been embarrassed that I saw her standing there, either excluded or self-excluded. I wasn't sure which.

I plopped myself down in front of the television to get some ideas for new reviews. I had a couple in the works that I didn't think were quite up to par—one about a wide range of feminine hygiene products that I thought had probably been laughed at too much already, and another reviewing fast food jingles. I scanned through the channels, thinking about what to write, and it occurred to me what a good story for Wanda Baxter this would be—illegal alcohol sales by community members to fraternities, county moonshine infiltrating the sacred halls of Monroe State University. Boy would that mess Elaine up. I could visit her on weekends at the county security complex.

Elaine and Doug returned inside about twenty minutes later. They sat down in the kitchen, talking, and I couldn't concentrate on the TV while eavesdropping, so I clicked it off and joined them.

"Look, Luke!" Elaine said, waving a thick wad of twenty dollar bills. "Two hundred and eighty bucks! That's more than I ever made in a day of apple picking."

"Congratulations," I said.

"If I'd made this much a day all fall, I'd be set!"

"Well, we still had to pick the apples in the first place," Doug said.

I added it up in my mind—that still wouldn't cover what she was paying Doug and Paige, even with rent taken out, even paying them under the table with no taxes taken out, even with that much money coming in for three months.

Doug said, "Don't forget that if we can still sell all the rest of the cider, it'll be

another five thousand."

"At least! Plus bees in the spring should double the crop. We need to go out and count inventory tomorrow."

"Plus the apples we left or that fell," Doug added.

"Plus the apples we left or that fell!"

"Plus the deer," Doug said.

If I was Baggy, I would've cocked my ears better to hear. "What?" I said.

"It was my idea! I made a deal with them that they could come out and shoot the deer. They're coming out after exams. Cider and deer—gone! Thank God, huh? Now I won't have to do it."

"Two birds with one stone," Doug said.

"Whoa—hold on a minute. You're letting a bunch of alcoholics in training come out here with guns? That's insane!"

Doug looked at me, "They'll be fine. They're nice guys."

"Really," Elaine added. "Nothing to worry about. Plus, they'll give us some of the meat. They'll all be going home for Christmas, and I doubt they'll be dragging deer carcasses along with them."

"Are you serious? You're not pulling my leg here?" They both gave me blank looks, and I knew the answers to my questions before I'd said them.

"No. It's a good solution to my problem," Elaine said. "I want the deer gone, so I am doing something about it."

I said, "Ah, inertia." I said it sarcastically, but she didn't pick up on it.

"Exactly," Doug said, "good."

That turned my stomach.

* * * * *

I tried talking to Geoff that night when he got home. It was weird, though. He'd become almost an absentee member of the house in the past few months, really ever since everyone else had moved in. I know he was working a lot of hours and trying to save up some money for the impending baby, but at the same time, he was salaried, and he wasn't getting paid any more for working more hours.

"Annual bonus," he said. "If the partners like my work, it can be more than half my salary."

"Are you serious?"

He nodded.

"That's amazing. I'm in the wrong business."

"Not if you want to have a life," he said.

He had a point. If I had to brown-nose people at work, trying to get ahead, I think I would have been utterly miserable. I think I'm a lazy perfectionist.

"Anyways," I said. "Diane's told you about this whole fraternity thing with the cider, right?"

"With the PHUK-heads?"

I hadn't heard that one before. I liked it.

"Right. Apparently, this is bad news. I was wondering if there was any way you could talk Elaine out of it."

"Because I'm a lawyer?"

"Right."

"I'm not. Not yet. And I'm probably not going to be one. I know I failed the bar."

I rolled my eyes. I knew he'd passed it. Geoff was just not the kind of person to fail anything. It would have ruined the foundations of how I believe our messed up

world worked if I actually believed that Geoff couldn't get what he wanted.

"I'm sure you did fine," I said. "Diane's got me worried about what Elaine's doing."

"It's not exactly contract law. I don't work with the kind of law you're talking about. Believe me, Diane knows more about it than me. Elaine doesn't listen to me anyway. She. . . ." He stopped, and looked at me, then looked at his feet, as though he was about to say something extremely vicious and critical. I wanted him to continue.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's a bad idea to talk about the people you're living with behind her back."

I thought I detected an unsettling whiff of Doug in what he'd said. "Can I go get her and then you'll tell me?"

"I think not."

"No, tell me. What were you going to say?"

Geoff narrowed his eyes, assessing whether to tell me or not. "Nah. Forget it."

I couldn't pursue it after that.

"Let me ask you a question," Geoff said. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Great. I hate those." I grabbed for a cigarette and fumbled to light it.

"Well, you really don't have to answer it. I'm just curious about what your plans are."

"My plans for what? Christmas?" Although I could pretty much put all my chips on the square saying no and not risk a dime.

"Well, that too, if you've got them figured out already. But I meant your plans for your life."

It was an honest question, but my first reaction was to tell him that no, I didn't want to answer it. At the same time, though, I was curious about what *his* plans were. "God, Geoff. I don't know. I don't really have any."

"No, come on. Seriously. Like Elaine's planning to run an orchard, I think. I'm planning to be a lawyer, although who knows. Diane and I are planning to be parents. What do you want to do? Long term."

I exhaled away from Geoff. "I just want to live my life. I don't have any plans."

My answer made Geoff look like he stepped on a particularly large bug that crunched loudly underfoot. "You're serious?"

"Yup."

"Let me rephrase the question." He twiddled his thumbs and then pressed them together, hands clasped. Very attorney-at-law, I thought.

"Go ahead, counselor."

"You don't plan to work at Kushman for the rest of your life, right?"

"Hell no."

"You like writing your reviews, right? Would you want to do that for a living?"

"I already am. But I'd eventually run out of ads to critique. Or I'd get bored with it." It occurred to me that Wanda Baxter wouldn't run out of things to write about. Hey, I thought, I could be a reporter when I grow up. That was actually the first viable occupation that I'd ever considered—besides crown prince—that didn't turn my stomach.

"Okay, so you wouldn't want to do either," Geoff said. "Is there honestly nothing that you're looking forward to?"

"That's not what you asked. There's plenty I'm looking forward to."

"Like?"

Christmas. New Year's. The Superbowl. "Just things. Okay, nothing. I have

nothing I'm looking forward to. It depresses me to get all worked up about things in advance. They never meet my expectations. Let me ask you though. Don't you think you plan more than most people?"

"Not more than," Geoff said, shrugging. "Probably more specifically than most people. And doing what most people do isn't exactly my criteria for living."

"What *are* your plans?"

"Pass the bar. If I don't this time around, then next time. Although I . . . never mind. So, pass the bar, have the baby, get married to Diane eventually, work at the firm for a few years, maybe become partner or go to another place or start my own practice."

We stared at each other for a moment. His confidence in himself and everything made me simultaneously jealous and disgusted. I said, "Okay—but Diane getting pregnant messed up your plans. Wasn't that completely disappointing?"

"You rearrange your plans for things like that. I don't have this blueprint for my life that I have to adhere to. But I've got to have some sort of plan, or I go crazy."

"I'd go crazy feeling like I always was waiting for something, like I wasn't living my life. If you plan for everything, it makes what you're doing now feel like a trial run."

Geoff said, "That's more a matter of your frame of mind, I guess." He was quiet for a moment. "To be honest with you, I find the idea that you don't have any plans whatsoever disturbing. Okay—rephrase again. Let's say you're ninety-nine years old, lying in a nursing home with tubes all over the place."

I cut in. "I'm certain I'll be dead before I'm forty."

He ignored me. "What would you regret not having done? Will you have wanted to have had kids?"

"I doubt it. I don't really like children all that much. I mean, I'm sure I'll love *your* kid and all."

"Will you want to have been married?"

"Probably not."

"Really?" His eyes widened as though I'd told him that I'd killed someone in a dark past.

"Really. How could I? I can't see myself in ten years. How could I know if I'd want to be married to someone. Forever?"

"What about Elaine? Don't you have any plans about Elaine?"

"Assuming she doesn't end up in moonshiner's prison, you mean? I don't know. Elaine's great. I wouldn't change a thing about our relationship." Well, that wasn't true, but so what. "We don't have any plans, though. We'll just do whatever happens, I guess."

Geoff looked dumbfounded. "So there's absolutely nothing that you want to have done by the end of your life?"

That was actually an easier question to think about, as vague as it was. I always wanted to go to Egypt, for some reason, just to see even one pyramid. And DisneyWorld, as close as I'd grown up to it and still never gone, that was something. I wished for good health but was sure my liver and lungs would quit before I was ready. Most of all, I wanted to have fun. But you can't make your own fun, really. It just happens. I think you can pursue happiness, but fun is more elusive. I said, "Okay. At the end of my life, I want to have had fun. Which means not ending up with tubes in my nose at age ninety-nine."

"*Fun.*"

"Right."

Geoff said, "Well, *fun* is something, I guess. So how do you go about having *fun*? What steps do you take to have more *fun* in your life." He kept overenunciating *fun* as

though it were some foreign syllable he didn't understand.

"You can't." If he said *fun* again like that I was going to scream.

"Sure you can. Your job isn't *fun*, is it? So if you want more *fun*, shouldn't you quit and do something more *fun*?"

"Like what?" I asked, clenching my teeth.

"You tell me."

Bubbles the Clown. Julie, your Cruise Activities Director. No—jobs just aren't supposed to be fun. "No, I don't think I should quit my job. My job allows me to have more fun by paying me. It's work, not fun."

"I don't think the two are mutually exclusive," Geoff said. "Wouldn't you have more *fun* if you didn't have to work for a living?"

"Sure," I said. "But that's mighty unlikely. By the way, fun isn't a bad word."

Geoff cocked his eyebrow. "Sorry—think about it this way—you could work extra hard for the next twenty years at a better paying job and retire early and have more fun then."

"But then I'd be having less fun now."

Geoff crossed his arms in front of him, like an arbitrator given up on mediation.

"You really don't have any plans at all, do you?"

"Nope," I said.

Chapter 26

I was thinking about the call I got from my mother at work as I turned past the Elysium sign onto the gravel, driving slowly to avoid deer. She invited Elaine and me down for Christmas, rather desperately though, because when I hemmed and hawed, she extended the invitation to everyone else who lived in the house. I told her I'd think about it, but I had no intention of road-tripping with the occupants of the Farm down to Smyrna. I thought back to last Christmas with Elaine—painting and singing and dodging evil hunters. I wanted it back. It troubled me to realize that last year, when I'd been doing it, all I'd wanted was to have Elaine. Now I had Elaine, and a house full of people beginning to chafe my nerves, and I wanted to leap back a year and savor what I'd had then. Then, it was just the two of us, with Baggy and plenty of liquor, and it was perfect.

It occurred to me what a shitty way that is to live your life—constantly looking ahead to things, past the present where you're enjoying yourself. That solidified my opinions about the discussion with Geoff. I had been tossing it around in the past few days, but I realized I was right. Plans aren't that bad in and of themselves, but they force you out of the present, and a moment's a terrible thing to waste. What a Dougish idea, I thought. That made looking ahead to Christmas, less than two weeks away, even more difficult. I didn't want to plan it. I just wanted the right thing to happen.

Pulled out of my thinking by reflexively slamming my brakes, I stared a moment at a bloody scene illuminated by my headlights. It took me so by surprise that I couldn't make sense of it for a moment. A pile of gore, red and black and tan and red and

impossible to distinguish in the glare of my hi-beams, lay on the grass beside Elaine's truck, coming up to the door handle. It looked like the special effects dumping site for *Halloween IV*, glistening wet, but horrifyingly real. The first thing that flashed through my mind was that it was the remains of Elaine, whacked down by an axe-murderer as she climbed out of her truck. Then I saw something moving in it, a mottled black and brown flag waving like a dirty feather duster somewhere to the side of the pile. It was a tail. I thought a wild pack of wolves had gotten her.

These goofy melodramatic thoughts came and went in milliseconds as I saw the rest of Baggy's body reveal itself from behind the pile. Baggy didn't even look up at me, even with my headlights on her, her tail wagging and her nose fixed to the gory mound. She was in heaven, judging from the speed and range of that tail. I still didn't quite know what I was looking at, but I rolled down my window and stuck my head out. "Baggy! Get away from that! Come!" She raised her head to look at me but immediately went back to her bloody treats, now tugging at something, trying to pull it loose. I repeated my directions in my low, commanding this-is-your-last-warning voice, and this time she stopped sniffing. She didn't come, but she sat, wagging her tail, torn between being yelled at and punished and leaving this windfall gore.

I pulled my car onto the grass, my headlights still shining on Baggy and the foul whatever-it-was. "COME!" I yelled, adding an extra bit of threat that implied a kick would follow if she didn't. I never kicked or hit her, but I got in her face a lot as though I was going to. It seemed to work. Baggy reluctantly came over to me and moped near my feet, her ears low and her tail no longer wagging. I told her to stay and that she was a good girl, and I went over to inspect her playground.

A few flies swarmed around the mess. I guess they'll come out of hiding in December for a treat. It was exactly what it had looked like. A big pile of bloody strips

of tissue and organs, clotting or shiny, brown and purple and stinking. They weren't tiny little organs, either, like you get from cleaning fish. This was like a ninth grade biology class of giants had been dissecting fetal pigs somewhere nearby. I couldn't identify any of it, and although I kept my distance from it, something told me it wasn't human. I don't know why—it's not like I'd ever spent enough time around piles of human organs to identify them. I even skipped frog day in my college bio lab.

"Luke," a voice called from the porch, and the screen door slammed. I turned to look at a female form, back lit by the porch lights so I couldn't see her face.

"What the hell is this?" I asked whoever it was.

"It's fucking gross." It was Paige. "The frat boys were out here cleaning their deer and left that crap. What assholes."

Oh. So I missed the shooting spree. I wondered how many they'd killed. I didn't exactly know the per capita mass of deer organs, but it looked like they'd killed a lot. "Will you call Baggy? She's been snacking."

Paige called Baggy, using that higher pitched woman's voice that dogs just don't listen to. I nudged her with my leg, urging her in Paige's direction, and I felt my pants slide against her fur. She'd gotten more than just her nose in the foul deer crud, and now it was on me. It made my stomach clutch involuntarily. I got back in my car and reparked it far away from the bloody pile.

There was a full house when I got inside, something we hadn't had much of lately. All seven of us were there at the same time—Paige and Elaine in the kitchen, Diane and Claudia and Geoff in the living room, and Doug in the bathroom, washing off Baggy. It pleased me to hear her collar tinkle furiously and then Doug shout at her. She must've shaken and soaked him. I didn't hate him or anything; he just got on my nerves.

Elaine shot me an enormous grin when I walked in the kitchen, a beaming, tooth-

showing smile that wiped eight hours of Kushman tedium from my mind. "I hope you're hungry," she said. "I was in boredom cooking mode today and made a ton of food."

"Give me a while for my stomach to settle after I change my pants," I said. "The mini deer Auschwitz outside robbed me of my appetite."

"Yeah, sorry about that." She didn't sound particularly sorry, though, which irked me. She bent down and looked through the oven window.

"We've been hiding inside all day from them, which explains the food," Paige said. She turned to Elaine. "I know they were drinking. I was afraid I'd get shot."

"They were just having fun," Elaine said. "It was no big deal. They even cleaned the deer and left us two."

"How many of them were there?" I asked.

"Dozens," Paige said.

"Nine," Elaine said to Paige. "You really should give them a break. They're nice guys, and they're buying the cider. They bought another ten gallons today. I gave them twelve." She said the last bit to me.

While Paige listened, looking disgusted with the whole episode, Elaine told me how they'd shown up in the early afternoon, bagged seven deer, gutted them, and left two for us. They left all the crap in the grass, but they were such good customers that Elaine didn't want to complain.

"Shouldn't they be having panty raids or something, instead of mauling deer?" I asked. I looked out the kitchen window, where the floodlights by the barn were shining in my eyes. Something else caught my eye. I squinted, trying to figure out what I was looking at, just on the periphery of the light.

"It's seven less deer on the property. I hope the rest got the hint. I haven't seen any deer foraging around this evening."

Two deer carcasses hung from the barn door, one of them swaying slightly in the wind. I couldn't see them well enough to tell if they were upside down or not, but just catching sight of them gave me the shivers and set my appetite back a few more minutes. They were smaller than I would have imagined.

"And thank God, too. Those deer were worrying me. Paige, are those ribs burning?"

Bambi's mother and aunt were dangling in our barn, like the warning of a medieval gibbet. *Woe to all ye deer who enter*, and Elaine was yakking about food. Gross. I looked away from the window.

"They want to come back out. I told 'em I'd give them a call if the deer were still hanging around."

Thinking about it, I realized I hadn't seen any deer on the drive through the Farm. Not whole ones, at least. Doug shouted, "Baggy!" from the bathroom, sounding exasperated. Paige opened the oven door a crack, and I got a nauseating whiff of barbecue and flesh, which sent me upstairs to change my pants. A brown smear crusted across the right leg of my putty-colored chinos. There was also a piece of something stringy and black that I didn't want to touch. In my boxers, I called out asking if anyone knew how to get out blood stains. Four female voices responded simultaneously, "Bleach!" Then they all laughed a little, and Diane called out that it never comes all the way out. I balled up my pants in the bathroom sink, poured in a little bleach, and left them. I don't know why that deer crud bothered me so much. I'm not particularly skittish about blood.

All seven of us sat down to a feast—ribs, baked apples, rolls, squash casserole, pasta salad—some of my favorite food, but I wanted no part of it. I was trying not to let Elaine or anyone else know how weirded out I was about the lynched deer outside.

Elaine was in such a good mood that I felt like a putz for being so queasy. I think Paige was feeling the same way—I saw her picking at her squash with the same disinterest I was feeling. It didn't seem to bother anyone else. They were all talking about what to do with the windfall venison and how to carve up the carcasses.

"I've never done it before, but I guess I could figure it out," Geoff said.

"Without mutilating it?" Claudia said. "Would you hand me the apples?"

"It can't be all that hard. You just have to know where to cut, I guess," Elaine said. And this was coming from the person who'd been reluctant to guillotine the moles that had been eating her potatoes.

Doug said, "I wouldn't think it would be *hard*, I'd just think you'd need to know what you're doing."

"They have places where you can take deer and they'll do it for you," Diane said.

"There are always signs on the road or little ads in the paper."

Not the Alternative Times.

"We could at least try it on one," Elaine said. "Then we can have someone do the other one if we butcher it too badly. More ribs in the oven if anyone wants them."

I'm not the kind of person that loses his appetite when people talk about tumors or stuff at the dinner table, but I was just getting more and more horrified by the discussion they were having. I hate it when people ask *me* not to talk about such-and-such while they're eating, so I couldn't really say anything to stop them. I could, however, change the conversation.

"So what's everyone doing for Christmas?" I blurted out, loudly, interrupting Geoff as he started talking about the parts that you wouldn't want to eat. He gaped at me for a second.

"Margitte and I are spending it at her place. She always does that German-candle

Christmas tree." Paige said it quickly, as though happy to be changing the subject. I felt a slight bonding possibility with her that I wasn't willing to acknowledge.

"I like that," Elaine said. "It's pretty, but it seems so dangerous. All that fire and dry pine needles together makes me nervous."

"I think that's part of the attraction," Paige said.

"My parents want me to come down," Claudia said. She was from Delaware, which is technically up. It always bugs me when people say that. "I told them I'd think about it, to shut them up, but I think I'm going to bag it."

"I hope so," Doug said. "The last thing I want is to spend a couple of days with them whispering about me while I'm out of the room."

"They don't hate you," Claudia said. "They just don't know what to make of you."

"Which, for your parents, translates into fear and hatred. Plus, I don't particularly believe in Christmas."

I didn't want to hear the thinking behind that. I could only imagine how it would grate against my nerves like a serrated knife on teeth.

"They don't fear or hate you, but you do make them nervous."

This was better than discussing deer meat, but I didn't want to listen to Claudia and Doug discussing what should have been talked about elsewhere. Meaning when I wasn't in the room.

"What about your parents, Doug?" I asked.

Everyone except for Doug whipped their heads around and looked at me. Apparently, I'd said something bad. I wondered why this was something I didn't know.

"Um, I don't talk to my parents," Doug said.

"Oh," I said nodding my head vigorously, trying to close the subject. The five

stares faded.

"Long story," he added.

"Ah," I said, still nodding and wanting to change the topic, but now curious.

"My parents want me to come down with Diane," Geoff said. "They keep saying how they don't know her very well but think they should get to know her better because of the baby."

Diane said, "And mine are saying the same about Geoff."

One of the unspoken options, except for Paige, seemed to be to stick around the Farm for Christmas and have a big jolly old non-traditional Christmas among friends. It occurred to me that everyone at the table was pretty seriously attached to someone else—and Paige was the only one who's other half wasn't there. So there we were, the parts and wholes of four couples, but none of us were running off and getting married or having private little relationships apart from the rest. Everything was sort of out in the open there at the Farm. I don't think that's very normal. I think most groups of people in couples like that would only be getting together for bridge or something, not because they lived together and spent every waking moment in shared space. And they definitely wouldn't be considering spending it together for dinner. I think that was maybe the first time it really sunk in that the whole living arrangement at the Farm was a little weird, to put it mildly.

"Well I'm definitely not going to Boston," Elaine said. "Every single time I talk to my mother, she talks about George. My father won't even come to the phone anymore. I feel sorry for them, but I can't get pulled into that business. George has turned into this family saint that everyone worships except for me." Elaine didn't talk about George all that much anymore, and I noticed how everyone at the table got a little silent when she started talking. "Thank God all my aunts and uncles are up there to make

sure my parents don't do anything crazy. I can't deal with being around them." She hadn't spent all that much time with them—last Thanksgiving and one other visit in the spring. I, of all people, didn't want to be critical of how Elaine dealt with her parents, but it seemed cold, to say the least. Conversation had pretty much died, no one willing to pick up immediately after Elaine. I took bite of my ribs and sucked the spicy paste from my fingers. My stomach didn't churn or revolt, so I was ready to eat something.

"I'll be hearing back about the bar any day now," Geoff said. "Two people from my class already got their results."

"And they both passed," Diane said. "Which means Geoff has been worrying about nothing."

"They weren't exactly dimwits," Geoff answered. "Just because they passed doesn't mean I did."

Everyone at the table groaned. False modesty, even neurotic modesty that keeps you from getting your hopes up, is unbecoming.

* * * * *

After doing the dinner dishes with Claudia, I disappeared to the sitting room to watch some good commercial TV. Christmas ads were in full season, and I wanted to do something about how painfully secular things got around Christmas. The word *santa* even got far enough removed from *saint* that people didn't have to acknowledge it's roots. K-Mart could be announcing a sale on angel ornaments and they'd still make it sound like it wasn't something religious. They called things like that "seasonal decorations"—not even holiday, which at least conjures up *holy*—as though it was wallpaper. Ricky had recently complained that I was doing more cultural analysis than review in the past two months, but I ignored him. I wasn't particularly concerned with my consistency.

"I noticed you didn't volunteer your Christmas plans at dinner," Elaine said,

climbing onto the futon beside me and being careful not to shake the hand that was taking notes.

"You're quite perceptive," I said, still writing. I finished what I was scribbling and then clicked off the TV and looked at Elaine. "I didn't want to really offer up what I wanted to do without talking to you first."

"My sensitive, thoughtful knight."

"That would make you Lady Elaine," I said. She didn't blink. "From Mr. Rogers."

"Ah—never watched it. It seemed more like a show for morons than children."

"That means you watched it too late," I said. "Fred is a very nice man."

"My father never changes his clothes to walk in the door."

"No one's does. It was still a good show. I bet you watched it some. Everyone did."

"Nope. By the time I came around, George was already way over Mr. Rogers, so we watched Sesame Street or cartoons."

"You missed out," I said.

"My children won't watch Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. I think it's disturbing." That stopped me for a moment. I couldn't imagine Elaine having children. She continued, "So what *are* your plans for Christmas?"

"Wait—you're planning on having children?"

Elaine looked at me blankly. "Yes. So?"

I spluttered. "Well, nothing . . . I just—I don't know . . . I always just assumed, um. . . ."

"You can relax. I'm still taking my pill faithfully."

"It's not that," I groaned.

"Then what is it?"

"Never mind."

"No, tell me."

"Elaine—I just, for some reason, never saw you as the kind to have children. Not like you *couldn't* or anything, just that you don't seem like you'd want them."

"Oh," she said. She settled back into the futon, away from me. "Well, I do." For some reason, I'd ticked her off a little bit, and I didn't know why.

"Ah," I said. I wondered if that meant she wanted to have my children. I guess I have some pretty decent genes. I'm reliable. I tried to picture myself with a baby though, and all I could see was one of those black and white postcards of brawny Soloflex men holding infants. I think they're supposed to be sort of visual oxymorons, which is why they came to mind. Father Luke. I just couldn't see me actually taking care of a child in any real way. I'd get bored.

"Diane has me kind of jealous."

Oh. That's it, I thought. "You think you could quit drinking for nine months?"

"No problem."

"Anyways, I'm just surprised to hear you say that. I think that's great. Now about Christmas—"

"Hold on—what about you and kids?"

"What *about* me and kids?"

"Do you want them, Luke?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it that much. Picture me stuck in an argument with my fourteen year old. It'd be a mess."

"You don't get junior high age kids dropped in your lap. You have years and years to get to that stage."

"I know, I know. It's not that I dislike children or anything. I just don't see myself as a father. I'd be afraid of it. I think I wouldn't be able to handle the responsibility well. My father was kind of non-existent when I was growing up, so I don't have a lot to measure up against."

"So you'd have to be better than him, almost no matter what you did, right?"

I grinned at her. "Well, only if you take the positive perspective. Let me think about it some more."

"You'd be a good dad. You'd fall in love with that child the minute it came out."

"I think I'd get bored with it."

"You wouldn't," Elaine said. "Now about Christmas. . . ."

"Yes. Christmas. My mom invited us both down. Actually, she invited everyone who lives here."

"That's bizarre."

"Well, she really wants me to come."

"So? What're you going to do?"

I looked away from her for a moment. What I wanted to do was have us make plans for Christmas together, like last year. But it suddenly felt very clingy and wienerish to need to include Elaine in my plans. I mean it had only been three months since That Night. It wasn't that much time. But then again, some people get engaged two weeks after meeting.

I said, "I was just sort of thinking that we, well, the two of us, could probably make plans together. You know?"

She smiled at me. "So can I interpret that to mean that you want to spend Christmas with me?"

"Something like that."

Someone opened a door somewhere in the house, and I simultaneously felt and smelled the cool, damp December air. It also smelled a little like iron, or liver.

"Well good, because I was hoping we could spend Christmas here like last year. I don't think I'm too hot about going down to your parents. I hate the way you get around them. You know."

"Believe me, I know. I hate the way I get around them too. So we'll do it here? Just the two of us?"

"Well. That depends on what everyone else is doing. Paige is the only one with definite plans. Have you noticed how she and Margitte have gotten really serious lately?"

I hadn't. I almost never talked to Paige. I shook my head. I realized that the iron smell was most likely deer blood.

"Well they have," Elaine said. "They don't ever fight any more, at least not that I've noticed. Paige isn't sullen—you *have* noticed that, right?"

"Yeah, kind of."

She looked doubtfully at me. I hadn't said it with a lot of gusto. "You know what I've been sort of thinking about? I think we should try and get everyone to stay here for Christmas. Like a big family, but without the tension and all the nasty history. Wouldn't that be cool? The seven of us?"

"Paige is going to Margitte's."

"We could have Margitte here. She could bring her candles. Oh, don't look like that. You know she's not all that bad."

"Sometimes she makes me physically ill," I said.

"That's the spirit of Christmas," Elaine said. "So you think it's a bad idea?"

"No, I didn't say that. I was just kind of hoping we could have Christmas like last year. Without the paint."

"But we already did that," Elaine said. "We'd just be trying to do the same thing over. Let's do something different."

"Like having everyone who already lives here spend Christmas together? The only difference would be stockings."

"It would be different, and you know it. It would be a different kind of Christmas. Everyone here is my closest friends. It'd be cool. We could all carol or something. Eight voices. We'll get Margitte to bring her stuff, I bet Claudia and Doug will stick around, and I know I can talk Diane and Geoff into staying. And we could make some big killer dinner. We can do Christmas on our own terms."

When she said it, I knew she'd be able to do it. Elaine would have made a good pharaoh—*So let it be spoken, so let it be done*. She had that look I'd seen plenty of times before, the look that told me she'd gone past reasoning and was moving deeply into planning things. Not like she got irrational or anything, but she just stopped listening to anything outside of her head. And she had the energy to go through with anything. It's hard to fault someone for things you usually find endearing.

Chapter 27

By Christmas eve, the halls were decked. There was plenty of red and green, stars, and tinsel, but no angels or creches or jolly Santas—unless they were the Christmas Carol kind, with wreathes of holly above their leering faces, the sort of Bacchus/evil clown version of Santa Claus. Paige made this string of fairly impressive snowflakes for the staircase, made out of milk jug plastic with blue lights behind them. Doug's self-imposed theme, or at least my interpretation of it, was to celebrate Christmas without the Christ. So what we were essentially celebrating was mas. Basically, he wanted to take all the baby-Jesusy stuff out of Christmas and distill it to its more ancient roots of some winter solstice celebration. Like druids or something. I deeply doubt he knew what that stuff was about, anyway.

I may have reacted a little obnoxiously, a stubborn child who wanted Christmas to just be the way it had always been without having to rethink it. I whistled "Away in a Manger" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" under my breath, particularly when Doug was in the room. Also, just to piss people off, on my bedroom door facing the hall I put up a reproduction print of a garish Gothic altar piece, the kind where Mary and friends have big gilt halos and look very two dimensional. Little scary baby Jesus made a peace sign with his fingers together at the viewer.

It's not like I particularly agreed with the whole star of Bethlehem deal or anything, I just didn't understand why Doug had to be so controlling about the whole thing. It seemed just as phony to celebrate this fake Stonehenge crap as it did to

celebrate the birth of a savior that none of us believed in. At least I knew what that was all about. And it wasn't fair to blame it on Doug, because it was just his idea—everyone else went along with it. I didn't like it, but I kept my mouth shut. It's just too manipulated, like rewriting fairy tales so they aren't misogynistic and violent. I sort of feel like—tough. If you don't like it, write a new one or don't read the old one. Don't mess up Bluebeard and Hansel and Gretel just to suit your fickle tastes. Those fairy tales, like Christmas, are a part of our deal and shouldn't be re-engineered. I wrote a review in the *Alternative Times*, from a secular point of view, condemning the secularization of Christmas. I usually tried not to get too political, but Ricky loved it. He called it my wacky left-wing pro-Christian yuletide piece.

This is the benevolent Christmas spirit I was clinging to as Christmas Eve arrived. Doug wanted us to forget gifts and I guess just hang around a decorated tree with nothing on the floor around it. He got outvoted on that one—Elaine was into her gifts. That was one of the few suggestions that I agreed with—I like giving people presents, but I hate the obligation to *have* to do it. People were hidden in their rooms wrapping presents. I'd already wrapped mine, and I was sitting in the living room drinking rum-diluted egg nog and watching Margitte put these metal doohickies on the tree. They looked like little egg cups with sturdy hooks attached, and each one had a skinny white candle put into it. I'd heard Elaine and Paige discuss Margitte's trees, and I was curious about it. Margitte was being very particular about the placement of each candle holder, making sure it looked right and was sturdy.

Margitte was more decked than our halls. She was wearing a thin, silky, red and green paisley robe that flowed behind her and opened to show the bright red tube dress with shiny black belt and boots she wore underneath. Her hair was piled in a complicated, swirly bunhive with red chopsticks poking out, and she had these ornate

earrings hanging to her shoulders that were Christmas trees with little tiny presents dangling underneath them. Mère Noël.

"Do you want any egg nog?" I asked her. I was hoping that by being overly pleasant to people I might actually change my attitude and not feel quite so grouchy.

"Ach, no. It covers my throat like bacon grease. You have vite vine?"

"We have everything," I told her and fetched a big ole glass of wine from a box in the refrigerator. We were trying to get rid of that box, because it spilled all over the shelf, but those things are enormous and take forever to finish.

"Here you go," I said, returning.

"Vat do you sink? Dey are all up. You see any bare patches?" She stood back and inspected her work, taking the glass from me.

"Looks good to me," I said.

"Me too," she said. "I vill light dem ven de odders come down. You have long matches?"

"Yup. Now you're sure the whole thing isn't just going to burst into flames and torch the house?"

"De tree, she iss wery vet and fresh. She wouldn't burn if you trew kerosene on her."

"Let's not try it," I said, smiling.

Margitte walked to the little caned chair beside the fireplace that Elaine had bought at some estate sale. It creaked when she sat.

"So, tell me vat's happening vit you zese days."

"Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary," I said. "Work is the same, the newspaper stuff is going well." I'd just had a piece by Wanda Baxter printed in the Alternative Times, a pretty long one, about this semi-retarded woman who had her kids

taken away from her and was put in jail for slugging her social worker. The social worker had called her cheap and trashy. I mean, come on. You can't just toss people in jail for getting angry and punching someone. My piece ragged on the race and class problems with Social Services. It was a good one. Wanda Baxter, Champion against Injustice. Of course, I couldn't tell Margitte about it.

"Surely you have somesing else exciting going on?"

Weird question, and she asked it very leadingly. "My Escort needs a new clutch," I told her. "It's started slipping."

"You and Elaine—you are happy, yes?"

"Everything's great," I said with finality, hoping I'd said it in a way that didn't beg further questions. "How's catering?"

"Vell, for New Year's, I am going to start—ach. No talking about vurk." Margitte paused for a moment and sipped her white wine. Then she leaned forward on the chair, and it creaked loudly, pained. I wondered if it was going to splinter into kindling under her weight. "So nutting out of ze ordinary is going on here?" She lowered her voice. It was not just a general question—she was fishing for something specific. That made me incredibly curious all of the sudden.

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me carefully, as though weighing each word before speaking so I'd know that she was saying something different than what came out. "Oh, nutting. Just a *question*."

But it wasn't just a question. The only thing I could guess was that Paige had told her something that she wanted to know more about. The first thing that came to mind was the fraternities, but I couldn't imagine anything that would make her so suddenly sinister. I guessed that she did have a tendency to be overly dramatic about things

anyway, but it still made me think. What had Paige told her? And why was she asking me instead of Paige or Elaine or Claudia, all of whom she was much tighter with than me?

"I can't think of anything in particular," I said, loudly. I lowered my voice to match her tone, feeling instantly silly. "Do you mean something specific?" I found myself wondering if maybe Doug wasn't planning something odd. I wouldn't put it past him. He was always planning something, and it was usually odd.

Margitte looked a little uncomfortable, as though she'd maybe said too much already. "No. Just making conversation." She paused as though about to say something else when Claudia walked into the room. I swear I saw Margitte start a little. She jerked the hand with the wine, sloshing a tiny dark spot onto her tube dress.

"Tree's done, huh?" Claudia asked.

"It's ready to light ven everyone is ready," Margitte said, and then she got up and started talking to Claudia about something I didn't pay attention to. I was still wondering what that bizarre little moment with Margitte had been all about. Was it about her or Paige? Either she sensed that something was going on, or Paige had told her something. Either way, I found myself completely at a loss as to what she'd been asking me. I watched her talking with Claudia, and she didn't seem the least bit troubled by anything, as though moments ago she hadn't just been conspiratorially hinting about something to me. We had been talking about me and Elaine one minute, then my clutch, catering, and New Year's. Something had made her ask me a question that she didn't want to ask anyone else.

Then I decided that she *was* just being overly dramatic and that it was nothing. She just wanted me to gossip about whatever was going on in the house, and that was that. I never understood her anyway, so I was probably misreading her. That settled it

for me. It was easier than worrying.

* * * * *

"Come in. She is ready!" Margitte called from the living room.

Margitte had sent us all upstairs to wait. We filed down the stairs in the near dark, and over Elaine's head the archway into the living room flickered yellow, reflecting the candlelight on the glossy paint. From where I stood, it looked more like a distant bonfire. I felt like I was heading into some ritual chamber where sacrifice awaited. Not a very Christmasy feeling. I tried to wipe it from my mind and concentrate on Elaine in front of me. We'd all gotten a little dressed up, which Doug had objected to, but I liked it. My well-shined wing tips mirrored the wavering light coming up the staircase. I heard someone in the front of our little line say "Wow," and I stepped off the stairs, following Elaine into the living room.

There were no ornaments on the tree except for the candles. They didn't light up the room as much as they did the tree. Every single needle on the tree glowed. It seemed like the green of the tree itself was giving off this amazing olive color. It was beautiful. Some of the candles bobbed slightly on their branches, so the light danced with more than just flickering flames. I loved it—it looked like the kind of tree you'd find out in the woods somewhere, where deer and raccoons were celebrating Christmas underneath a single bright star. A *real* Christmas tree, no plastic angels or electric lights. I was simultaneously pleased and ashamed by how much that tree affected me. It made me wish for a minute that I was five again, when I would get excited for Christmas starting in about April and be hardly able to contain myself until Christmas morning. The ashamed part was that it was just a silly tree with candles and it shouldn't mean that much.

We all stood around the tree in a semi-circle, some people exclaiming quietly how

pretty it was, but I just looked silently at it. I found Elaine's hand and squeezed it. Diane was standing to my left. I thought, What the hell, and I held her hand as well. She looked over to me and smiled without saying anything. She didn't make any kind of big deal about it, which was nice. I knew she'd make a great mother someday soon. I loved how happy I felt—I changed my mind and decided that it was a very good thing that I could get so worked up about a silly little tree in a living room. I wanted all of us to simultaneously, without direction, burst into a perfect version of "Silent Night" together like the Peanuts.

So, instead of waiting for it to happen of its own accord, I started singing quietly. I half-expected Doug to break in and tell me to stop, but instead, seven other voices joined me. When he didn't, I forgave him all his irritating little transgressions in an instant. I was feeling mighty close to everyone in the room, that weepy feeling you sometimes get after one too many drinks. But this was real, not chemically induced. I was very glad I lived in a house with six other people who would sit around and sing together.

We got to the end of the first verse, and the people who didn't know the words to the second one dropped out. Claudia and Geoff and I were the only ones still singing, and the others listened to us. The tree wavered and glowed, and I was thinking that this wasn't even Christmas, just anticipation of it, and Christmas never really matched my expectations anyway, but this anticipation of it was the real part of it, the good part that you look forward to. It's the part where you have the right feeling that you're supposed to have, the feeling that I've somehow managed to latch onto every single Christmas of my life, if even just for a short moment.

The three of us reached the end of the second verse and we were all quiet. I didn't want anyone to say anything. Doug said, "Merry Christmas, you all." It was nice.

I smiled to myself and said "Merry Christmas" along with everyone else. And that was better than the silence.

* * * * *

With four couples around the dining room table, it amused me to think that we could square dance after the dishes were cleared. It all felt very balanced. I wondered if Margitte or Paige would lead.

There was so much food on the table that we had to pull two end tables into the dining room to fit all of it. Christmas dinner was a lot easier than Thanksgiving—there weren't all these specific foods that everyone just *had* to have in order for it to be right. It was all relaxed. There were the requisite apple dishes and venison, which I avoided. Margitte had brought a big batch of her catering crab puffs, made into bigger cakes, and I was wolfing them down. I hadn't had them in over a year and a half. Having Margitte around probably helped everything be so relaxed—there were plenty of ex-caterers there, but she was the one still used to cooking for hordes of people and not getting stressed about it. I was busy liking everyone at the table. That warm fuzzy feeling from around the tree had dissipated a little bit, but it was lingered enough to feel like Christmas.

"I'd like to make a toast," I said, gonging my wine glass with my fork. Everyone stopped talking and looked at me. The old Lowenbrau commercial rang in my head—*here's to good friends, tonight is kind of special*. . . . "Just a little toast. Here's to celebrating Christmas with friends." All the eloquence I'd been imagining had slipped from my tongue, so I raised my glass touched it to Claudia's next to me. We all touched whomever's glass we could reach.

"Und lovers." Margitte said. Again, the glasses touched.

"Also—can I make a toast with ice water?" Diane asked. "Okay. Bear with me now. I want to thank everyone for being so great about helping me through my

pregnancy. Even when you all treat me like an invalid, I know it's because you're taking care of me. I appreciate it. And those of you that don't treat me like an invalid—" I think she was referring to me and Paige "—I want to thank equally for keeping me sane."

She paused, and Geoff said, "That's not a toast, that's an acceptance speech."

"Please let her speak her mind," Doug said. I looked at Geoff to see if that pissed him off. It didn't. I wondered if Christmas had anything to do with it, or whether he agreed with Doug.

"*Anyways*, now that the rest of the world will be able to tell I'm pregnant, I'm glad I've had these past few months with all of you guys to get me used to the idea of people knowing I'm having a baby. I'm rambling. Okay—the toast part. Here's to all of you for being . . . well, just great."

Eloquence wasn't avoiding only me. We all chinked our glasses, even though you're not supposed to drink when the toast is to you.

"Should we go around the table?" Elaine said. Everyone nodded and agreed. I took a tiny sip of my wine and hoped no one noticed. She said, "Here's to my one year anniversary of living out here. The numbers have grown some, but I've never been happier in my entire life. I snagged the man of my dreams, I have the most gorgeous house in the world, I have the best friends money can buy—" she winked at Doug "—and I just want to thank all of you. Here's to living your life the way you want to, living off the land, and having friends to share it with."

"Here, here," we all said, punctuated with the *pings* of cheap wine glasses touching.

"My turn, I guess," Geoff said. "Ah. I would like to toast Elaine for making all of this possible." More *heres* and *pings*. "And Doug for keeping us all on track." I *pinged* half-heartedly on that one.

Paige said, "Since I hate making toasts, I'll just say here's to having the only job I've ever liked in my entire life. Thanks." Again, the required audience response. I was really starting to want to gulp that wine.

"Give me a sec," Claudia said. "Um. Okay—here's to being in a place where I never have to worry about what other people think, where I can just be me."

"Here, here." *Ping*.

"Well, that leaves just me," Doug said. I could tell he was settling in for a long one, so I took a surreptitious sip from my glass. Paige saw me do it. "I would like to second the toast that everyone has made here. I agree wholeheartedly. I would also like to say—Here's to what we've accomplished in the past few months. Here's to the little community that we've built, and here's to what we can do in the future. Here's to never giving up, never settling. Here's to the honesty that I feel in this house. Here's to not being afraid to make changes, to having an open mind, and to making sure that we all are living our lives the way we want to live them." He stopped.

I raised my glass, but there was no one else to *ping* with. They were all still waiting for Doug. "Here is to living what you believe in and never forgetting that ideas can be made real." The toasts around my family table had always been a little more specific than that, like here's to the peach cobbler. I felt irritation gnaw the base of my skull. "Here is to sticking together and making something stronger than a family out of friends. And, finally, here's to working every day to maintain momentum, to overcoming inertia." He raised his glass.

The loud *heres* and repeated *pings* around me *deja vued* me back to the auditorium where I'd first heard a lot of that crap. Plus Elaine's old saw. The words were almost the same, distilled from parables, but the meaning was exactly the same, as was the audience response. I half-heartedly touched my glass to Elaine's and Claudia's and then

swilled back a large mouthful of sulfite-laden boxed chardonnay. With venison, nonetheless. All the Scrooginess that I deplored and had been silently accusing Doug of gripped me. I didn't want to live with him any more, and I was once again completely and utterly disgusted with everyone that I lived with. That nice feeling by the tree was gone. It had been nothing but a ghost of Christmases past, something I'd pulled up out of my twenty-six years of loving that feeling and wanting at all costs to get it. I closed my eyes and willed everyone at the table except Elaine to disappear. I took another gulp from my glass, emptying it.

When I opened my eyes, everyone was eating.

Chapter 28

As with every year in the past, I awoke early Christmas morning tired but anxious. I never had enough sleep on those mornings, but I was always wide awake when the first sunlight crept in the window of whatever room I happened to be in. This was the first year that I woke up with someone else in the bed, however, and my anxiousness wasn't related to guessing about the pile of presents under the tree. I looked at Elaine lying next to me, wearing the long red t-shirt I'd given her the night before. I wanted to pick her up out of the bed, carry her downstairs and out the front door, load her in my car, and never come back to the Farm.

I'd decided the night before, while lying in a spinning bed, that I would never be able to get everyone else to move out. I couldn't ask her, that was certain. I wanted to be with Elaine and I didn't want to be with them. I kept telling myself over and over that these weren't the most Christmasy of thoughts, but I couldn't help it. I told myself that they were early New Yearsy thoughts, time to relook at things and figure out what I was going to do. The strain of keeping my mouth shut had gotten almost unbearable.

I lay there, adding up the pluses and minuses of my life. Elaine—plus. Alternative Times—plus. No signs of cancer or cirrhosis—plus. Kushman, Kushman & Walters—minus. Housemates—minus. Doug—minus. Happy? Sometimes.

I thought, I should be able to do better than this.

I wondered if Elaine and I would still be together if we'd slept together all those years ago back when we'd first met. I wasn't sure. I couldn't help thinking that all those

years as friends had somehow soured our relationship. Things were too easy. Nothing had changed all that much between us, except that we slept together. I wished I had something to compare it to.

For the bazillionth time, I wished I hadn't backed down and lied about the Shriya article.

As I lay there thinking, Elaine eventually woke up and sleepily half-smiled at me. She nestled against me, and it reminded me of that first morning together, when I could have lay in bed for hours with her. I was glad that it had all happened, but I found myself wishing it had happened differently. I realized that I was making an awful lot of wishes.

"Merry Christmas," she murmured, opening her eyes. I could feel the heat radiating from her, the warmth almost like the purr of a cat, contented and internal yet soothing to the outside.

"Good morning," I said. "Merry Christmas."

She closed her eyes again. She pulled up tighter to me, lying on her side, and she ran her fingers through the hair at the back of my neck. "I wonder what Santa brought you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think I've been a very good boy this year."

"No coal in my stocking either."

"I imagine Santa brought you something wonderful. So shall we rise and shine?"

I asked her.

"Not just yet," she said, pulling me down deeper into the sheets.

The see-saw swung again, and I felt much better. How could I let myself get so distracted by her?

* * * * *

Regardless of everyone's plans not to go haywire with Christmas gifts, Elaine sat beaming and grinning as everyone opened their presents from her. Presents—along the lines of three or four, not just one. And we were all bloated from an enormous breakfast. As she walked around the room, distributing wrapped boxes and rolls to everyone, we all groaned at her for going overboard.

"Just shut up and open it," Elaine said to Geoff.

"I thought we agreed," Geoff said.

"You agreed. I never said I'd cut back on what I was giving people." Yankee you.

"There's nothing you all can do about it," I said. "She's the wild present woman." I sat back and opened a heavy box that Elaine had set in front of me.

"Thank you, Luke," Elaine said. "He's right. You just have to sit back and open them. It's better to give than receive."

"Yeah," Claudia said. "But you're doing all the giving and we're doing all the receiving." She gaped at the open box on her lap. I didn't see what was in it.

"You're making me feel guilty," Diane said.

"No, *you're* making you feel guilty. I'm just giving Christmas presents. End of conversation. More mimosa anyone?"

I reached inside the box in front of me and pulled out a fat, marbled unabridged dictionary. I didn't have one—they were too expensive, so I couldn't afford one. I sat it on my lap and leafed through the thin pages. "This is awesome," I told her, quietly. "I don't have one."

"I know," Elaine said.

The gifts weren't only extravagant in number—she'd obviously spent way too much money on each one of us. I expected it for me, for some reason. But I didn't

expect her to load everyone else up as well. The more we opened, the more we were all embarrassed and the more Elaine gloated. Diane opened a small envelope marked *For the Baby*. She was going to get a ultrasound one of these days, she kept saying, but until then the baby stayed an it.

"It's a savings bond thingamajig," Elaine explained. "It'll mature when the little prodigy is eighteen. For college."

"You are too much," Geoff said.

"Every little bit helps," Elaine said.

After the trash was cleared away, we all broke up into small groups, playing games or reading. Diane and Doug and I were working on a jigsaw puzzle that Elaine had bought as a house gift. It was a reproduction of a Seurat, so all the pieces were just a mishmash of colored dots. Pieces were spread all over the kitchen table, and we were working on individual sections after we'd all gotten the border together. I began to go blind after a while, as did Doug and Diane, but none of us quit doing it for long. There's something addictive about puzzles. Elaine helped us for a few minutes but lost interest quickly.

"Damn, would you look at that," Elaine said.

She was standing behind me, looking out the kitchen window.

"What," Doug mumbled. I noticed he was good at scanning the 1500 pieces and finding the one he was looking for, whether a specific piece with a lonely dot of red or a unique shape.

"Our deer friends are back," Elaine said. I turned to look as she struggled to open the kitchen window. "Get out of here!" she shouted at the deer. Three or four beige bodies bounded out of my line of sight. "I guess I'll be needing to get our little fraternity hunters out here again after New Year's."

"Maybe they're just passing through," I said. I really didn't want another of those days where I came home to deal with a mound of deer guts gracing the front yard.

"Doubtful. They were behind the barn again."

"I don't know if I should be eating any more deer," Diane said. "The baby'll probably come out with antlers."

"I don't care if we eat it, as long as they're gone from the property."

"Don't you feel like it's kind of horrible to kill the deer?" I asked.

"Can you think of any other way to get rid of them?" Doug asked me.

"No," I said. "But that doesn't mean it's not horrible."

"True," Doug answered, nodding but looking at the puzzle pieces instead of me.

We settled wordlessly back into the puzzle while Elaine let Baggy out to chase the deer away. We hadn't worried about her being kicked by deer in a while. They always saw her coming and outran her.

I grew distracted from the puzzle. Everyone else in the house kept talking about us as a family, and I started thinking that maybe that was the problem. My parents were family, and that was the main problem with them. If I met my mother and father on the street, I would probably think they were perfectly nice people. And I'd gotten a chance to see them through other people's eyes at Thanksgiving. There wasn't anything particularly offensive about them; they even had some decent sides. But they drove me crazy, as much for what they did and said as for the way I could so easily get embarrassed or angry around them. It wasn't fair, it was just true.

I started thinking that maybe the reason everyone else in the house but Elaine was driving me so crazy was because they *were* becoming family to me. Doug hadn't bothered me before we'd lived together. Paige and Geoff bothered me less *after* we had lived together. And I'd always just plain liked Diane. Maybe that was what siblings are

all about in the long run. I wondered if everyone else was looking for a family and I was looking to get away from one. I thought it might explain why no one else seemed as miserable as I often felt. Or maybe they did, and didn't show it, like me. I didn't know.

I worked on a patch of yellow dots, the tops of some clouds in a blue and green dotted sky. Up so close to the painting, the dots started to lose meaning and form, becoming just little tiny distinct units. I couldn't tell whether the yellow was supposed to be sunshine or impending rain. We mumbled idiocies to each other about certain puzzle pieces for a while—"I'm looking for all greens with a line of lighter green"—until Geoff announced that dinner was ready.

I was thinking to myself that I never went out anymore as we all sat down to eat. I used to go out to eat or drink a lot—Elaine and I had always done it, even when she was broke. Now she was no longer broke, but we never went out. I didn't think it was the long distance—twenty minutes—trip into town. Geoff and Margitte were still bringing food to the table when we all heard the first gun shot. It was unmistakable.

"Please tell me that was a car backfiring," Paige said.

"Don't count on it," Diane answered.

"That didn't sound too far away," Geoff said.

We all sat silently, listening for another shot. We froze where we were, holding silverware or a glass. No sounds. I sat there, frowning, as though that would help me listen better.

"I've heard gunshots before out here," Elaine said finally, after we all slowly moved back into motion. "I don't guess it's any big deal."

"Actually, it was last Christmas," I told everyone.

"That's right," Elaine said. "We were a little spooked—"

Then we heard the roar of a second gunshot, followed instantly but distinctly by

the sharp *ping* of a bullet or buckshot or whatever ricocheting off of metal.

"Jesus," Claudia gulped. Elaine and Geoff were out of their seats immediately, heading to the front porch, closely followed by the rest of us.

Chapter 29

We all scanned the property. I was looking for metal things, hoping to find what had caused the ricochet. There was nothing out of the ordinary that I could see, but then again I didn't know what I was looking for.

"This is fucked up," Paige said. I agreed with her.

"Hello?" Elaine yelled out to the empty land in front of us. I was suddenly aware of the fact that there were hundreds of trees to the north end of the property, and even though it was late December and the leaves had fallen, you couldn't see much in those thick woods.

"Baggy!" I called out.

"Oh my God, I forgot about her," Elaine said. There was a panic in her voice that I didn't think the situation quite warranted, at least not yet. "BAGGY!" she yelled. "COME!"

Geoff stepped off of the porch and began walking across the circular driveway toward the barn. "Baggy!" he called. Diane and I followed him across the grass.

"Do you think they're really close by?" she asked me in a low whisper.

"I don't know," I told her. I was pretty sure that they were, whoever *they* were. I had whispered back, and it reminded me again of last Christmas, whispering with Elaine. I don't know what the instinct is to whisper when you may be in trouble, but it isn't much of a useful instinct.

Geoff turned around. "Diane, go back inside," he said. It was an order.

"Why?"

"This could be dangerous."

"Oh. Well, then you should come inside too," she said, the worry in her voice raising it an octave.

"Come on, Diane," Elaine said. "He's right." She sounded exasperated. Everyone was on edge, and I was still looking around, hoping to either see something or at least hear Baggy's collar tags jingling.

"Look, just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean that I can't do anything," Diane said.

I caught sight of something orange in the trees. It was blaze orange, and there was just a tiny flash of it beside a tree. Definitely orange fabric, that color being as unnatural as it is. It wasn't moving, but I was sure it was a hunter's elbow or something. "Look!" I said, pointing. Everyone looked where I was pointing, and we all stopped talking. I walked toward the footbridge, keeping my eyes on the orange spot. Geoff was right beside me, and I started wondering if this wasn't maybe the stupidest thing we could be doing. Someone was out there shooting, after all.

"I still don't see it," Geoff said.

"I'm keeping my eye on it."

As we crossed the footbridge, I began to be able to make better sense of the orange from a closer perspective. It was too low to the ground to be a hunting vest, unless it was hanging from a low branch. As we got even closer, I realized that it was just one of the survey flags, a bright orange piece of plastic stuck to a thin stick of wood.

"Oh," I said. "I thought it was a vest or something."

"This is making me nervous," Geoff said. "What if somebody shoots at us by mistake?"

"Or on purpose," I said. "I'm pretty sure deer hunting isn't in season." I was wearing my usual khakis and white shirt. That wasn't a good sign.

"How do you know they're hunting deer?" he said.

"I don't. I'm just guessing. What else?"

"Quail, geese, turkey. Squirrel or possum. I don't know."

"I can't imagine that—"

He cut me off. "Shh! Listen."

I didn't hear anything for a second, then I heard a familiar faint tinkling, muffled by the crash of four paws against a floor of dead leaves.

"Baggy! Come!" I called, to no direction in general. I couldn't see her yet. "Come on. Good girl," I yelled.

"Bagheera," Geoff shouted. That amused me—no one called her that any more. How lawyer-to-be of Geoff to assume she'd come at her given name. She'd obviously stopped running, because the tinkling had gotten less urgent, and there was no rhythmic leaf crunching.

"Come." I used my getting-angry voice, low and rough, and then I listened some more. She still wasn't running, that I could hear. Then she barked a few times, somewhere ahead of us, off to the right. It sounded pretty far off. We started walking toward the sound. "COME," I threatened, my eyes jumping around to catch sight of her. Her brown and black camouflaged her better in the winter than the summer. At least her barking wasn't camouflaged. She continued, at a higher pitch, the same bark she used when she wanted someone to toss an apple for her to chase or when she stood on the bank of the river while we swam and beckoned her. The *COME*, the one that usually got her attention, didn't seem to be working.

Geoff and I trudged through the woods, calling her name. I heard the crunch of

sticks behind us and turned to see Paige and someone else far back, coming into the woods off of the footbridge.

Baggy was still barking playfully, so we followed the direction of her bark. Hearing her bark like that made me less nervous—it meant that everything was fine, at least with her. We hadn't heard any more gun shots, and I was beginning to think that maybe they were farther off than we'd thought. A nagging thought kept telling me that no, they weren't farther off. I ignored it, and as Geoff and I walked in silence, I began to notice a chill in the air that I hadn't before. I wished I'd grabbed a coat. Geoff was of course wearing a green sweater that was keeping him comfortable.

"Come on Baggy," he called, when she hadn't barked for a short time. I was thinking that we'd tried to break her annoying habit of barking, so calling to her probably wasn't the greatest thing to be doing. But then she barked again, a short yap, and we were getting closer. I thought we should be able to see her. We heard the crush of leaves and sticks ahead of us and kept walking straight.

"Damn. Ow," Geoff said. I looked over, and he was picking his sweater free of a thorny wild raspberry. I stopped while he extricated himself, gingerly picking at the plant and cussing and shaking his hands when he touched a thorn. The branch kept reattaching itself to him as he tried to push it away.

"Here," I said, reaching to help, and then I froze. Baggy's bark changed to a low growl, punctuated by vicious, raspy barks. Geoff and I both jerked our heads in the direction of the bark. Something was definitely wrong.

"Go get her," Geoff said.

I took off, away from him. I still couldn't see anything, but I thought I heard someone talking up ahead, in a low voice. Baggy's fierce-sounding barks continued, and I knew the fur was up on the back of her neck, wherever she was. "Hello?" I called out,

and the voices stopped. Baggy barked savagely again, followed by the rustling of leaves and sticks. Then she yelped, high and pathetic, the way she did when the door slammed her tail or someone stepped on her paw. When she was hurt. I began running up the little hill I'd been walking up. Then she started growling and barking. She sounded like two wolves in a fight, all by herself. I'd never heard that kind of noise come out of her before. She sounded ferocious.

"Baggy!" I called out, and came to the top of a little rise in the woods. I scanned beneath me, and saw two men in blaze orange vests standing near Baggy. One had on a green knit cap, dark shirt under his vest, and desert camouflage pants, facing me. He had whitish hair poking from under his hat, with that dark leathery skin that you get from years of being outside, a reddish-black that doesn't fade after a while. The other had an orange hat, plaid shirt, and jeans and was facing Baggy. They were both carrying rifles cradled in their arms, the butts and barrel ends sticking out to either side. Baggy was in front of them, snarling and growling, looking ready to lunge at them. She looked wild, teeth bared. It made me wonder what had happened to the puppy who used to chase grapes around the couch. I called her name again, and the two men turned to look at me. Baggy's noise stopped, but the fur was still raised on her back.

"Come here," I called, for some reason embarrassed to use her name. She didn't move. The camouflage pants was watching me, and the orange hat was looking at Baggy.

"You best call your dog off before we shoot it," the camouflage pants said. I felt a little chill run up my spine. So much for country kindness and Virginia gentlemen. Dueling banjos ran through my head. Suddenly I was pissed. These guys were on my property, threatening me and my dog.

"She doesn't like trespassers," I said.

"*She's* messin with our deer," the orange hat said, turning slightly. He said *she*

in a sarcastic way that I didn't much like. I hadn't noticed the deer, a pretty small doe. Or at least a deer without antlers. It lay bleeding, on its side, with Baggy between it and its killers. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth, covered with spit foam and flecks of dirt and leaves, and its eyes were twitching.

"My deer," the camouflage pants said.

"What're you all doing hunting here?" I said, slowly, walking toward them. I don't know where my attitude came from, seeing as how I was face to face with two rifle-toting, fairly aggressive, unpleasant men, but the whole scenario made me angry. So what if it wasn't my dog or my property. They didn't know that.

"Baggin deer," the orange hat said. The camouflage pants cracked a smile that he wanted me to see. Baggy growled again, pulling back her lips, and they both whipped their heads around to check on her. Orange Hat had a can of Old Milwaukee poking out of the pocket of his vest that was buttoned tight around his fairly large gut.

"Bagheera!" I growled at Baggy. I pronounced it with a long *a* instead of a nasal *a*. It sounded meaner that way, and much meaner than Baggy. I was impressed with her. She looked mean. She stopped growling and looked at me. "Come," I said, calmly and forcefully, and she slowly made her way over to me and sat at my feet. I resisted the urge to reach down and grab hold of her collar. I wanted her to attack if necessary, but I had no idea if she would. She was more likely to lick them to death. I was now standing in a triangle with the men and the deer. I wondered where everyone else was. This was not a particularly wonderful time for me to be alone. That beer made me more nervous than the rifles, but I wanted to get a good look at both of their faces. "This is private property," I told them.

Orange Hat said, "The deer don't know that."

"I suggest you and your dog leave," Camouflage Pants said, nodding with his head

at a spot behind me. He lightly pounded the barrel of his rifle into his left hand, like a policeman beginning to threaten action with a billy club.

I didn't know what to say and was relieved to hear footsteps crunching down the hill behind me. I didn't turn to look. I thought my little hunter friends might do something.

"What's going on?" It was Paige. I would have preferred Geoff. "Have you all been shooting at our house? Oh my God. . . ." I turned to look at her and saw that she was looking at the twitching doe. Elaine was behind her, and Geoff was coming down the hill.

I saw Orange Hat raise his eyes at Camouflage Pants. I could only guess that it was in reference to Paige's dykiness. Or maybe not, although she always looked pretty butch, even in her Christmas finery.

Camouflage Pants said, "Why don't you all take your dog and go on back inside." He was trying to be intimidating, but I could hear that he was more nervous now with four of us.

Paige cut in, ignoring the hunters. "That poor deer!"

"What? This is my property," Elaine said. "And I want you off it." Her voice was high and I noticed how Yankee she sounded talking to the hunters.

"We aim to do some huntin'," Orange Hat said. "And this is where the deer are right now, so this is where we're at." I have no business faulting anyone for being a smart-ass, but he was one, and it bugged me.

"You can't just go shooting all over the place," Paige said. "You all hit something close to our house. What if it had gone through a window?"

Orange Hat said, "Look, uh, *miss*—I don't aim to stand her arguing with you." He rapped the rifle against his palm, taking his cue from Camouflage Pants.

"Are you threatening us?" Elaine said. I wanted to tell her to be quiet.

"Why don't you two leave the property. Take the deer and go. We don't want it. But you aren't welcome to hunt this land." Geoff walked up next to me. I noticed a piece of bramble still stuck to his sleeve.

Orange Hat belched. "It's my day off, and I plan on shooting something bigger than a rabbit. And I don't much care what it is." Merry Fucking Christmas to you, too, I thought. He stared stupidly at us, reminding me with his expression of the assholes in bars who consider getting in a fight a requirement for a good night out.

"Would somebody please help that deer?" Paige said.

"Let's go," I said, catching Geoff's eye. He nodded slightly.

"And leave them here?" Elaine said. "Shooting up the property."

"Better than shooting something else," Geoff said.

"I want you off my property," Elaine said, almost hissing. I didn't blame her for being mad. I was mad. But this was just stupid. I also don't think she'd been threatened by drunk assholes very much.

"You might should listen to your boyfriend here," Camouflage Pants said.

I wondered how he could tell. Maybe he was just guessing. "We're going," I said. "Please be careful where you shoot."

"I'm not leaving until that poor deer is out of its misery," Paige said. "This is absolutely inhuman just to leave it lying here."

Camouflage Pants looked at her evenly, and then he walked over to the twitching tan body of the deer. He held his rifle to its head, looked at all of us, and fired. As half of the deer's head exploded away from us, the recoil of the rifle sent Camouflage Pants stumbling toward us. While he was off balance, reeling, I considered grabbing the rifle from him. I thought, If I had any kind of guts, I'd do it, without thinking about the

consequences, without worrying that Orange Hat was still standing right there with a probably loaded rifle, without deliberating. I'd just act.

But I didn't do it, because it would have been dangerous. I stared at the awful mess that the deer had become, and then I put my hand on the small of Elaine's back to steer her around and head her back to the house. I could tell she wanted to stay around and argue. I planned to go inside, call the police, and have as little to do with the two hunters as possible. I hated knowing that I was doing the smart thing yet still feeling like a coward.

The four of us walked away from the hunters, Baggy trotting along beside me as I held her collar tightly. As I let go of Elaine's back, she turned around.

"I want you assholes off my property," she yelled at them.

Geoff hissed "Elaine!" through clenched teeth. I put my hand back on her spine, as though she was an old woman who needed help maneuvering through the woods. Seconds later, we heard another shot, followed by whoops of laughter from both of the men. I'm sure they were just firing up in the air to piss us off, but it made my skin prickle nonetheless.

"I feel positively nauseous," Paige said quietly, when we'd gone over the crest of the hill and I could no longer see the hunters over my shoulder.

"Let go of me," Elaine said, irritated. I didn't remove my hand. I thought she might turn and bolt any second and get herself in more serious trouble.

"Were you *trying* to get us shot at?" Geoff said to Elaine.

"Excuse me, but I can't just ignore the fact that there are two men with rifles shooting up my property."

"And what would you plan to do to stop them?" he asked. "Reason with them?"

"I wouldn't just turn and walk away."

"They've got rifles for Christ's sake!" I said. "We'll call the police and let them handle it."

"Hopefully someone back at the house has already called," Paige said. I looked sideways at her. She looked as though she might bend over and vomit any second. "I hate people like that," she added, squeezing her eyes shut.

"So do I," Elaine said. "And I particularly hate letting them get away with being . . . God, with just *being* like that."

"Geoff and Luke are right," Paige said. "The best thing to do with people like that is just get away as fast as possible."

"Three to one," Elaine said. "Am I the only one with a sense of right and wrong?"

Geoff shook his head and stayed silent. I knew Elaine well enough to know that once she cooled her heels, she'd stop saying stupid things like that. I ignored her.

"It's not right and wrong," Paige said. "It's a death wish."

"Like you'd know," Elaine said, unpleasantly.

"I do," Paige said coolly, punctuating both words. For some reason, that silenced Elaine. I got the sense that Paige *did* know.

* * * * *

No one had called the police back at the house, so Geoff called as soon as we got inside. The four people back at the house listened incredulously as Elaine narrated the tale of the Evil Hunters On Her Property. We backed her story up, and the four of them sat in the living room shaking their heads.

"Those guys should be locked up," Diane said.

"No one in Chermany has guns," Margitte added.

Geoff came into the living room with his eyes wide. "You won't believe this,"

he said, his fists clenched at his side. "The police won't come. They say that this is a 'hunting incident' so I need to call the game warden. Hunting incident my *ass*. Those guys threatened us. They're understaffed on a holiday and don't want to come out is what I think."

"Well did you call the game warden?" Paige asked.

"I left a message with a woman who I doubt will pass it on," Geoff said.

"Game warden," Diane said. "Real authority."

"Really," Geoff said.

"So no one's coming?" Paige said.

"I don't know. The woman said she'd have someone return the call as soon as possible."

Paige clutched one of the sofa pillows to her stomach. "I can't stay here if those guys are running around outside. Actually, I don't think any of us should."

"This is ridiculous. I'm going to call the police again," Elaine said. We could hear her in the kitchen when she was making the call.

Any kind of festive Christmas spirit that had been lingering in the house was dead. I thought about what Paige said. It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to leave the Farm, at least until sunset and the hunters were gone. Then again, what was the likelihood of them actually shooting at the house? They weren't terrorists, just two drunk belligerent men . . . stalking our house with guns. We all jumped when we heard the next shot. Okay, so they were terrorists of a sort.

"I need a drink," I said. "Anyone else?" All the hands in the room shot up except for Diane's. It wasn't even four o'clock yet, but I guess you're allowed to start early on holidays. I took their orders and then joined Elaine in the kitchen. There was food all over the counters in the kitchen, and the pot of venison stew on the stove had started to

congeal slightly, pools of yellow grease coming to the top and getting waxy around the edges. I forgot we'd been about to eat when the first shot was fired. There was no way I was going to eat venison stew that day.

The puzzle lay in pieces on the table, and Elaine was distractedly holding a cardboard piece in her hand and scanning the picture. I guessed she was on hold.

"Drink?" I asked.

She shook her head and then snapped out of a daze. "Yes, I mean. Something strong and not sweet."

I lined up eight tall glasses on the counter. I made Elaine a rum and tonic and then a bourbon and ginger for myself to drink while I made other people's drinks. One of the nice things about winter is that the ice doesn't melt immediately. I handed Elaine her drink, sipped mine, and began pouring drinks, mumbling what the others wanted to myself so I wouldn't forget. I was trying not to listen to Elaine's phone conversation, because it was confusing me, but I couldn't help it.

"I know someone already called," she was saying. "I don't care. There are two men outside my house, on my property. They've got guns, they threatened me and my dog and my guests, and they would not leave. . . ."

I'd already heard her say that, or a variation of the theme, three times. I think she was talking to someone different.

"So if you're wearing camouflage and hold up a convenience store with a rifle, that's a hunting incident? Is that what you're saying? Hunters have their own special police department separate from the rest of us?"

She was getting a nasty tone in her voice that wasn't going to help her any, but I kept quiet and poured the remains of the mimosa pitcher over ice for Claudia.

"The game warden's not answering. Look, I *know* it's Christmas, and I'm sorry,

but someone's got to come out here. My guests are terrified. Is there anyone else I can speak to there? Are you serious? Look, could I have your name, please. Thank you. Oh—do you have a direct line for the game warden, so I don't have to leave a message? This is unbelievable." She slammed the phone down with a thin plastic thud. New phones just don't make that satisfying clang and ring when you slam them.

I pushed her drink in front of her a little, and she took a distracted sip after furiously punching some more numbers. I could tell she was on hold.

"I wish Uncle Tony still had his mafia connections," she muttered in my general direction. She wasn't serious, I don't think, but I vaguely remembered some stories about Uncle Tony and boxing up in Boston. Maybe being a bootlegger ran in the family. "Or I at least wish I had a gun."

That got my attention. I forgot my drink orders and stared at Elaine. She wasn't just talking off the top of her head. She *was* serious about this.

I said, "I'm not sure that's such a hot—"

Elaine turned and put her hand over her free ear. "Hello? Yes, I'm trying to reach the game warden."

I looked back at the glasses lining the counter and carried the full ones into the living room. I couldn't remember what everyone wanted. I had to retake some drink orders and go back into the kitchen to mix them. Elaine was repeating her story for the dozenth time, and I headed back to the living room with my task completed.

"Doesn't sound like she's having any luck," I told everyone.

"I don't see why she would," Geoff said. "I couldn't."

"Is anyone as bothered by this whole scenario as I am?" Paige said. She sounded panicked, which immediately calmed me and made me not take the situation as seriously as I perhaps should have. I think I polarize a lot when people get extreme, and that's

probably not such a hot adaptive trait.

"I certainly don't like it," Claudia said.

"We're just sitting here, for crying out loud," Paige said, beginning to yell. "Those guys are out there shooting everything in sight. They've already shot at something near the house and hit it. What are we doing? What if no one comes out here? We just sit and wait for them to go away?" Margitte was patting Paige's back ineffectually. I don't imagine Germans are the best cuddlers.

Doug said, "Paige, we're all worried. Okay? I don't like this any more than you do, but I don't think we can really leave the house too safely."

"You think they'd shoot at us if we went for the car?" Geoff said. He sounded a little incredulous. I could hear Elaine in the kitchen, speaking in an angry voice to someone on the phone.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Doug said.

"They're off in the woods," Claudia said. "Right?"

Margitte said, "We don't know that."

"It's silly to speculate," Diane interrupted. "We don't know what they'll do. But it's probably a bad idea to test it. The chance that they *might* do it says we should stay where we are." She rubbed her belly while she talked, a habit she'd fallen into recently. I wondered what it would be like to be pregnant.

Then I heard something outside, a thin metal-against-metal sound. "What was that?" I said, freezing.

Everyone looked at me. "I don't hear anything," Geoff said.

"I heard it," Paige said, her eyes wide.

"Me too," Doug chimed in.

"Oh my God!" Elaine shouted from the kitchen, still on the phone. "Now they're

coming up to the house! Send someone out here *immediately!*"

All seven of us in the living room were up and into the kitchen in a matter of seconds, peering through the window where Elaine was looking. Elaine again slammed the phone into its cradle. Orange Hat and Camouflage Pants were walking around the side of the barn, their rifles held at their waists. Camouflage Pants handed Orange Hat a can of beer. He finished off the drink, crumpled the can, and tossed it into the bed of Elaine's truck. It was the same sound I'd heard before.

Camouflage Pants raised his head and looked up at the house, and for some reason, I instinctively ducked, along with a couple of others. I was eye level with the pot of venison stew, and when I'd had a second to think about what I was doing and feel foolish, I stood back up. I hate the way I react to pressure.

Camouflage Pants was grinning at us. I imagine we must have looked fairly amusing, all crammed up against the kitchen sink, looking through the window at them. He nudged Orange Hat, who followed his gaze and looked at us.

"What're they going to do?" Paige whispered. No one answered her.

Orange Hat, the younger and more asinine of the two, raised his fist over his head, contorted his face, and let out a throaty "Whooooooooo-hoooooooo!" The Yahoo war cry or mating call. He was the replica of every idiot I'd ever suffered on the school bus, on night-lit streets, and in backwoods bars. Georgia and Virginia aren't all that different. Baggie barked from the living room and came trotting in to join us.

"I hate him," Elaine said.

I don't think I'd ever felt that powerless before. There were two assholes outside of our house, and just because they had rifles, the eight of us inside were stuck like softshell crabs stranded on a beach, defenseless and with no plan in sight.

"Should we talk to them?" Claudia said.

"What the fuck are they doing?" Paige shrieked. "This is a nightmare!"

"They're just messing with us," I said. But there seemed an enormous difference between making us leave them alone to hunt and coming up to the house looking for trouble. Or worse, maybe looking for sport. I thought about this short story I'd read in junior high where this man is hunted by another man on a tropical island. My not-so-clear-thinking mind was making all sorts of connections with guns and dogs and islands.

"I say we just wait and see what happens," Doug said.

"This would never happen in Chermany," Margitte said. Diane glared at her.

"I wonder if they know that the police won't come," Elaine said.

"They probably *are* the police," I told her. "Rednecks and guns love each other."

"You're not serious," Paige said in a hushed voice.

"Of course he's not," Doug said.

"Right," I said. "Just my twisted way of trying to relieve some tension in here."

There we were, about to be invaded by the barbarians, and Doug and I were about to have the same damn discussion. I tried to ignore everyone in the kitchen by concentrating on what the two hunters were doing. Orange Hat was grinning up at us, trying to look menacing. It felt like we were watching some PBS nature special: *The male redneck asserts his territory by hooting and marking his space with aluminum beer can litter.*

Camouflage Pants was glancing around, craning his neck to look in the half-open barn door. He turned and walked to the door of the barn and then slipped in, out of sight. He shouted something muffled to Orange Hat; Orange Hat turned to face the barn and then back to us. Silence reigned in the kitchen as everyone watched through the window, trying to figure out what the hunters were doing.

A few seconds later, Camouflage Pants reappeared outside the barn with a jug of

cider in his hand. He uncapped it and held it out for Orange Hat to sniff it. Then Orange Hat took it from him and swilled down an exaggerated chug of cider from the jug, his back to us. I wondered if we could take them down throwing kitchen knives circus-style at them through the window.

"Those fuckers," Elaine said.

Camouflage Pants took the jug from Orange Hat and stared at him for a moment cagily. It was the same look Elaine had given me when I tasted the spoiled cider for the first time, waiting to see if I keeled over from the drink before she took a sip herself. When Orange Hat didn't begin choking or gasping, Camouflage tilted back and hoisted the jug to his lips, hillbilly style with a finger crooked through the handle and the jug beside his head. I could hear Orange Hat talking to him but couldn't make out any of the words. *The male redneck fortifies himself daily with fermented beverages as a precursor to fighting or mating.*

"Great. That's all we need is for them to get drunker," Claudia said. I wasn't certain how drunk they were or had been when we were talking to them in the woods.

"You think they know what they're drinking?" Paige said.

"I'd bet that's why they're drinking it," Geoff said. "I'm guessing that we just saw their last beer get downed and tossed into the truck."

"If they came up here looking for something to drink, they certainly came to the right place," Doug said. I sipped my drink and chewed one of the ice cubes. This whole thing was beginning to feel unreal. I began to feel less worried, certain that *because* the situation looked so bad, it couldn't be. If that makes sense.

Orange Hat disappeared into the barn and came right back out hefting three more gallons of the cider. Trespassing, hunting out of season, assault (I was sure they kicked Baggy, and I'd bet it was Orange Hat), battery, and now theft. What a day our little

hunter friends were having. Orange Hat handed two of the jugs to Camouflage Pants. The two of them walked off around the barn and disappeared behind it. People began talking in the kitchen, but I ignored them and kept my attention focused out the window. A few seconds later, I saw a fleck of blaze orange bobbing through the leafless trees and then they were gone from my sight.

Chapter 30

An hour and a half later, a man and a woman in brown uniforms were standing in the living room listening to us tell them about our uninvited terrorists/guests. He had a lazy eye that kept wandering around the room while we spoke. She looked about our age but had larger hair than anyone in the house. Not only were they about two hours too late, but they weren't even real policemen. Even so, I didn't like having them in the house. I thought they might catch a glimpse of Doug's stash and bust us all for it.

From the minute Geoff started telling the story, they put on an attitude of disbelief, as though he was exaggerating or over-reacting. They might have been just hustling to get out of there because it was Christmas. As far as we were all concerned, Christmas was over. All of us jumped in to tell details of the story, but Elaine ended up doing most of the talking. They looked very suspicious of us and kept glancing at each other.

The tricky part about telling them about the hunters came when we got to the point about the hunters tossing beer cans into Elaine's truck. She had gone outside and retrieved the cans and put them in a zip-lock plastic bag, hoping the police could get finger prints off of them. She handed them the bag and then became silent when it came to the part about the hunters going into the barn and fetching cider—it *was* moonshine after all, and I think that that was maybe the first time Elaine had really thought about the ramifications of having illegal liquor piled up in the shed. She hemmed and hawed about the details concerning when the hunters left. I don't think either of the game

warden deputies, or whatever they were, noticed anything unusual about the situation. They wanted to file their report and be gone.

They left without doing anything—which, at that point, I think we were all glad about. They took the plastic bag with them, but they didn't see the need to go into the woods or check out muddy footprints or look in the barn. They said to give them a call if there were any more disturbances, and the woman handed Elaine a card.

"It's good to know we're so well protected," Elaine said, loudly, as she shut the front door behind the two semi-cops.

No one said anything. "Sheesh," I said, after a moment. "I want their jobs."

"You'd have to work on Christmas," Doug said.

* * * * *

We picked at the cold food on the kitchen counters that night, but most of it went untouched. Regardless of Elaine's pleading, Paige and Margitte left just after the game warden folks. Paige said she just didn't feel safe in the house; she didn't say whether this was a temporary feeling or not. It was unlike Paige to get so wiggled out about something, yet no one but Elaine tried to talk her out of it.

I think one of the unspoken worries flitting through everyone's minds that night was that we had no way of knowing who those hunters were. Worst of all, we had no way of knowing whether they'd come back. The minimal descriptions we'd given the wardens wouldn't be much help in finding the men. I'd guess that even if we'd given them photographs of the men (which I wished we'd thought to take out of the kitchen window), the wardens wouldn't find them. They didn't seem to give the situation much weight.

"This is the first time I've wished that I could get just plain stinky drunk," Diane said that evening, nursing her solitary glass of red wine.

"I don't think that would be too great for Baby Venison," I said.

"I wish people like that didn't exist," Claudia said.

"Nothing you can do about it," Geoff said.

Doug ran his hand through his hair and fiddled with his pony-tail rubber band. "Education," he said. "That's the only way."

"Like teaching them in first grade not to terrorize people with deer rifles?" I said.

"I don't think so," Claudia said to Doug. "I see kids in school—around fourth grade, they make this big switch. It's like you can tell what they're going to grow up to be."

"Little fire chiefs and ballerinas," Elaine said, numbly. She was drinking a whole lot.

Claudia shifted in her chair. "No. The boys and girls have already split up by that age, but suddenly there are these notes and giggles going back and forth. Then the black and white kids stop playing together. There are these four divisions of kids in each class, and they all pretty much stick to themselves—and that's when you can see them split up even more." She shook her head and sipped her drink. "I swear I can peg what they'll be like by the time they get to high school. This little kid will be a redneck, this little kid will be a pothead, this little kid will drop out. It's depressing."

"I've seen a bunch of kids straighten out in the Big Brother program," Doug said.

Claudia said, "Good, but those kids are targeted, you know, for change. The rest of them pretty much replicate their parents. Even when I haven't met the parents—I usually don't, except for long term subbing—I can guess pretty accurately what they'll be like. I mean, I think I can at least—I haven't exactly done any long-term studies. And the worst part is that I try *not* to peg them, but it's just so obvious."

"I refuse to believe that," Doug said.

O joy to all ye nations wide, I thought. Doug and Claudia don't agree on something.

"It's not scientific. It's just something that I can tell," Claudia said. "Regardless of education."

"Okay," Doug said. "Maybe the education they're getting *now*. I'm not picking on you or anything, Claudia, but you know they're not getting the best education, no matter what stereotype you try and squeeze the kid into."

"I know that," Claudia said.

"So maybe with *proper* education, they'd have more choices."

"I think that's naive," Geoff said.

"I'd hope it *isn't* naive," Diane interjected. "Everything's not predetermined by your genes."

"Education schmeducation," Elaine said. "We have renegade hunters roaming the countryside." *Huntahs*. She was well-greased and losing proper enunciation. Her Boston accent came through when she drank too much. It was kind of cute, even though that accent always hit my ears like sandpaper Q-tips. Everyone ignored her.

"I'm not saying you're genetically predetermined," Claudia said. "But the environment you grow up in from birth to fourth grade is going to make all the difference. No matter what anyone says about gender and race in the classroom, those kids basically get the same education. What makes the difference is the similarity or disparity between what they get in school and what they get at home. But they're not old enough and we don't have enough time to change what their parents have taught them."

"Is that your goal?" Diane said.

"Change schmange," Elaine said.

"I at least want them to think about it," Claudia said, "but fourth grade usually

...n't the time or place for it."

"Right. That's college's job," Geoff said.

"Not everyone goes to college," Doug said.

"Touché and duh," Diane said.

Claudia pointed at Doug and Diane. "You two are making too much of a distinction between education at home and in school."

"What I basically don't agree with," Doug said, "is the way you're implying that things can't change. They can and do."

"Nothing ever changes," Elaine grumbled. "It looks like it does, but it doesn't."

"That's a little negative and general," Doug said.

"Bite me," she responded. "I'm going to get a gun to keep around here. That'll change things."

Diane frowned. "You don't want to do that."

"Yes I do," Elaine said. I could see her swimming through a haze to think a little. "Okay, no I don't, but I have to."

"You would not have shot those guys," Geoff said.

"No, I wouldn't have. But I would have waved the gun and we would have been even."

"They might just have shot you for that," I said. My mother constantly told me stories about fathers shooting sons in hunting accidents or brothers shooting other brothers accidentally while cleaning rifles. She told those stories with a lot of sighs, High Tragedy. I said, "Guns are just plain dangerous to have around."

"Of course they are," Elaine said. "That's the point."

Claudia said, "Kind of a silly point."

"What I most object to about guns," Doug said, "is that they rob you of the right

to speak. A person with a gun effectively can't hear what you're saying. I don't want to live like that."

"I won't point it at you," Elaine said, sullenly and slurring. I could tell she didn't like being ganged up on. She had a bitter and determined look in her eye, and she muttered something inaudible into her drink. The other four looked like they wanted to get off of this conversation—Elaine wasn't in much of a communicative mood.

"I hope you won't," Doug said eyeing her evenly.

"Okay, then," Geoff said, with an exaggerated rubbing-together of his hands, "so what are we all going to do?"

"Take their pictures next time," I said.

Claudia said, "I hope there isn't going to be a next time."

"That's what I want to talk about," Geoff said. He leaned forward on the sofa and scanned the room making eye contact with everyone who was looking up at him. "Imagine this: it's two a.m., bars are closed, our two hunting friends have run out of liquor on a fine Friday or Saturday night. What do you suppose they'll do?"

"Head for the nearest barn full of illegal hard cider," Diane said.

Claudia groaned and buried her head in her hands, slowly shaking it side to side. Elaine was also shaking her head, but with a grim and determined expression on her face.

* * * * *

Two days after our not-so-merry Christmas, I left work a few minutes early and came home to an empty house. Geoff's and Claudia's cars were parked out front, but I called aloud and got no response except for a pair of muddy paw prints on my chinos when Baggy greeted me. "Bad girl," I said loudly, wiping at the brick-red smudges and wondering where everyone was. Diane was often at work in the evenings, but it was unusual to find Doug and Elaine not home. They were always there. Claudia was done

work in the mid-afternoons, and unless she was tutoring, she was most often at the Farm. Paige still hadn't come back to the Farm since Christmas, and I was curious about whether she'd ever return or not. We hadn't seen or heard anything from the pseudo-cops or the hunters, and no matter how many times Elaine and Doug had told Paige this over the phone, she hadn't come back. They weren't bogged down with work, so it hadn't been an issue, yet.

I looked around for a note to see where everyone had gone. There was a scattered pile of opened and unopened mail on the kitchen table, but no note. I squelched the immediate fear that everyone had been taken hostage by hunters and was being held bound and gagged in the barn while men in blaze orange polished off six hundred gallons of Elysium. That was silly. Plus, they would have probably shot Baggy, and she was fine. Well, muddy perhaps, but unhurt.

I decided to enjoy my alone time in the house; I couldn't remember the last time that I'd been there without anyone else around. Actually, when I thought about it, I couldn't remember a time when I had *ever* been there alone before. I mixed myself a drink to celebrate, and I lit a cigarette in the house, a definite no-no in winter with windows closed. A damp chill hung in the air, almost tangible, a little like death but also comfortable, the kind of slight nip in temperature that makes you happily burrow deeper under the covers.

Putting on a sweater in my room, I looked over at my computer and decided this would be a good time to get some writing done. I'd been thinking about writing a piece for the *Alternative Times*—a nasty editorial complaint about hunters. Similar letters-to-the-editor appeared fairly often in the other town paper, the *Newsleader*, followed by rebuttals by upstanding hunting enthusiasts who always claimed that the percentage of irresponsible hunters was so small as to not merit mention. Then they usually cited the

second amendment and talked about how the Central Virginia deer population was out of control.

I was excited about this piece—I was going to put my own name on it. Luke West, reappearing as something other than the witty commercial dude of the *Alternative Times*. That made me nervous, using my real name, but something had actually happened to *me*, something dangerous. I hadn't just witnessed it, I'd been a part of it. Wanda wouldn't be able to make such a claim. I was in the thick of it. My piece would be scathing but fair, insightful and amusing. My housemates would approve of it, too, which didn't hurt.

I'd been thinking about the piece enough that I didn't bother with an outline—I just started writing, words like barbarian and troglodyte flying from my fingers to the screen. I was near the bottom of the second page, completely immersed in what I was doing, when I thought I heard something clink. I jerked my head toward the door and listened some more. Nothing else. I noticed my bourbon and ginger beside the keyboard, the glass sweating and the ice melting slowly in the cool December of my room. I took a sip, and then heard something again: clink-clink-CLINK. Glass bottles being struck lightly together, like moving a full trash bag after a party.

"Hello?" I called, frowning, still facing the door but unsure where the sound had come from. I peered over my desk to look out the window and saw nothing unusual. Not wanting to be distracted, and also, I suppose, not wanting to find something horrible that I'd have to deal with, I decided it was Baggy and went back to my work.

Crushing the aluminum can in his hand and leering at us, the man in the orange hat tossed his garbage at my girlfriend's truck. Girlfriend? Did I want to say that? Partner? Lover? Housemate? While trying to figure out how to manage that word, I thought I heard a door close in the house.

"Is someone there?" I shouted. No answer, and now I was nervous enough to have to check. I walked around the upstairs, saying *hello*, and then I went downstairs. I didn't hear anything, but as I was heading back to the kitchen from the back bathroom, I noticed that the basement door was half open. That made me very nervous.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" I said, from the top of the stairs. The basement light switched on from a pull chain at the bottom of the stairs. We'd all talked about rigging a string up the stairs, because you could fall and break your neck in the dark. Now I was wishing I'd taken a little more rigging initiative as I peered into the dark. "I'm coming down there," I said. My voice quavered. Great Luke, let the axe-murderers know you're coming—and you have the gall to complain about stupid heroines in horror movies. Something pressed against the back of my leg, and I gasped out loud at the same moment that I saw it was just Baggy. Quietly, thinking myself very smart, I nudged her around me and prodded her down the stairs a few steps in front of me. She disappeared into the darkness, and I could hear her tags clinking together. Maybe that's what I heard, I thought.

"Good girl," a voice said softly out of the darkness. My eyes widened, and then I heard the racket of bottles tumbling over. "Goddamit, NO," the voice yelled at Baggy, "FUCK!"

"Geoff?" I called, warily, still perched at the top of the stairs. I was sure it was his voice. Almost sure. "Geoff, is that you?" I waited, and there was no answer. I was sure it was him, but not sure enough not to be a little paranoid that it wasn't.

I walked down the stairs, my eyes getting used to the dark slowly. Beside the water heater, I saw a dim red light. I squinted at it to figure out what it was, and as I was looking at it, it glowed brightly for a second and lit a face behind it. It was a cigarette ember, and apparently, Geoff was at the other end.

"What're you doing?" I asked. I groped for the light pull and couldn't find it.

"Drinking and smoking and minding my own business," he said.

Something was definitely wrong with him. I gave up my search for the light chain. "Thanks for answering me when I called. You scared the shit out of me."

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," he said.

He was drunk. As that occurred to me, I could smell beer and that horrible Pine-Sol odor of gin. When I'd fully grasped that Geoff was sitting in the dark in the basement by himself—smoking, which he never did or had done before to my knowledge—drinking, which he never did by himself—and home before seven p.m., which was unheard of in recent weeks—then, I became worried. I also wondered if they were my cigarettes. "What's going on?" I asked him, moving closer and fishing my own cigarette out of my shirt pocket.

"I'm just sitting here," he said, gulping a mouthful of beer.

"Okay. So why are you just sitting here, smoking and drinking? Something wrong?" I lit the cigarette and then flicked the lighter over my head, searching for the light pull.

"I busted it," he said, quietly. "Lil fucker snapped off in my hand."

I looked at the socket over my head—two tiny brass beads poked out from the side where a whole chain should have been, so I pinched one between my fingers and pulled. The fixture clicked as though switched, but the light didn't come on.

"Unscrewed it," Geoff said. "Tried to switch it off, the damn thing broke. So I unscrewed it." I screwed it back in and then pulled the chain again. The light came on, and I looked at Geoff sitting there by the water heater, still in his suit and tie. He had a stupid and belligerent look on his face, his chin pulled back into his neck in an exaggerated look of disgust that made thin concentric curves of skin under his chin. An

opened twelve of Bud bottles was beside him, along with a bottle of Aristocrat gin, the cheapest and foulest money can buy. "Want a beer?" he asked me.

I nodded, and he handed me a rapidly warming bottle. The water heater and furnace kept the basement fairly stuffy in the winter. I took a sip and grimaced at the bitter warm beer. I don't know how the English do it. Actually, I don't really believe that they do. "So what's up, to repeat my question," I said.

"You know," he said.

"No I don't."

He scowled at me. "I'm imitating you."

I stared blankly at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

"I'm Luke West. Look—I'm sitting by myself, drinking and smoking and feeling sorry for myself because something shitty happened. And I'm not doing a damn thing about it. Isn't that how you manage everything?" He gave a little laugh as though he expected me to find him funny.

Normally, I would have just walked out, but I was curious. A dozen worst-case scenarios of what could have happened to him flashed through my mind. "You are so amusing. When I am feeling sorry for myself, I try not to be a dick," I said.

"Oooh, touché." He finished off his beer and then lifted the Aristocrat to his mouth. Just watching him put that foul garbage to his lips made my stomach hurt.

"So what shitty thing happened?" I asked.

"You obviously aren't as bright as you pretend to be."

"Thank you very much." I waited for him to go on. He was rapidly getting under my skin.

When he finally started talking, it was more to himself than to me. "The whole time, I've been thinking, if I set myself up not to be disappointed, then I won't be. But

I was totally lying to myself. I was sure I had it made. They said a lot of people don't pass the first time around, but I knew there was no way—"

"You failed the bar?" I asked. He ignored me.

"—that I didn't pass it. I thought, I'll just tell myself I failed, so I won't be all sure of myself and get deflated when the results come out. But I knew deep down that I'd passed. Never a doubt in my mind. Well, that was a joke. Fuck it. I never wanted to be a lawyer in the first place."

"So you failed the bar?" I still wasn't sure.

"Yes, fuck it. I failed the bar. I failed. Do you want to gloat?"

I couldn't answer him immediately. I was in a little bit of shock. Geoff had failed the bar. Of all people. Here's how surprised I was: I thought for just a moment that it was my fault, for keeping him from studying during the summer.

"Well? You want to at least condole me?" Geoff slurred.

But I couldn't yet. I wasn't even really listening to him. If Geoff failed the bar, well. . . . That was like an abomination against the laws of nature and physics. The sun might not rise tomorrow. Water might start flowing uphill. Worst of all, it was a horrible thing that happened to someone I truly liked. Plus, he was right—I did want to gloat. There was a tiny little part of me—very tiny, I'm being honest here—that was pleased that Geoff had failed. Maybe not pleased, but something in me was reacting like this wasn't that bad a thing. I knew it wasn't any kind of real major tragedy—outside of Geoff's perception—and I couldn't help but be slightly tickled. While I was busy suppressing that feeling, I was also berating myself for being such a terrible friend. I'd like to think it was more than just getting a little pleasure out of Geoff's pain. But I don't know what it was. I made myself ignore my thoughts and talk to him.

I stammered, "I'm sorry, Geoff. This blows for you. I can't believe it happened."

"Neither can I. Not only does this completely bite me, but I have to tell all my dingleberry lawyer superiors at work. Those assholes probably already know somehow. Probably shmooze with the bar association dickheads at cocktail parties. Fuck 'em. And then I have to tell everyone here, worst of all Diane. She's going to flip." He took a last puff of his/my cigarette, dangerously close to the filter, and then tossed it in the corner of the basement. I made a mental note of where it fell, because it would be blamed on me when discovered by someone else.

"Diane'll understand, don't worry about her," I said.

"What're you, stupid? Do you totally not know her? She's going to have a stroke. She's counting on me getting paid more by the time lil Cletis is born so she can quit work and not feel guilty about it."

"Cletis?" I said. I hoped he wasn't serious that this was an actual name possibility.

"The fetus," he told me, deadpan. He glared at me for a moment. I busted out laughing; Geoff tried to hold it back but a couple of short snickers came through. I was relieved to see him at least able to laugh. It meant I could handle the situation and wasn't going to have to call 911 or the suicide hotline.

Chapter 31

"I still think we should have gotten a keg," I told Elaine. "People just aren't used to chugging fermented cider."

"The English are," she retorted, not even looking at me. She was making a big sort of puffy globe out of different colored strips of crepe paper.

"Well, that would be a good point if we were having this party in England," I said. "Cabell County may have fox-hunting, but that's about it."

"What I mean is that it's palatable. Besides, why should I go giving my hard-earned money to the competition?"

Competition—that cracked me up. As though Elysium Felonious Cider was giving Anheuser-Busch and Miller a run for their money. (I took a little stroll to the MSU law library and found out that moonshining and bootlegging and everything else Elaine was doing was a felony in the Commonwealth. And I also discovered that there's no statute of limitations on prosecuting a felony.) I personally wanted to get a keg for the New Year's blow-out we were throwing that evening. Kegs just scream 'big party' to me, the way wilted shrimp cocktail and rented tuxes shriek 'prom'. I could always run out and pick one up myself, but that seemed a little sneaky after Elaine had already said she didn't want one. It was our party, all of ours, but it still felt a little more like Elaine's party than mine. I dropped the keg issue.

I looked around us at the spanky clean living room. Glittering letters spelling out "Happy New Year's" were strung across the doorway into the front hall, and there were

small bowls of peanuts or pretzels on every flat surface above knee level. Oddly enough, the thing that made it really look like a party to me was that there were ashtrays next to all these bowls of food. I would be allowed to smoke inside on this one night, saved from having to go out to the front porch or lean my head out of my bedroom window. It somewhat bothered me that dozens of people who all of us only barely knew could come to the house and smoke, but poor old Luke, who lived there, had to dangle out of a window or smoke inside with a fan turned on full blast.

I tried to pull me out of myself by looking at Elaine decked out in one of her sexy lumberjane outfits—longjohn bottoms, a sweatshirt, clunky workboots with mud boulders clinging to the leather above the sole, hair tied in a knot at the back of her head with pieces dangling, and no makeup. This was my Elaine, and I knew that soon she would go upstairs and change into something small, black, and sheer. I didn't want her to. I began to realize how little of a party mood I was in.

I said, "Did you get in touch with Paige? She coming out?"

"She said she would. I hope so—I need her back out here." Elaine tied the crepe paper globe with a string.

"That seems a little callous," I said.

"Hunh?" Elaine asked, her teeth clamped down on the string trying to sever it.

"Well, she's wiggled out about living out here next to psychotic rednecks with firepower—can't say I blame her. And all you're worried about is whether you can get work out of her or not."

"Whoa, grumpy," Elaine said. "I never said that's all I was worried about."

I looked at her blankly. I had the vague feeling that we were going to have a fight. Maybe not we—maybe I was just in a foul mood, the same mental state I'd been in since Christmas Eve dinner. I could feel a fight starting in the back of my mind, like

a pimple too deep to have a head but there nonetheless, growing and exerting pressure outward. This perhaps shows my slightly warped frame of reference.

Elaine continued. "Maybe that did come out a little harshly, I guess. I wish she'd come back out here so I'd have someone besides Doug to talk to all day. I am worried about her, on a friend level, and also on a boss level." She winked at me. "I need my little assistants to run the moonshine out for me."

That was supposed to be funny, but it made my stomach hurt. I did, however, notice that she did something other than laud Doug. There was even a little bit of an apology buried in there, but I didn't acknowledge it. Having that cider around had made me nervous for the past week. It seemed like a hell of a lot more than a week had passed—I had my life threatened by drunk rednecks, spent the worst Christmas of my life, suffered the worst day after Christmas ever listening to my mother moan and spoonfeed me guilt with a shovel, wrote the best piece I'd ever written about the hunters, had my faith in Geoff's perfection shaken, and planned for the 1992/1993 party to end all parties. Plus I always end up drinking a lot around holidays, and when I drink too much, I smoke too much, which makes me hack and feel poisoned. My skin was the color and texture of a small, unripe Dutch cheese.

"Something wrong?" Elaine asked me, when I didn't respond to anything she'd been saying.

"Nope," I answered, not looking up at her.

"You're lying. Anyways, since when do you run around sticking up for Paige?"

She was joking around, but I didn't acknowledge it. I couldn't shake the nasty feeling that had gripped me. "I'm not sticking up for Paige. I'm just feeling a little out of sorts, I guess. I'll be in better shape for the party."

"Anything you want to talk about?" Elaine asked. She put down her crepe globe

and looked at me with her eyebrows raised. She was giving me a genuine open door to tell her what I was thinking. But what could I tell her? *Gee, things just don't seem so great right now. We have psychotic neighbors who might start shooting at us any moment; I hate Doug's guts; we have deer carcasses dangling around here the way some people have windchimes; I'm not at all happy. Wait, there's a hell of a lot more, because I haven't even started griping about us yet. . . .*

I couldn't tell her all that. "Really, no. I've just got a case of grouchiness that I'll get rid of."

"Any particular reason you're feeling grouchy?"

"Okay, Elaine—I'll tell you what my problem is. If you don't stop asking me if something is wrong, I'm going to explode." I clenched my teeth and smiled tensely at her, trying to pretend I was kidding when I actually felt like I might just damn well explode that instant if she didn't stop asking. "Boom!"

She smiled and looked at me from the corners of her eyes. She put down the globe and stood up, stretching her legs. "Much better. I'm going to make me a drink. Do you want one?"

"Sure."

Elaine walked out of the room, and I thought about how much I did not need a drink right now, something to send me spiraling further down than I already was. That was one of those moments when you start to think that maybe you have a drinking problem, because even though I knew I should call out to Elaine to change my order, I didn't. I didn't really have a drinking problem then. Well that's not really true. Let's just say that back then I could stop when I wanted to. That wasn't often, but it's a necessary distinction, regardless.

* * * * *

People starting appearing at eight o'clock exactly. This was strange, because I would normally have expected people to start showing up at least two hours late. Maybe the party had gotten some good press that we weren't aware of, or maybe people still remembered Elaine's blow-out from the year before. As I was sipping a weak bourbon and ginger and blowing up balloons in the sitting room, I was shocked to remember that it had only been a year and some change since the last party. Back when I was still a virgin and still honest about what I thought. After four months, sex had become less of an all-consuming passion and more of a habit.

I would never have guessed that I could have become nonchalant about sex. From the day my first pubic hair appeared my twelfth summer through my twenty-fifth birthday, I think the idea of sex had pretty much hogged most of my mental air time. Now, in four short months, I had gone from sex-obsessed naïf to jaded sex-haver. It just didn't seem so important any more, and that was a brand new concept for me. Not that it wasn't important—it was still great and all, but it just wasn't at the top of every mental to-do list. Me, the guy who wasted a decade of his life pondering the erotic mysteries that had already been solved by every one around him.

I didn't know any of the first fifty people that arrived; they were people that I recognized from around town. Since I didn't spend any time in town anymore, I couldn't even remember their names. I'd been tempted to invite Ranger Rick and Judy, but the thought of them climbing the stairs out of that cellar just seemed too disturbing. I could easily imagine the two of them, stationed strategically equidistant from the food and drink, getting loose-tongued and entertaining my housemates with stories about the day we all came up with my pen name. So I hadn't invited anyone of my own accord. That was weird; I was the one who didn't take the house so seriously, the way Doug and Claudia did, but there I was, the one without any friends outside of the house. A pathetic

indictment of my life. I gulped down the rest of my bourbon and ginger and set the glass down by the kitchen sink instead of refilling it. I needed a mood-lifter, not bourbon.

I was smart to stop drinking. With what happened later that night, someone needed to be sober other than Diane, eternally pregnant and teetotaling, it seemed. But I'm getting ahead of myself. As I left the kitchen, Doug was coming in from the sitting room. He called me dude and asked me if I wanted to get high with him upstairs. I declined without a reason and then we both turned to pay attention to the noise suddenly pouring in from the front door. A pack of six or so guys a few years younger than me were coming in off of the porch, shouting and laughing. I didn't recognize them, but Doug muttered something in my ear and then stepped past me to greet them. I listened to them talk for a minute or so and realized that they were from my favorite deer-slaughtering and hooch-chugging fraternity. Obviously they were wasted, and I wondered how many mailboxes they'd demolished on the drive out to the Farm. Elaine must have invited them, and based on Doug's reaction to seeing them, I'd say that she hadn't told him, at least, let alone the rest of us.

"Who're they?" Claudia asked from directly behind me, startling me.

"Frat boys," I said. If Paige did show, this certainly wasn't going to thrill her. And why *was* I thinking about Paige so much? Elaine's question came back to me. Since when *did* I stick up for Paige?

"What're they doing here?" Claudia said.

"Ask Elaine," I told her, walking off. I danced for a while in the sitting room with Diane. It was a pretty half-hearted attempt at dancing. First of all, I didn't really feel like it, secondly, she couldn't move all that well because her ankles were swollen, and third, it was a CD collection of hilarious disco songs that were rapidly losing their hilarity the more frequently I heard them. She hadn't had much energy recently, since

Geoff had told her about failing the bar. It seemed like she'd lost a lot of steam, but it wasn't clear whether it was because of the Geoff or just a regular run of the pregnancy. She'd come into my room the night Geoff had told her. She said he'd apologized for being obnoxious to me, but I didn't believe her. I felt terrible for her, but there was nothing I could do. She looked old suddenly, haggard, the way I imagined she might look after a particularly grueling week of single motherhood.

Elaine walked into the sitting room while Diane and I were bopping around to "Knock on Wood" with about a dozen other people. Close at her side, practically drooling on her, one of the fraternity boys was sipping a glass of cider. I could tell he was trying to look down the top of her dress. That disgusted me more at Elaine than at him. She introduced him to Diane and me—Nelson was his name, a tall blondish guy with a pockmarked face and an overly developed upper body. Steroids probably, I thought to myself, and after a further thought, I decided I needed to get Elaine away from him. The last thing I needed in my life was to be worrying about Elaine and some other guy five years younger than me.

"You write for the newspaper, right?" Nelson said suddenly.

I nodded blankly at him. He'd taken me by surprise.

"One of your commercial things is on the wall by the house phone," he said. "It's about aspirin. I always stare at it when I'm calling home. It still cracks me up."

I thanked him for the compliment and then couldn't remember what I'd been doing previously. I always got a flushed mixture of embarrassment and pride at mini-celebrityhood when someone mentioned my *Alternative Times* stuff. I was flustered and confused for a moment. "What's your major?" I asked him. That's the stupidest question in the world, the one I remember hating the most in college, as though your major has anything to do with your life and plans.

I didn't hear his answer, still feeling jumbled, and I walked away from the little group, losing myself in a sea of people in the front hallway. The house was getting absolutely crammed full of party-goers, none of whom I knew, and few of whom I suspected had been invited. People were sitting and standing on the staircase, packed into the living room, even out on the front porch where the coolers of cider were stashed. This party was getting enormous, and it was growing by the minute as more and more headlights crested the hill. Cars were parked on the other side of the bridge, in the grass underneath the apple trees. I couldn't even count the cars—there were so many that they were parked away from the streetlight on the bridge and I couldn't see them. A thin stream of people walked over the bridge and onto the island. It was beginning to be less like a party and more like fuel for a riot. My only consolation, as I smoked on the porch and looked out at the orchard-turned-parking-lot, was that there might be enough people there to drink all of the cider. But most of the people were arriving with six-packs or bottles of cheap champagne tucked under their arms, so getting rid of the cider didn't look like much of a possibility.

Paige arrived around 10:00 that night. It was good seeing her, the first time in a week, but when I started talking to her, I realized that I didn't have much to say to her at all. We smiled awkwardly at each other, and I found an excuse to leave. Still, it was comforting to see her. She gave me the feeling that I might be sane after all.

I danced with Elaine for a bit and spent the next hour wandering around the house, not really talking to anyone for more than a second or so. I went upstairs and checked my room occasionally to make sure that no one was going in there. The upstairs bathroom was occupied constantly, and I could smell illicit smoke streaming from under the door. I was completely stone-cold sober, and I noticed how everyone at the party seemed to be getting dumber and louder as the night progressed. I was praying for

midnight to come around so that I could kiss Elaine and then go to sleep. I was even planning on taking some Percosets left over from getting my wisdom teeth out if I couldn't sleep. Turns out I didn't need to have bothered thinking about it.

At midnight, I stood on the front porch with my arm around Elaine. The front yard was a small mob of people shooting champagne corks into the night and setting off minor fireworks. Doug had appointed himself official keeper of the clock, but with that many people and wristwatches, there were at least a dozen different count-downs and shouts of glee welcoming in the New Year. My glass was just drained when I noticed that the door to the barn was wide open. Elaine had specifically closed it to keep people out, and it was gaping open, enough that I could see a deer carcass dangling inside. I wondered if some wayward party guests were perhaps helping themselves to jugs of Elysium. It seemed like a bad idea to me to have random people aware of the fact that we were warehousing hundreds of gallons of perfectly drinkable liquor. I didn't mention it to Elaine immediately. I was content to stand outside in the oddly balmy January air with my arm around her, trying to wish for more than just a new year. I wanted a new start that I could imagine for myself, a way for things to work better. There were plenty of resolutions that I could drum up, but I wanted more than that. Resolutions seem like patches on last year's coat, and as I was standing there with Elaine, I realized that there were so many patches on the old coat that I'd freeze to death if it got cold. I wanted a new coat altogether.

"Here's to a brand new year," Elaine said, hoisting a glass of cider in the air. I had an empty glass in my hand. After drinking to the new year, we kissed for a long time, warming each other. I felt that strong urge again to carry her off, away from the Farm. When we removed our arms from around each other, Elaine was gone almost instantly, disappearing into the crowd on the front yard. I walked around to the barn to

see why the doors were open.

The combination of moonlessness and overly bright floodlights made it impossible to see anything that wasn't directly lit. I peered around the edge of the double door, a large old-fashioned sliding door that was suspended from the top of the door frame and rolled open or closed on ball bearings. Except for the deer, dangling dried and blackened, I couldn't see anything. I waited for my eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, and then I searched for the light switch. As my hand found the switch, I heard something move in the barn. I froze and listened intently. I couldn't hear it again, and then slowly my ears found another sound—it sounded like heavy, rasping breathing. But not quite. Snoring. It was snoring. I flicked on the light switch and looked around for the person napping in the barn.

All I saw was a muddy floor, pocked with footprints, empty stacked crates, and the shelves of cider contentedly fermented and smelling musty against the back wall of the barn. But I could still hear the snoring. The image of some drunken party guest passed out in the barn amused me. I looked behind one stack of apple crates and then another, and there I spotted a figure sitting on a stack of bushel baskets, leaning against the wall of the barn, snoring away. It was a guy about my age, and I grinned to myself as I walked over to shake him awake.

That's when I noticed what he was wearing. He wasn't at all dressed for a New Year's Eve party. He had on a pair of blue work pants, sort of Mr. Goodwrenchesque, and a dirty white t-shirt with a heavy lined flannel shirt on over it. Atop his head was a greasy red Marlboro baseball cap. Next to him was a jug of cider on its side with a pool of wet underneath, presumably what he'd been drinking. I stopped where I was and took a good look at him. I faintly recognized him. I stared at him, trying to place him. Then I knew who he was. My heart skipped a beat and then began pounding furiously.

It was the younger of the two hunters.

I looked again to be sure it was him—Orange Hat. I was certain. He didn't have his rifle, but it still seemed like a stupid idea to mess with him. I mostly wanted to kick him in the ribs or set him on fire, but that seemed a little extreme. I took in a sharp breath and dashed out of the barn, flicking off the light behind me and then carefully closing the door. I could lock him in—there was only the one large door into the barn—and then I could call the police. There were probably a hundred people who could make sure that Orange Hat didn't get away. I had him good. Talk about getting the New Year off to a good start.

My pulse was banging around my adrenalized head and heart, and I took a deep breath and caught sight of Paige on the front porch. I hissed her name, a half whisper, half yell. Although the stereo was blaring and people were making an enormous racket, I didn't want to take any chances of alerting Orange Hat. There wasn't any way to lock the barn from the outside.

Paige walked over to me, looking suspiciously at me.

"What?" she said.

"Shh." I took her by the shoulder and walked her a few steps away from the barn door. "I need you to go inside and call the police. One of those asshole hunters is actually passed out in the barn."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"You're kidding! Oh, man—" She was gone before I had a chance to tell her anything else. I relaxed and leaned against the side of the barn, my foot holding the door closed. I'd be ready to throw all my weight against it to keep it in place. We had him. And he would lead us to the other hunter—and then we wouldn't have anything else to

worry about, intruder-wise, at the Farm.

Paige was back outside almost immediately. "The cops are on their way," she said. "I may have exaggerated the urgency of our situation a little." She grinned at me.

We looked at each other for a moment. I wished that instant that the odd old tensions between us would disappear. I found myself unable to remember in the first place why I had never liked her.

"Should we tell the others?" she asked me.

"I hate to break up the party, but I guess we probably should," I said.

She volunteered to go find people, and then asked if Orange Hat had his rifle with him. I said no, and then she asked if he maybe had a pistol or something with him.

"He's a hunter, not a mafioso," I said.

"What if he wakes up and has a gun?" she asked. I didn't like thinking about that, and I could tell from the stricken, I-just-drank-sour-milk look on her face that she didn't like the idea either. Paige went off without another word to find Elaine and Doug. I resumed my sentry position by the door, petrified that any moment the drunk under my watch would begin shooting holes through me and the door.

I didn't have time to worry long—Doug and Elaine came charging toward the barn after less than a minute, followed by the others. Apparently Paige hadn't said anything other than to run to the barn because of an emergency. Claudia later told me that she thought someone had been hit by a car in the driveway. All of them asked me the same panting questions, and I was too busy hushing them to answer them. Once they'd all stopped jabbering, I told them what was going on, and we all stood there for a moment, nobody really having any ideas about the right thing to do.

"How long did the cops say they'd be?" Geoff asked.

While Paige briefly recapped the conversation, I noticed that the huddle of the

seven of us by the barn was beginning to attract the attention of the party guests. Several of them were headed our way, and a good number of the people in the front yard were turned around, peering at us to see what was happening. I noticed Margitte behind a couple of stoner-looking guys walking in our direction.

Suddenly, Diane grabbed tightly onto Geoff's arm. She looked like she'd won the lottery for a second, and then her wide open features crumpled into a look of panic.

"We have got to get him out of there," she said. "The cider is in there—we can't afford to have the cops poking around. They've got more evidence against moonshining than they do against the hunter guy."

I felt my ears get warm. I hadn't thought of that.

"Oh, man," Elaine groaned.

"Forget it," Paige said. "That guy's dangerous. We leave him there til the police get here. There's no reason for them to think the cider is anything other than cider anyway."

"Until Orange Hat starts answering their questions," I said.

Everyone began talking at once. Doug thought we should go in and drag Orange Hat out of the barn so that the cops wouldn't need to look in the barn. He was a little drunk. Paige repeated that we didn't know whether this guy was armed or not. Elaine kept exclaiming to herself and anyone listening how we were going to nail this bastard's hide to the wall. She was a lot drunk. Geoff was trying to enlist people to agree with him and Doug to drag the guy out of the barn—the police wouldn't be able to even look in the barn without a search warrant. I thought that would be a bad moment to make a wisecrack about not being able to trust Doug's knowledge of the law. Claudia said she was with Paige, and Diane thought we needed to do whatever necessary to keep the cider from the cops. I said I didn't think the cops would be interested in the cider—they

weren't ABC or ATF agents, just regular old cops. Elaine shouted that she was going to see this son of a bitch hang.

Our discussion became moot moments later when the blue lights of one and then two more police cars lit up the orchard. The cars descended the hill toward the house. As the lights got brighter, I could hear the volume of the party grow, all wondering what was happening.

"That was comfortingly speedy," Claudia.

"Wait til we're riding back to town in a paddy wagon on felony moonshining charges," Diane said.

"He's gonna rue the day he fucked with Elaine Riccio," Elaine hollered.

Chapter 32

Blue lights washed across the Farm in waves. When the two police cars came to a rest in the driveway, the crowd had gotten almost silent, the hush broken only by the jarring crackle of the police radios. For someone clicking through the channels and coming across the scene without context, it probably would have looked like a rumble or a very large, older, festive street gang being busted by a small handful of resentful cops. They had disgust written all over their faces. I was praying that it was a generalized cop distaste for everything rather than a specific hatred of what they saw. Cops are only allowed two faces it seems—disgusted and stoic.

Geoff and Diane walked over to the first policeman that got out of his car. Through some kind of group ESP, we decided that a pregnant woman and a pseudo-lawyer would catch the cops off guard. I stayed back with the others by the barn, guarding the door and holding onto Elaine to keep her from running over to the cops and making more of a mess than we were already in.

"Let go," she hissed at me and jerked her arm, trying to wrench her elbow out of my grasp. I clamped down on it a little harder, just to let her know that I was still there, and then I loosened my grip. The last thing any of us wanted was Elaine with an attitude barking at the cops. I just wanted them to scoop up Orange Hat, cart him away, and put him in jail for a decade. That was before I was introduced to the drawn-out nightmares of police procedure.

I watched Diane talking to one cop, a youngish jarheaded guy who looked short

enough to have a major chip on his shoulder, the kind who wear mirrored sunglasses inside. She had her hands pressed against her kidneys, pushing her belly forward. It accentuated her pregnant balloon more than the tent-like dress she wore. She pointed to the barn, and then he and two of the other cops strode across the yard toward us. One of the cops stayed by the cars, crossing his arms in front of him and surveying the party with what looked an awful lot like contempt from where I was standing. I don't know why they sent so many. Maybe they beef up patrols on New Year's. Diane and Geoff followed behind.

I leaned toward Elaine, who was sullenly watching the policemen coming toward us. "Please, just keep quiet while these guys are here."

"Don't treat me like a child," she said loudly, jerking her arm again. With the police watching us, I suddenly felt like I shouldn't be holding her like that. It looked suspicious.

"Which one of you is the one that saw him?" Jarhead bellowed at us when he was thirty feet away.

"Me," I said weakly, holding my hand up. I watched Claudia slowly sidle up to me and move Elaine away. He asked me a few short questions, until he was standing at the barn door with the other two cops behind him. They were both older than Jarhead, but still pretty young. I noticed that one of them had an odd-looking bald spot on the side of his head, a small shiny patch of pink scalp. It gave him a much more human look than the other two cops with their military bearing. He looked slightly scared.

Jarhead peered into the crack of the barn door. "There a light in here?" I nodded and put my arm inside the door, feeling for the switch. There was something a little frightening about sticking my hand in the crack, as though some closet or under-the-bed monster was going to chew it off. I flicked the light on and then yanked my arm back

quickly. Jarhead put his eye to the crack and then pushed the door open wide enough to walk through. The other two cops stood right behind him.

"Anyone in here?" he called out, the same way a janitor will bellow into an opposite sex bathroom. There was no answer.

"He was behind the stack of crates against the far wall," I said. "He was asleep." I was beginning to feel ineffectual and slightly foolish. Here we were, seven of us and one passed-out guy in the barn. What were we doing calling the police in? And not only were there seven of us, but another five dozen mildly to heavily inebriated people were standing in the front yard swarmed around the police cars, on the front porch, in the house, looming around the barn trying to find out what was going on. The champagne bottles in their hands would have made perfect weapons. Why had we called the police?

"What are all those jugs?" Bald Spot asked of no one in particular. No one answered; I wanted to turn around and look at everyone else, but I didn't dare. I was standing closes to him.

"Apple cider," Paige said from behind me. What else was there to say? I had to remind myself that it was the truth, and there was no reason for the cops to think otherwise. I think it pays to lead a virtuous, non-criminal life. I couldn't handle the tension of always waiting to get caught. Sort of like lying.

"My grandparents used to make cider," the other cop said.

Jarhead turned around and glared at Bald Spot and Other Cop, for talking too much, I guess. They were then silent, and the three of them walked inside the barn.

"We are *fucked*," Diane whispered. None of the rest of us said anything. We waited for something to happen inside the barn. I could hear the cops muttering to each other, and then I distinctly heard Jarhead say loudly "Hey buddy, wake up." When I looked inside the barn, the three of them were standing in a huddle beside the stack of

crates. I told the others and we all crowded around the door of the barn watching the cops with their backs to us. One reached down and pulled Orange Hat to his feet.

"It *is* him," I heard Claudia say.

"You were doubting me?" I asked.

Diane shook her head. "It makes me mad just looking at him." I agreed with her. The cops were talking more quietly now that they had him awake and on his feet. I couldn't hear what they were asking him. Other Cop began talking loudly into his walkie-talkie, but it was so loud and buzzing that I couldn't really get what he or the other end were saying.

"You drunken piece of shit!" Elaine yelled into the barn as she pushed past us. She was halfway to where the cops were standing before any of us had the presence of mind to try and stop her. I think all of us cried "Elaine" at the same time as we lunged forward to grab hold of her. She caught all of us off guard, and no one was able to rein her in before she was standing two feet from Orange Hat and the cops, cussing like a sailor being evicted from a trailer.

Orange Hat stared at her, wobbly, disheveled, and shorter than I would have guessed. He looked more like a punk and less like the spawn of Satan that he'd been in my memory.

"Ma'am, please calm down," Other Cop said to Elaine.

"Ma'am? Please. I'm not even thirty."

"I think you've had a little too much to drink," Jarhead said to her.

Elaine said, "It's New Year's Eve for Christ's sake. If I'm still standing then I obviously haven't had too much to drink."

I winced. I was wishing her to shut up. Behind me, I heard Diane mutter "What is wrong with her?" to herself.

The cops asked Elaine to calm down while she babbled on about what Orange Hat had done just a week ago, shooting up her land, hunting illegally, and she added, "And generally just acting like the stupid inbred redneck fuck that he is."

I watched the expression on Jarhead's face harden. It occurred to me that, in the grand scheme of things, while Jarhead and the other cops might have shared general law-abiding behavior with me and the other residents of the Farm, in most other lifestyle respects they were probably a hell of a lot closer to Orange Hat and company. I needed to stop her before she started some serious problems for us. Before I could get to her, Geoff was already there with one arm on her shoulder and another at her elbow.

"I'm sorry officers," he said. "I hope you'll ignore her. Having this gentleman here"—he pointed at Orange Hat—"threaten her with a rifle has really upset her. She's been—"

"Don't patronize me," Elaine said, squirming and turning to face Geoff.

"That wasn't a rifle, college boy," Orange Hat said, "it was a shot gun." He spat. Jarhead and Other Cop seemed to find him vaguely amusing.

At that, Elaine just about lost it. She began yelling at Orange Hat, and for a moment, I thought she was going to try and hit him or wreak some sort of mayhem upon his face. Geoff managed to hold onto her elbow, and Jarhead stepped in front of her and took her by the shoulders.

"You keep acting like this, ma'am, and I'm going to arrest you for drunk and disorderly." He looked at Geoff. "I suggest you control your girlfriend," he said.

"Don't you dare threaten me. And I'm not his girlfriend, you jerk," Elaine said. Jarhead looked stoic and chewed the inside of his mouth. I could tell he was considering what to do with her.

Diane brushed past me. "Just be quiet, Elaine," she said. "Come inside with me."

She looked at me for support.

"Just do what she says," Geoff said to Elaine, leaning in toward her.

This was the moment when the chaos started. I put my arm around her to walk inside with her, wedged between me and Diane. I tried to start walking, but she wouldn't budge. Absolutely stubborn and too drunk to realize what an idiot she was being. I was thankful once again that I wasn't drinking, and I thought about how much I needed a cigarette. Diane glanced at me and rolled her eyes.

"She won't move," she said to Geoff. "Elaine, cut it out. Do you really want to be doing this?"

"Elaine," Geoff said, in his most patronizing manner that would have bugged the hell out of me had I been in Elaine's shoes. He was annoyed with her though, and I didn't blame him. I felt responsible for her, but I didn't want to be. I didn't particularly like what I was seeing.

"All of you get *off* of me!" she shouted. "This is my goddamn house and I can be dunk and belligerent if I want."

Other Cop said, "He's serious about taking you in."

"What you need to do is put this dirtbag in jail," Elaine said, pointing at Orange Hat. She was acting bizarre. I couldn't figure out if this was just extremely drunk or what. I'd seen her bossy and pushy, but never like this before.

"For God's sake Elaine, shut up," Geoff shouted at her.

"Don't yell at me," Elaine said.

"You're making an ass out of yourself," he said.

"Go fuck yourself, Geoff," she shouted.

"You need to stop yelling and go inside," he yelled back.

Elaine turned and glared at him. She rolled her eyes and said, "Look Geoff, I

hope you don't think sleeping together gives you the right to boss me around." Then she turned away.

I was getting ready to say something, but it died in my throat.

"Oh fuck you Elaine," Geoff yelled while Diane's brow furrowed and she nearly screamed "*Whar?*"

"It was a long time ago," I said to her back. I don't think she heard me. Geoff glared at Elaine for a moment.

"Go ahead and arrest her," he said to the cops. His nostrils flared, and he was going to say something else, but instead he clenched his fists, turned around, and walked off. I looked at everyone's faces—Diane gaping pregnantly, Doug and Claudia and Paige looking extremely confused, the cops sneering, Orange Hat looking like he was about to vomit, Elaine watching Geoff walk away. He weaved through the party guests littered all over the driveway, climbed the porch, and disappeared into the house.

"You two are sleeping together?" Diane shrieked at Elaine.

"Gross. Don't jump to conclusions," Elaine said.

In the following interlude of near silence, broken only by the steady chatter of the crowd on the front yard, the cops seemed to lose interest in us, and they escorted Orange Hat to the cars and put handcuffs on him. Elaine was quiet now, looking more subdued, but Diane looked like she'd just seen a puppy run over by a semi. I gave the police a statement about what had happened this night and Christmas. I tried apologizing some more about Elaine, but they didn't want to hear it. I was afraid they'd take it out on our guests and arrest everyone for drunk driving as the pulled away from the Farm.

They didn't. As soon as the police cars were out of sight, people were leaving the party by the bunch. It was almost two-thirty in the morning by that time. It was a brand new year, and it had gotten off to a horrible start. How do you stay in love with

someone that gets on your nerves? It seems easier with family. There, you've got no choices. You simply put up with people that you had nothing to do with choosing to be related to. But with someone you think you love—what allows you to stick with that person when they're horrible? And what if they start being horrible all the time, so much so that you can no longer stand them? I was thinking that maybe that was why people got married—so that you had a reason to stick around during the bad times. I still wasn't quite sure what the point in that was.

All I knew was that more and more strongly, I was finding myself tired of dealing with Elaine. I was scared of what that meant—possibly another twenty-five years of celibacy and partial misery. My wish of taking her away from the Farm had vanished. It was all too obvious to me right then, with Elaine sulking on the front porch and Diane and Geoff shouting at each other upstairs, their exact words muffled but their emotions perfectly clear, it was all too obvious that it was just as much Elaine as the Farm that I needed to get away from. Eight short months was enough—enough for me to almost completely realize that I needed to remove myself from the situation. Things would have been much easier if I had only decided that a week earlier.

* * * * *

I was downstairs with Claudia when the police came back. We each had our own large green trash bags that we were filling with beer cans. We'd already taken four trash bags full of non-recyclable garbage out to the barn, and we were working on the cans now. In the process of collecting trash, Claudia discovered this guy named Chris zonked behind the sitting room futon. We tried to wake him and move him and ended up just tossing blankets on him while we gathered the rest of the trash. The volume of metal was amazing to me—three large bags full of reeking dried beer cans that I'd crushed with my boots. That's a lot of trash for one mediocre, ruined New Year's Eve party. The smell

from the bag I was dragging around was making my stomach clench. For the dozenth time that evening, I applauded myself for not drinking any more. I wouldn't have been able to do it, and would probably have passed out cozied next to Elaine upstairs. I wasn't sure where everyone was, whether they were asleep or not. Paige had left with Margitte shortly after the shouting match between Diane and Geoff had started upstairs. That had ended abruptly some time earlier, and now the house was pretty much quiet except for the scraping of the bags on the hardwood floors and the glug-glug of half-emptied beer cans being poured down the kitchen sink or into the downstairs toilet.

"Luke, come here," Claudia called from the living room. There was an edge to her voice begging me to come now instead of after a few minutes. It was funny to me at that moment that I could have lived with her for four months and still not know her very well, but I could hear that edge to her voice and know what it meant. I poked my head into the living room and saw that she was looking out of the window, silhouetted by the glow of headlights. I peered over her shoulder, and as I was about to ask her who was driving in, I spotted the bar of lights across the top of the car that identified it as a police car. It bumped its way across the bridge.

"What are they doing back here?" I said.

"There are four cars," Claudia told me, and as she said it, the second police car came into view in the light over the bridge. Maybe they need us to make some sort of statement, I thought, or they found Camouflage Pants and need us to identify him, too. Or maybe we're all screwed. "What the hell are four of them doing here at this time of night?" she said.

It was minutes before four a.m. according to my wristwatch. "Think we should get everyone up?" I asked her.

"Let's wait and see," Claudia said, walking out of the living room toward the front

door. As she opened it, the glare from one of the police cars filled the doorway.

"Oh boy," I sighed as we walked out onto the porch. It had gotten colder. The balmy night we'd been enjoying four hours earlier had turned frigid. Claudia wrapped her arms around herself.

The other police cars filed across the bridge as the first car stopped and Jarhead emerged from the passenger seat. He was looking as officious as he had the first time he'd been out to the Farm that night. He made eye contact with me but didn't hurry to the porch. He was taking his time, I believe enjoying watching us stew. I don't know for certain about Claudia, but I was definitely stewing.

All four of the cars were by this time stopped and disgorging blue-clad cops. Jarhead walked up to us with another cop beside him, a woman with a big fat brown braid dangling in the center of her back. Rapunzel deputized. I saw Other Cop, but I didn't see Bald Spot anywhere. Two other policemen were behind Jarhead and Rapunzel. They all looked very serious, and I didn't like the looks of it one bit. While I was quaking in my shoes, another pair of headlights crested the hill. I wondered who it was and then felt my stomach churn when I saw it was a big white police van, the kind I imagined they'd use to raid a brothel or something where they needed to stuff a lot of people into a paddy wagon but this was the 90's, so they were using a van instead.

"Fuck," Claudia hissed under her breath. The other four police men that had gotten out of their cars walked to the barn.

"Do you both live here?" Jarhead asked when he was about ten feet from the porch. He flashed his badge like this was a television show and I didn't believe that he was a policeman. Like some very intricate con artist is going to go to all this trouble. We nodded, stupidly, as it turned out. "Get their names and read them their rights," Jarhead said casually over his shoulder to the cops behind him.

"What's going on?" Claudia said while I asked, "What for?"

Jarhead looked evenly at us and raised an eyebrow slightly. "Breaking section six four two dot seven of the code of the Commonwealth of Virginia," he said, and buried under his pseudo-military bearing I thought I detected a smile of satisfaction. "In a nutshell, bootlegging."

While Claudia and I protested and sputtered and tried to explain, Jarhead very calmly showed me a piece of paper for a nanosecond—a warrant. Like I had ever seen one before. It could have been the instructions to a toaster oven. Like I could stop him without it. He walked past us, pushing opened the screen door. I wanted badly to stop him, to at least give me the privilege of waking everyone in the house up and give them some warning so they wouldn't flip when they were woken from a miserable slumber to find cops in their room slapping handcuffs on them. Because that's what they were doing to me and Claudia on the front porch. Shackling us, asking out names, and herding us toward the van.

I always was afraid of going to jail. I just can't imagine anything worse, really. I didn't ever think that I would be able to handle jail, that I'd probably go crazy from the boredom and the shame. I surprised myself that night by not freaking out. It wasn't at all like I'd ever imagined it, with a zillion cops pointing guns at me and blue and red lights flashing as I came out of the bank with my arms up. I wasn't even scared, I don't think. I just felt numb, the way you feel after a car accident when all you wish is that you could go back and erase the last ten minutes of your life and everything would be fine.

We sat in the warmth of the van (some small comfort—always the optimist, I am) for what felt like fifteen to twenty minutes before I heard Elaine arguing with the cops outside somewhere.

"This is my property!" Elaine was saying, rather shouting over someone talking at the same time in a calmer voice that I couldn't make out. I hoped she wasn't making too big of a scene.

"Elaine, shut up!" Geoff.

"She's pregnant for Christ's sake! I am fully responsible for all of this—I made the cider, I sold it—" Elaine.

"Elaine!" Diane.

"This is bogus—I passed out. God damn! Is that against the law?" I didn't know whose voice that was.

The back door of the van swung open, and they were all lined up with their hands cuffed in front of them. Elaine, Geoff, Diane, Doug—with bedhead-looking hair and pissed-off expressions. Behind them was Chris, the guy who had passed out behind the futon. I guessed they'd made a clean sweep of the house and didn't care who they busted. As miserable as I was, I couldn't help feeling sorry for poor Chris. Hell of a thing to happen. While they were piling into the back of the van, Baggy came out of nowhere and leaped up into the van, extremely excited and energetic. One of the cops exclaimed about her and crawled in between Diane and Doug to drag Baggy out of the van. I hoped Baggy would be okay while we were all incarcerated.

Seven of us were stuffed into the van, glum and silent, except for Chris who was still mostly drunk and bumming out. He introduced himself to Doug and Claudia, the only ones who he didn't know. "Since we're getting busted together and all," he said as he awkwardly shook Doug's manacled hand.

"I'm sorry they wouldn't listen to me," Elaine said. "None of you should be here except for me."

"It's a little late for that," Diane scowled at her. "My baby is going to be in

prison before it's even born."

Elaine looked to me for support. I put my head down and she stammered, "But . . . well I tried—"

"Just shut up," Geoff said. "For once, Elaine, just shut the fuck up. And no one say *anything* without a lawyer."

I could tell she was looking at me, but I just couldn't look back. This is basically the end of the whole story, really, when I think about it. I didn't know it at the time. All I knew was it was a long, tense ride to the Cabell County Police station in Shiflettsburg.

Chapter 33

After refusing to make statements, Geoff and Doug and Chris and I were put into the crowded drunk tank. If you've never been in a jail on New Year's, let me tell you it is not a pretty sight. It's one of the biggest drinking nights of the year, probably the biggest. The cops are pretty lenient, I know that from my own experience tilting champagne bottles on the MSU campus or at the PeachTree center on New Year's Eves past. But no matter how lenient they are, they still end up arresting a buttload of people for being drunk in public or getting into fights or driving drunk or a host of other infractions, not the least of which includes suspicion of bootlegging. So there we were, crammed into this stinking cage the size of a racquetball court with at least forty other guys. I think they put most of the serious criminals in another place for the night, or at least that's what I kept telling myself. If I'd fully extended my arms and legs I could have hit twelve people. I didn't want to nod off next to some axe-murderer and not know it.

Not that I was getting any sleep. I was so exhausted that all I wanted to do was sleep, but at the same time, I was feeling completely sick to my stomach and wired. If there'd been a bed under me I couldn't have fallen asleep. I mentally paced while Geoff went and made the necessary phone calls to get some lawyers from his firm in to help us all out. I declined my own phone call. Luckily, I had work off that day. I mean, who was I going to call? Hi Mom, Happy New Year's, guess what?

Chris was fast asleep with his head tipped back against the wall less than twenty minutes after we got there. Geoff and Doug and I were talking about what to do and

decided that all we really could do was play dumb, like we didn't have anything to do with the selling of the cider, which was basically true. We all knew about it, but we hadn't helped, at least Geoff and I hadn't. Doug had gone with Elaine to make sales pitches, and he was an employee of Elysium. He decided to go ahead and deny involvement anyway. Elaine wasn't likely to say otherwise, and beside, if he admitted to anything, they'd end up dragging Paige into the whole thing as well. So Doug was going to lie, which seemed to me very much the antithesis of everything he generally spouted.

While the three of us were pow-wow-ing, I happened to notice a tall skinny policeman leading a guy about my age down the hallway. He didn't have handcuffs on, so I figured that they must be setting him free. I stared for a minute before I realized that it was Orange Hat. He looked severely hung over and miserable, which was a slight consolation. Here we were, locked up, and Orange Hat was getting out. I didn't bother pointing him out to Geoff and Doug. It would only rile them both.

I started to fret about an hour after we got there—they'd taken my lighters from me. I had cigarettes, but no way to smoke them. It took me about three minutes of sitting quietly imagining what would happen to me stuck in a cell for a week with no way to have a cigarette before I began to sweat and my heart started racing.

"I need a cigarette," I said quietly to Geoff, trying to sound in control, but as soon as it came out of my mouth this little whiny squeal escaped with it. A man who reminded me of my seventh grade earth science teacher snored loudly at my feet. Geoff shrugged at me, and instantly I hated him. I worked myself up to the point of complete panic.

In my nine years of smoking heavily, I had never, not once, gotten into a situation where I didn't have a spare pack of cigarettes and a spare light within reach. I brought

extras when I went hiking, when I got in the car, when I traveled, everywhere—I would even bring more than one set of spares if I was going somewhere like the beach where the possibility of wet cigarettes was greater. Now here I was, with a pack of opened cigarettes in my shirt pocket and an unopened pack in my pants pocket—and no lighter. I walked to the bars and held them, like on TV—but they were much thinner than they are on TV, more like a sturdy fence than maximum-security-escape-from-Alcatraz bars. "I need a light," I said dully, trying to squelch the fear in my voice. As soon as it came out, I lost it.

I started screaming that I needed a goddamn light and they couldn't do this to me and due process and violations of my civil rights and paying taxes and a lot of other crap I'm ashamed to admit. I woke everyone in the cell, and a seriously pissed-off-looking policeman poked his head around the corner. He told me to shut up. Then he offered me a light, and holding the lit match while I scrambled for a cigarette, he threatened to knock the shit out of me if I tried anything. I ignored him and filled my lungs, in my mind already planning to light my next cigarette with the stub of the one I was smoking, chain smoking for hours if necessary until Geoff figured out what we were going to do.

Once my nicotine scare was gone, I was able to think more clearly about what was going on. The problem was, I was so tired, I couldn't think straight and my mind kept wandering and I'd remember where I was. Every twenty minutes or so, one of the cops would let a guy out of the cell. I felt like a puppy in a pet shop window, scrambling for attention, hoping he'd pick me, as though the cop was choosing rather than following orders.

I had a lot of time to think, sitting there in the desolate cell of the police station with the hard boards of the bench I was sitting on boring into me. My mind was completely scattered from sleep deprivation and probably stress too. I wasn't thinking

clearly, but I had some things to say to Elaine, and they couldn't wait. I thought about them and rehearsed them while I waited. And waited. *Elaine, I think I should move away from the Farm.* No. *Elaine, I think that we should go back to being friends.* Nope. *Elaine, I think that nothing is working out and I'm miserable and I've given this a lot of thought and this has nothing to do with the fact that we are jailbirds but I think that we need to break up.* Break up. Almost as terminologically stupid as girlfriend.

After we'd been there for three hours or so, the pissed-off cop who'd given me a light came and let Chris go. Chris flashed us a peace sign and then left. The cop wouldn't answer any of Geoff's or my questions, but I figured they must have talked to one of the girls and realized that Chris really didn't live at the Farm and had done nothing more than been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Which was very much how I was feeling. Wronged. In a multiplicity of ways.

The three of us were finally released at eleven o'clock that morning when two lawyers from Geoff's firm showed up and wrangled with the police for a while. They let us out and let us go, completely free. Geoff was mortified at the whole situation, but these two guys—more like smarmy Little League coaches than lawyers, if you ask me—seemed to get a kick out of it. I never even had to talk to the police. Doug and I stood quietly by a wall while Geoff and the lawyers talked to various policemen, uniformed and not. A while later, when I was getting really bored and actually sleepy, Claudia and Diane came through a doorway and joined us, both looking the worse for wear. I craned my neck to see behind them. There was no sign of Elaine.

"We can go," Geoff said, turning to face me and the others, rubbing his hands together.

"Where's Elaine?" I asked.

Geoff chewed the inside of his lip and explained that she would be at the station

a while longer while they processed the formal charges against her. They were calling in ABC agents and also checking to see whether there were any federal charges they could press against her and call in the ATF guys. Seriously. I don't think it really occurred to me that we had possibly been in pretty severe trouble until Geoff said that. It'd felt like getting harassed by the cops for camping where you weren't supposed to or smooching in a car somewhere. This was big time though. Elaine was actually being charged.

No one seemed to care that Elaine was in such deep shit—they all just wanted to go home and go back to bed. Geoff said that the two lawyers, Houston and Tucker, their last names, I presumed, could take care of everything. That didn't matter to me. I went back to the Farm with them to get my car and then turned around and drove back to town to wait for Elaine. I didn't want to leave her alone at the police station. Even if I couldn't wait around with her, I didn't feel right having her there by herself.

So I sat in the waiting room with my mind spinning, thinking the same thoughts I'd been thinking in the cell, wondering if I was doing the right thing. Wondering what would happen now. There was this nasty gunky resin on the arm of the chair I was sitting in, like old varnish or wax or something. It probably had bacteria in it from every crook and their mother who had passed through the Cabell County police station, but I picked at it nonetheless, slowly cleaning it away from the blond wood underneath.

"Luke," Elaine said, interrupting my thoughts, standing there in front of me looking awful and dejected. I thought I imagined her for a moment—my mind was foggy, and she was completely out of context. There was nothing to say to her, or anything to do other than stand up and wrap my arms around her. Normally, she would have cried, but this was beyond crying, this was just rock bottom. I stood there for a minute or so, hugging her and feeling guilty for my thoughts earlier about breaking up,

flicking the gunk way from under my nails. "Do you feel up to talking?" I asked her.

She nodded her dark hair against my shoulder and fell a little limply against me. "I guess. Thank you for waiting."

My arm still around her, we walked out of the police station, and I knew I couldn't tell her what I wanted to tell her. I suggested we go grab a bite to eat, but she just wanted to go home and crawl into bed.

Driving back to the Farm, I completely lost my courage to clear my chest, but I also felt like it just wasn't the right time. Like there ever was a right time for that sort of thing. Even if there was a right time, this wasn't it. It was a relief not to have to say anything, but I'd also gotten so worked up about it that I couldn't help myself from babbling a little.

"I know this is no big concern of yours right now, but everyone is really happy that they aren't implicated in any of this stuff, and they're all grateful, including me, that you told the cops that it was all your fault, which you totally didn't have to do." I looked over at her, but she just stared out of the window at the dead brown grass that speeding by. I stopped talking because my voice was just filling my car without doing anything other than bang around and make noise.

A minute or so later, Elaine said, "Luke, I might be going to jail."

I didn't say anything. She was right.

She shook her head, staring unfocused in front of her. "I'm about as stupid as possible."

"Elaine. No you're—"

"I thought—I'm serious here. I thought that because it was me doing it that it couldn't be that bad." She shifted in her seat and looked at me. I kept my eyes on the road.

"Wait. There's a huge difference between bad and illegal," I said.

"Right. Illegal. Whatever. Do you know how arrogant that is? For me to assume that because it was just little old me doing something, that it couldn't possibly be something that I could actually get in trouble for? That's why I'm stupid."

"Elaine."

"I'm enough of an enormous fuck-up to get my friends and ever houseguests, for God's sake, arrested."

We weren't technically arrested, more like impounded, but I didn't say anything. I wanted her to know that I probably wasn't the best person to sympathize with her right then, but I just kept quiet and nodded while she talked. All the way back to the Farm, she berated herself, and all I could think was *it's a little late now*. I drove across the bridge and pulled my car onto the grass beside the barn. The doors to the barn were wide open. All of the cider was gone, impounded, probably to end up passed around the table at some policeman's poker night. It was about one in the afternoon, but there was no sign of life anywhere. Everyone was still asleep. I wondered if Baggy was okay.

Elaine made no moves to get out of the car. I turned off the ignition and juggled the keys up in the air, nervously, the noise sinking into my skin like prickly heat.

"I don't want to go in there." she said.

"Okay," I said. "I have a confession." I started talking fast before I could stop myself. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to say, but it was a start. "Something I've been thinking about for a long time that I have to say now. I don't think it is that big a deal, but I just have to get it off my chest because . . . well, I just do. So do you remember back in August that article that I wrote about what's his face the prophet-y guy? The nasty one that made you all so mad?"

Elaine looked at me, uncomprehending.

"You do remember it, right?" I asked.

She looked a little disgusted and irritated. "Of course. It was like only four or five months ago. What does this have to do with me probably going to jail?"

Something in her tone was making me mad, the teenage duh quality seeping into her voice. "Nothing Elaine. Absolutely nothing. I just wanted to come clean and say that . . . um, okay. Okay. I wrote it and it was published as written and my editor never changed a word, and I meant everything I said."

Elaine raised her eyebrows. "So basically you lied."

"Basically."

"So let me get this straight. We sleep together for the first time, and then like the next day, you concoct this enormous lie. Wait—first you do something spiteful like writing it in the first place, and then you concoct the lie. That's nice, Luke."

"I wrote it before we slept together," I said. "Look, forget it. I'm not trying to defend myself. I feel guilty about lying and I wanted to be honest, okay?"

Her eyes widened, but instead of looking hostile, she was looking like she might just deflate and weep. I remembered for the first time that she had been pretty much inebriated the night before, and I wondered if she was hung over or whether the threat of imprisonment sort of made a hangover pale in comparison. "But how could you lie about something like that, and why are you telling me about it now?"

Because there are other things I have to say that are harder. . . . "I was sitting in that cell this morning, thinking about it over and over. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't have lied in the first place," she whispered to me.

I nodded and stared dully out the windshield at the woods across the river. "I realize that now," I said, my voice calm, matter-of-fact, and resigned. The way I like to

sound in an argument, if that's what you could call this. "That's why I'm saying this in the first place."

"How can stand by the stuff you wrote?" she asked.

I waved my hand in front of me. "Let's not talk about that right now. I'm too fuzzy brained."

We both sat quietly in the car, not talking and staring ahead of us, like two high school sophomores on a date, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Baggy suddenly appeared at my window, her paws up against the glass. She barked sharply at the two of us and then ran off; her nose left wet marks and fog on the window.

"So why'd you lie then, Luke?" Elaine asked me.

"It's hard to remember," I told her, although I knew ten reasons why, had not forgotten and probably wouldn't ever. "Mostly because I didn't want to lose you at the time."

Elaine reached over and grabbed my hand and stroked it with her own. "That is a terrible reason to lie to me," she said, leaning closer to me and kissing my neck.

"Yup," I said, not responding. I had this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'd told her what I'd meant to tell her, what I'd been holding in for months, but it didn't make me feel any better. There were other more pressing things that I had to say, and what I thought about some phony guru was just about the last thing in the world standing between me and Elaine that day.

"I'm mad about all of this," Elaine said, sounding decidedly un-mad. "But I still want to thank you for waiting for me."

I said, "Sure, it's no problem."

"It's nice to have someone I can count on," she said. "Actually, it's more than nice. It's *necessary*. I don't know what I'd be doing right now if you weren't here."

In the open door of the barn, I saw a large, dark circle on the ground, the spot above which two deer had previously been dangling. That thought and the memory of the smell and the confined air of the car and Elaine and lack of sleep and a number of other things conspired to make me feel violently ill. I burst open my door and leaned out of the car, sucking in cold, clean air to keep me from vomiting on my dashboard.

Chapter 34

Things returned to a surprising facsimile of normal, surprisingly quickly. You would think that the gloom and doom of Elaine's problem would have hung over everyone's head, including hers, like the knowledge of an asteroid speeding toward central Virginia. But it didn't. It was easy to forget about. I went to work the next day, ten minutes late and apologetic, and everything from the previous day seemed like a dream. Not even a bad dream, just a weird one where strange things happen in a very normal setting. Those dreams disturb me the most of all, like when I have this very intense and detailed dream about grocery shopping or raking leaves, and I wake up feeling ashamed of myself for being such a mundane and unimaginative person.

Geoff's firm, Hawthorn and Ellis, was representing Elaine. While representing her, they also had intentions of cleaning out her bank account—charging her \$150.00 an hour plus expenses. That was their friendly discount price for a friend of Doug's. They weren't casual about it, either. Every one minute phone call to them skyrocketed her bill, every time they had to file something or mail something. If I was charging \$150.00 an hour, I'd feel too guilty to charge for anything but long meetings or actual court dates. The lawyers of Hawthorn & Ellis charged for everything, almost to the point of fanaticism.

When the first bills came, she was astounded at how much they were, and she showed them to Geoff and me with a gaping mouth. "How can they charge so much? How can people afford to run around suing people all the time?" I didn't have an answer

for her, but Geoff would go into a lengthy explanation that usually sent me out of the room pretty quickly. As more bills came, Elaine turned from astounded to annoyed and then finally to amused. "It's kind of funny if you look at it the right way," she explained to me one night, as though the bills were an amusing closet full of old basketballs and ugly Christmas presents that will eventually and hilariously explode. I didn't see the humor in it.

I know all of this because over the four months it took for Elaine to be arraigned, have a hearing, a pre-trial, and a trial, she showed me her accumulating bills. She showed the bills to me because I was still sleeping in with her in her room, because even though I had four months, I still never said anything to her. At the time it seemed like there was just never an opportunity to say anything, but looking back on it, there were plenty of times in those four months that I could have said something. It's so much easier just to let things randomly happen to you.

So the machinery of Elaine's pending trial was grinding away that winter and early spring, but it was definitely not at the forefront of conversation around the Farm. After a few weeks, we stopped talking about it. It was almost the way you feel around a widow just after the funeral—you really don't want to dredge up any bad feelings. Geoff was taking a class to prepare for the bar again in the spring. He didn't want to take any chances this time around. He'd gotten a major pay cut because he didn't pass the bar, so he was even more determined to do it right the next time around. Seemed like a pretty harsh step to me, but it motivated him, so maybe that's what his bosses were trying to do. Diane was trying to be Miss Nice Supportive Girlfriend, but she always looked absolutely exhausted from having to get up three times a night to go pee.

Claudia got a job teaching—she took over a class from a pregnant third grade teacher who had some baroque problem and had to spend her last four months in bed.

The dining room table looked like the fallout from a construction paper bomb right after Claudia got the job in late January—she was busy cutting out bright red squirrels to decorate her class bulletin boards. It was basically the same old thing after that.

Something new and different that happened then was that I gave up Wanda Baxter. I'd had a good four months with her, but I finally decided that I would either not write additional articles for the *Alternative Times* or I would write them under my own name—take responsibility and credit for them. The first thing published under my name was the piece about the hunters. It came out right after New Year's, and it made me nervous. What if Orange Hat saw it and decided to come and extract a little vengeance? Or worse—Camouflage Pants? We never did find him. Orange Hat, as it turned out, was this guy named Jimmy Morris who worked at a small engine repair shop in Shifflettsburg. He got fined for trespassing on the Farm, but the Commonwealth Attorney basically refused to press charges against him for the intimidation of all of us with his rifle. Orange Hat wouldn't tell them who his buddy was, and it was obvious from the treatment he was getting—slack—that nothing would happen to Camouflage Pants even if we did find him. The CA basically explained to Elaine and her lawyers that there was no way that they would get a conviction, especially now that Elaine was a publicly notorious figure. The lawyers yawned and looked bored and Elaine was irate but helpless.

She'd been picked upon by the local crappy newspaper, *The Newsleader*, and portrayed as this toothless Ma Barker/Granny figure with a corn still operation up in the mountains somewhere. This was of course completely ridiculous but it made her something of a celebrity for a while. I told Ricky that I'd quit on the spot (not that I was even really employed there) if he even printed mention of any of the charges against Elaine, and to my surprise and pleasure, he didn't. He said it wasn't exactly alternative-type arts-scene news, but quite frankly, I couldn't see the difference between this and the

ABC store incident I'd written about for the first time as Wanda. I think he was actually showing some respect for me or sacrificing his principles, whichever. He complained when I gave up Wanda Baxter, but he said he understood and hoped that I would be writing more in the future under my own name. I told him I'd think about it, and I started thinking about ideas immediately.

I think Elaine and Doug started to go stir-crazy in January and February when it was too cold for them to do anything outside. She suggested that he might want to consider getting a job in town for the next few months or so, until there was work for him to do. Doug got suspicious of Elaine at that point, wondering if she was planning on canning the apple operations at the farm entirely. She said she had no intention of doing that at all, but she just didn't have enough work to keep the two of them busy, and she was going to be severely strapped for money with the legal bills just starting to flow.

She wouldn't answer any direct questions I had about how much of her original money was left, but I did the math and got somewhere in the neighborhood of \$15,000. Which wasn't much at all, especially as a cushion for someone who has no source of income and is possibly going to jail and has legal bills and two employees. George's insurance money was mostly sunk into the Farm itself, which was at least salable if not insured, but I foresaw Elaine having some severe cashflow problems in the near future.

At least she wasn't paying Paige or Doug anymore—Paige was now living in town and communicating less and less frequently with us. I found myself missing her. She was living with Margitte, happy as a clam, and working as a receptionist and office manager for two architects, which I just couldn't see at all. It was kind of funny. When Elaine blabbed to everyone that I'd confessed to having lied about the Shriver article, I got the silent treatment for almost three days, and then it disappeared, like it had never happened. Doug said that Paige had never believed me. Even though I didn't like

seeming transparent, it made me feel good to know that I'd had some kind of honest relationship with one of the members of the house over the past four months. Even if it was strained, there was something about Paige that I'd gotten to almost respect.

As opposed to Doug. Doug worked for one day as a telemarketer, three days as a temp in a plumbing supply store, numerous other short stints as a temp, and finally settled in as a part-time farm animal caretaker at the Cabell County SPCA. Doug was feeding crippled goats for a living, which I guess is fairly honorable, but I found it pleasingly mundane and shit-involved. There had been a couple of openings for courier-type guys in my office that were perfect for Doug, but I didn't mention them to him. Kushman, Kushman & Walters was too small for me and Doug. The Farm was bad enough.

* * * * *

In February, while Diane was getting huger all the time, she and Geoff started going to classes to teach them how to give birth and breathe or something. I didn't want to come across as reactionary, so I didn't say anything, but it seemed kind of silly to me for Geoff to be going to these things. He didn't exactly have a whole lot to do with the delivery except creating the problem in the first place. He and Diane came back to the farm every Tuesday night in February excitedly talking about dilation and amniotic fluid and other things I didn't want to hear about. I could understand him wanting to watch the kid being born and all, but learning how to teach Diane to practice breathing seemed pointless. I made a mental note to myself that if I ever had children, which was looking distinctly unlikely, that I would be certain to stay all the way out of it.

They cracked me up getting ready to go out on those Tuesday nights—Diane all bundled up and Geoff scurrying around her like a small nervous mammal, making sure that she was covered and warm. He became obsessed with being a thorough snow

shoveler—when it snowed five inches just before Valentine's Day, he went out and shoveled paths twice before it had even stopped snowing. He made her hold his arm when she walked across an icy patch of grass.

"I'm not being overprotective," Geoff told her when she complained. "I read that over sixty percent of pregnant women—"

"Can it," Diane interrupted. Geoff had been doing a lot of extracurricular prenatal reading. "He's making me crazy," Diane told me one evening as we slumped in front of the television. She couldn't sit for long in the same position any more.

"You love it," I said. I was making notes for a piece about bargain-basement-looking psychic hotlines ads, the ones without celebrities. I decided that they were an effort to strip callers of any last shred of dignity that people watching late-night TV or soap operas might possess. I turned to look at Diane lying on her side with a throw pillow under her belly. "It makes you feel like a hefty homecoming queen."

"Bull. He's relentless," she smiled. The due date was somewhere in the middle of April. As Diane said, "If we knew exactly, there wouldn't be a baby." We all threw them a small shower and Elaine went overboard and bought a ton of things for the two of them and even announced plans to insulate the attic to make an extra bedroom. Big things like babies and trials began to loom on the horizon.

* * * * *

In mid March it snowed again, and this time a sheet of freezing rain created a disastrously slick world around us. We got iced in at the Farm for three days, and even then, Elaine's four wheel drive pick-up was the only one of our cars that could up the hill leading out of the orchard. It was treacherous living out in the country in weather like that, but it was absolutely gorgeous. When the sun came up that first morning after the ice, everything was sheathed in mirrors of ice, every blade of grass, every tree, and every

rock by the river. I took a roll of pictures that didn't come out because the glare from the light overexposed all of the film and made the pictures come out looking like I'd photographed a world full of disco balls.

We all went sledding in the orchard, which became almost dangerous—the thick ice made it some of the fastest sledding I'd ever done. Geoff protested when Diane tried to sled, but she did it anyway. After one trip down the hill, completely out of control and screaming with glee, she decided that her sledding days were over for that winter at least. It was thrilling but scary—there was really no way to stop, unless you wanted to steer for an apple tree, and the sleds went fast enough to make it dangerous. I didn't think I'd ever be able to be scared sledding again—and it was nice knowing that I might have grown up a little but I could still get breathless flying down a hill on an orange plastic sled at the speed of sound. Baggy slipped around on the ice, which completely cracked me up. She preferred to stay inside, as did we all after our initial brief interest in the ice sheet faded.

The river froze solid and it seemed like the world had come to a standstill. I looked out at the uniform glaze covering everything I could see from my window, and nothing moved. Nothing at all. There was a new silence at the Farm that had never before been there—the bubbling and murmuring of the Mawmannock had always been present in the background, but I'd never really noticed it until it stopped. It was gone now, and when I stood out on the frozen river taking pictures, I was the only thing moving at all, and when I held myself completely still, the only thing I could hear was the throbbing of blood through my ears. I put away the camera and turned around, spooked, and headed inside.

Chapter 35

If you've ever had to spend some time in a courtroom, you know how tedious it can be. I refuse to go into a whole lot of detail about the proceeding, for two reasons. The results of the trial, first of all, were a complete sham, and second because I think the paper-pushing dragged-on quality of the trial was obscene. Maybe if Elaine had been on trial for murder it would have been slightly interesting, but it was all I could do to keep from screaming from sheer boredom. Four entire lousy days in court it was—a Wednesday and a Thursday, then a Friday that the judge took off for golf or to get his nose hair clipped or something, followed by a weekend of utter hell and tension, and then a Monday and Tuesday of complete snooze.

Even the fact that Elaine was really really in trouble and could possibly go to jail (there was the tiny tiny chance, but I'm sorry, if murderers and rapists and embezzlers are running around free, it just seemed like the heavy hand of the law was more likely to grab someone else's shoulder than Elaine's) or get some enormous fine, even these threats just didn't alleviate the seemingly unending boredom that I endured in that courtroom. I took time off from work to lend moral support to Elaine, and I was beginning to wish that I was more callous.

To make matters worse, it was pouring down rain. April in Virginia is generally monsoon season, and by the time the trial came, right around tax time, everything was sodden and muddy. I was completely swamped at work from tax season, so I was calling in every day saying I had this horribly potent virus, otherwise they wouldn't have let me

take off work. Every day when we got back to the Farm after being in court—we'd wade through the mud to get to the house. We'd been making jokes about Diane being able to row to the hospital when it was time to have the baby. The muddy, rushing water of the Mawmannock was six inches below its banks on the island—a good foot above where it normally was. We thought of Mr. Canter's stories about the house surviving floods and were only slightly less worried.

Geoff walked into the house the Monday of Elaine's trial completely soaking wet. He couldn't have been wetter if he'd been swimming laps in the churning brown waters around the island.

"I parked at the top of the hill," he announced. "You all might want to move your cars. Better safe than sorry."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Elaine asked, narrowing her eyes. Her tone of voice was immediately unpleasant and confrontational, which I suppose in all fairness should be credited to the stress of the trial, but Geoff had spent as much tense time in the courtroom as she had and he didn't ease up any.

"That was intended to mean that I parked my car away from the bridge which could just very well get washed out in the next five minutes," he replied.

"Time out, you two," Doug said, loudly. For once, I agreed with him. The bickering level of the household had quadrupled over the weekend.

Elaine said something rude and dismissive to Doug and then said, "If you were really worried about flooding you'd realize that you wouldn't be able to cross the river to get to your car up on the hill. But nothing is going to happen."

Geoff took in a short breath and barked, "Diane! Grab your coat. We'll stay at your parents."

Diane looked at me and rolled her eyes and flipped through the pages of the baby

magazine she was scanning.

"You guys need hobbies," I said, garnering glares from both Elaine and Geoff.

"If you're so worried then leave," Elaine said to Geoff. "No one is asking you to stick around and predict the end of the world."

It occurred to me that they were bickering as though they were a couple. I decided to keep that one to myself. They kept sneering and digging at each other, Elaine annoyed that Geoff was actually worried about something bad happening and Geoff annoyed at Elaine for being annoyed. This in turn annoyed all of the rest of us, and made a general atmosphere that reminded me uncomfortably of living at home with my parents. I started wondering if maybe we shouldn't all move our cars off of the island, but I wasn't about to bring it up. When we all got up in the morning, the water was surging even higher, hitting the middle of the bridge and occasionally spurting over the surface of it. Without any discussion, we all moved our cars across the bridge to the higher ground in the orchard.

* * * * *

There were numerous charges against Elaine. The ones for not properly reporting the deer or having a hunting license were the most minor and got the least attention. The bootlegging and the distribution of alcohol without a permit and the sale of alcohol to minors and a couple of others that I didn't really understand as distinct from other charges, these all got the most court time. Elaine's lawyer's strategy was based on the position that Elaine was not consciously selling hard cider but was rather a victim of random and uncontrollable fermentation. One of them, a guy with a closet full of glen plaid suits that made my eyes itch, actually said to the jury that trying to stop the cider from fermenting was like trying to prevent puberty. It was a completely natural process, and it was a crime in and of itself to prosecute an individual for the chemical wonders

of nature. The jury silently chewed their cuds and didn't give any kind of noticeable response. And, said the lawyer, not only did Elaine not know that the cider had turned, but she was as shocked as the good people of Shifflettsburg to find it out.

The jury was out for an hour and a half on Tuesday before coming back with the verdicts. We waited outside the courtroom, pacing up and down the hallways, drinking coffee out of paper cups. Geoff looked more nervous than Elaine—he'd prepared much of the work that the lawyers presented, and even though he wasn't trying the case, it was his. Rain poured down the plate glass windows of the Cabell County courthouse, distorting the lawyers and policemen and handcuffed derelicts that came through the doors. The doors of the courtroom opened, and a short fat sheriffette called us all back inside.

Not guilty, not guilty, not guilty, acquit, acquit, acquit, acquit—and two tiny inconsequential guilties for improper commercial food storage and failure to secure a license for the cider sales. I don't really understand the difference between an acquittal and a not guilty, but I didn't really care. The judge recommended a \$2,300 combined fine for both infractions. Elaine had completely and utterly dishonestly bucked the charges against her. I was thrilled that she'd won, but something was nagging at me nonetheless, a little voice saying to me that this was really wrong that she'd gotten off so easily. The laws she'd broken seemed Byzantine and silly to me, but that just meant that they should be taken off the books, not overlooked. What is the point of a judicial system then?

I wouldn't have dared mention this to anyone but Diane, and I decided not to. We all went out to an early dinner and drinks afterwards to celebrate Elaine's and Geoff's victories, and Claudia met us out after school. It was the first night that all of the Farm residents had been out together that I could remember since Shriya. We just never left

the damn Farm. Maybe that was the problem. It felt very normal that night—a loud, gleeful bunch of twenty-five year olds taking up a couple of corner tables and having a blast. Wet people came in out of the rain and sat as far from us as they could and still get served. We were making a lot of noise, even the sober and enormous Diane. Elaine toasted Geoff for being so helpful through the entire thing, and then everybody went around the circle toasting everybody else, and then I'll never forget what happened.

Everyone was sitting and I'd just given my little toast/prayer to the rain gods to spare the bridge. Everyone said 'cheers' and took a drink and then looked at Diane, sitting to my left. It was her turn to give a toast, and she hefted her glass of soda water. Before she could speak, she widened her eyes and said "Oh my God." Then my left foot got very wet and warm and Diane pushed her chair back from the table. I stared down for a moment, uncomprehending, when I noticed a faint sweet smell, like candy dust in an Easter basket. I looked at Diane.

I heard Claudia ask, "What's wrong?" but I kept looking at Diane. Her grey stretch pants were completely soaked, as were the floor and the lower half of my left leg. Diane's face was unreadable—she looked like she might faint for about ten seconds, and then she broke into an enormous grin and looked at Geoff.

"Looks like we're going to have an Aries," she said.

After we all stopped shrieking, Diane and Geoff went to use the phone. We used bev-naps to clean up what was a hell of a lot of amniotic fluid, and quite frankly, I was pretty darn pleased with myself for not being grossed out about the whole thing. I think on any other day I'd have wanted to go home to change clothes immediately, but everyone else in the bar was soaked, so it didn't really seem like a problem. Elaine was on her knees daubing the floor with a stack of bev-naps, muttering "Oh my god this is so amazing Oh my god I can't believe this" over and over. When Geoff and Diane got

back to the table, we'd cleaned up the mess and had already ordered a bottle of champagne for ourselves.

"Because we deserve it in a multitude of ways," Elaine explained to the waitress.

Diane announced that she didn't have to go to the hospital yet because her contractions hadn't started, so she wanted to go ahead and order dinner. This was the first time I had ever sat down to eat with a woman in the midst of labor. We were all a little wigged out, Geoff probably the most of all of us. He was acting like a nervous sitcom dad, which was a nice change, and while the rest of us ate our meals, he picked at the tiny salad he'd ordered and drank coffee and tapped the table loudly.

"Are you sure you're not having contractions?" he asked Diane. He was completely serious but none of us laughed at him.

"Positive," Diane said. "You better eat something. It's going to be a very long night."

"I just want to make sure that everything goes smoothly, without a hitch," Geoff explained. If only he'd known then.

Doug said, "I heard that some women's labor can last as long as forty-eight—"

"Shut up," Diane said. She was excited, but she hadn't forgotten all the horror stories she'd been hearing for the past eight months. "If I don't start contractions within the next twelve hours or so, they chemically induce labor. If that doesn't work, they do a C-section. Natural childbirth, whatever. I want this thing *out*."

I agreed with her. I wanted to see this baby. I'd been rooming with it for quite some time now, and I was curious about it. I felt like I had a stake in it. It made me feel kind of strange—I'd been thinking about Diane being pregnant and abstractly about a baby for so long, but I hadn't actually been thinking about a concrete *baby* baby, an actual thing. Was I going to like it? What if it cried all the time? Would Diane actually

stay out at the Farm with a baby. Wouldn't that be just a little bit weird, even for the Farm?

We stayed at the restaurant for about an hour and a half, Geoff and Diane growing quieter and quieter as time passed and no contractions came. "A watched womb never contracts," I said, and Doug shot me a nasty look but didn't say anything. I tried to lighten the mood, but it was like the two of them were this ultra-closed impenetrable twosome all of the sudden. They didn't seem worried or scared as much as they seemed concentrated, focused, and distant.

We talked about the names they had for the baby, Sophie and Benjamin, and how convenient it was that little Sophie wouldn't have to visit Auntie Elaine behind bars at the county minimum security. When Claudia called her Auntie Elaine, it occurred to me for the first time that I was maybe going to be Uncle Luke. That's a pretty tall order. I had plenty of aunts and uncles that were just friends of the family when I was little. It was definitely possible that I might be one of those for this baby. I'd always liked the idea of non-related aunts and uncles, though it had confused the hell out of me when I was trying to understand the concept of relatives. Uncle Luke, I thought to myself, silently trying it on for size as we left the restaurant. That sounds like an adult to me. Christ.

Outside in the rain, Diane froze in the middle of the sidewalk, clutched Elaine's shoulder for a moment, and then sighed. Something like a very complex relief spread across her face. The contractions had started. Ten minutes later, she had another one as we were all getting into our cars. "I don't think I'm going to like this," she said, slowly lowering her shoulders.

"You'll be great," Elaine told her.

"Exactly," Geoff said. He wanted to take her to the hospital immediately, but she

thought they should just go home and wait a while until she had to go. They argued about the length of the drive back to the Farm while we all stood out there in the rain getting completely soaked. Finally, they decided to wait for a while at Diane's parents before going to the hospital. I don't know. If it was me about to squeeze a baby out, I think I'd want to be in the hospital immediately. Thank God I'll never have to make that decision. Diane wanted Elaine and Geoff both to stay with her through the labor—one person for each end, she said. Geoff was about to protest, I could tell, but he would have done just about anything Diane said at that point. I personally can't imagine anything worse than having Geoff and Elaine attending to me. I'd rather have Diane in a heartbeat.

Geoff wanted to get Diane's stuff that she'd already packed. I volunteered to go back to the Farm and get Diane's bag and then head into town with her things and meet them at the hospital. Everyone kept saying that it was going to be a long night. How right they were.

I walked to my car, and by the time I reached it, my shoes were both soaked all the way through. I drove the fifteen miles out to the Farm mostly on sheer faith and experience, because I couldn't see a thing. It was about seven-thirty p.m. by that time, and completely pitch black because of the rain. I flicked on the radios. There were reports of flooding all over the county, and I had a strangely certain feeling that the bridge was going to be covered in water when I got back to the Farm. I didn't want to think about it.

A car started tailgating me, with its brights on. I wasn't going more than twenty miles an hour, and this car was right on my fender practically. This annoyed me until I realized it was Doug and Claudia and then it made me furious. I slowed down even more and took my time driving the rest of the way out to the farm. The road was curvy

enough that there are no passing possibilities. I couldn't believe they couldn't tell that it was me in front of them, and then was further irritated to think that perhaps they didn't care.

Finally, I pulled into the driveway, the twenty-minute drive stretched into thirty-five. The ruts in the dirt driveway were completely full of water. I was afraid of getting stuck in the mud. I turned off the radio to concentrate better—a bizarre driving habit but a habit nonetheless. Doug and Claudia pulled in right behind me. I drove slowly over the top of the hill and then down it toward the bridge.

I flicked on my high beams and strained, but I couldn't see the bridge. When I got near the bottom of the hill, instead of a cement bridge crossing the river, there was a rush of violently churning brown water flowing by. I stopped the car and got out, actually a little bit nervous. The river was high, and who was to say that it wasn't going to become a flash flood and take me away with it, standing not two feet from the stream of water and debris floating by. My high beams were aimed at where the bridge was supposed to be, and I was trying to see it through the rushing waters.

"This sucks," Doug called from behind me. He and Claudia came and stood next to me and the three of us stared at where the bridge should have been. I noticed the light pole sticking out of the water about thirty feet from us—it was still standing, which meant there was actually a bridge under there. But the pole was normally only about ten feet from the bank.

"I don't suppose we should try driving it," I said.

"Not unless you want your car carried away by the flood," Claudia said, having to shout a little bit over the noise of the river.

"Not to mention risking drowning," Doug said.

The three of us stared in silence. I started worrying about Baggy. Where had we

left her that morning? How high up on the island had the water gotten? I looked across the river at the house, squinting through the rain. Water covered the entire island. I couldn't see the ground at all, just the house and the pine trees at the east end of the island sticking out of the middle of the river.

As I stared at the house with my eyes squinting in the dark, shielded against the rain, it took me a moment to register what I was seeing. I think the same thing happened to Doug and Claudia at the exact same time, because none of us yelled or anything. We just gaped blankly at the house. The house was destroyed. It had fallen over. That's the only way to describe it really, but it's inaccurate. The sides of the house were jutting out of the water at crazy angles, the rectilinear shape of the house squished to a rhomboid like a partially collapsed box.

It took a while to figure out what had happened—the foundation must have caved in when the water hit it, pulling the support out from under the house and basically collapsing it in on itself. It tilted west, fallen inside itself. Water came up to the top of the first floor windows at the lowest end—on the other side, the house was still sitting on the foundation. The roof was skewed and torn apart from the house at the front. Regardless of the specifics of the damage that had been done, one thing was clear. The house was destroyed.

The three of us all started crying, which in afterthought is a strange reaction, but at the time there was nothing else to do. Our house—Elaine's house—was gone. My bedroom was propped at an angle just inches from the surging waters of a flood. My stuff was in it, everything: clothes, music, pictures, computer, yearbooks, letters I'd saved. All of it was poised over the river, ready to go at any moment. All I owned, if the river rose any more, was the clothes I was wearing and my car.

While I was thinking of all of that, I thought again of Baggy. We'd left her

running around that morning as usual. On her average day, she'd alternate between roaming the woods and sleeping on the porch. The same porch that was pointing out of the muddy waters now like a boat ramp.

"Baggy!" I started calling, joined by Doug and Claudia. As soon as I started calling for her, I knew as certainly as I'd known that the bridge would be washed out that Baggy wouldn't come running. She could swim pretty well for a dog, but an Olympic swimmer would drown in that situation. Whole trees were floating down the river. I thought about her chasing grapes around the kitchen floor or sleeping in bed with me and Elaine. I stopped calling her name. I stood there by the edge of the swollen river and wept for my dog and my house. Even though they were technically Elaine's dog and Elaine's house. The Farm was gone.

Chapter 36

I walked through the automatic doors of the hospital with Doug and Claudia, and the woman at the information desk directed us to the fourth floor maternity ward. She raised her eyebrows at the three of us sopping wet, pathetic, bedraggled looking individuals but she didn't call security on us. We looked like the day after of some low budget slasher movie, the three lone heroes who'd escaped the psycho in the rain. I didn't know what we were going to tell Elaine and Diane and Geoff.

Doug wanted to call the Red Cross, but I figured places like that were probably swamped in this kind of disaster. According to my car radio, half the low-lying areas of the county were flooded. As long as none of us were hurt, we could try to manage by ourselves. I was more worried about breaking the news to the birthing trio than I was concerned with how most of my earthly possessions were probably floating toward the Chesapeake Bay and there was nothing I could do about it.

I told the charge nurse who we were and asked for any news about Diane. She said that she would send one of Diane's support people out to talk to us. I left Doug and Claudia to stare numbly at each other in the fourth floor waiting room while I went to call Paige to let her know what was going on. It seemed the right thing to do.

"Hey. This is Luke," I said when she answered the phone.

"Hi." She sounded suspicious, and I don't blame her. This was the first time I'd ever voluntarily called looking for her in my life. I explained that Diane was having a baby and that Elaine's house had been destroyed by flooding. "My God," she said after

asking for details. "If any of you need a place to stay, we've got room."

"Thanks," I said. "We'll probably be taking you up on it. I'm sure someone will call soon with better news after the baby is born." I hung up the phone and went back to the waiting room. Just as I sat down, Elaine appeared around a corner, her face flushed and excited.

"Hey!" she said. "You've got Diane's stuff? It took you long enough—man, you should be in there. I'm telling you, this is something amazing. You guys are soaked!"

She looked back and forth from me to Claudia to Doug, grinning wildly and then looking unsure of herself as she studied our faces.

"Elaine—" I said.

"What's going on?" she asked, suddenly demanding. Doug and Claudia both looked down, away from her, and Elaine looked fiercely at me, daring me not to tell her what was the matter.

"I've got some pretty awful news," I said, putting my arm around her. Her body stiffened under my touch. I knew she thought I was about to tell her that somebody was dead, but I couldn't just blurt it out. "We just came back from the Farm," I continued. "The entire island flooded and the house is pretty much destroyed."

"Destroyed? What do you mean, *destroyed*?" She looked like she was waiting for me to say April Fools.

"I mean it flooded and collapsed. The first floor is in the basement under about five feet of water."

"My house *collapsed*?" she shrieked. She looked to Doug for confirmation, and he just nodded at her.

"And Baggy's gone," I added.

Elaine looked at me like she was about to cry, and then her eyes flared. She

straightened her shoulders. "I can't deal with this right now," she said. "I'm going back in there to help deliver a baby and then you can tell me this again." She turned stiffly away from the three of us and headed back to Diane.

"Elaine! Wait," I said. "You can't just take off. Now what are we going to do?"

She turned and looked coldly at me and then shook her head and disappeared inside the door to Diane's room. I turned back to Claudia and Doug sitting on the couch, speechless and wet.

"Paige offered to let you guys sleep at her and Margitte's tonight," I said. They nodded. We didn't say anything to each other. There wasn't anything to say. I tried to think of what to do, but there wasn't anything to do either. I certainly couldn't go to work tomorrow. The only clothes I had were on my body—I was soaked from head to toe in flood waters and amniotic fluid. Maybe I'll think this is funny some day, I thought. At about eleven that night, Claudia and Doug took off for Paige's, abandoning me to the two month-old *People* magazines in the maternity ward waiting room. I just sat there and waited. Where was I going to go?

Around one in the morning, Geoff came out into the lobby looking wild-eyed and exhausted. He went to the water fountain and then paced the hall for a minute. When I called his name, he looked at me in a way that told me that Elaine hadn't said a word to them about the Farm. That's fine, I thought—let them get through this one ordeal before dealing with the next.

"I'm just taking a breather," he said. "I feel bad. She can't have one."

"How's everything going?" I asked. I'd only been occasionally thinking about what Diane was going through, and I immediately felt guilty for it.

"Slow," he said. "Slow but fine. She's still only at four centimeters." That meant nothing to me, but I nodded and looked supportive.

I saw glimpses of Geoff and Elaine all that night and the next morning as they took brief walks or went downstairs to get coffee. I offered to be the coffee boy, but they obviously needed the break. Elaine wouldn't even really make eye contact with me. I guess that was what she needed to do in order to not collapse. I know I couldn't have done it.

I couldn't let myself sleep, so I just sat there on the fourth floor of the hospital and waited, like it was where I belonged. I was very keen to the fact that I belonged elsewhere, but I waited regardless. I think if I left the hospital I would have had to think about all my worldly possessions floating down the Mawmannock.

I got breakfast from the cafeteria at six thirty and brought food up for Geoff and Elaine. I looked out of the huge plate windows of the waiting area and noticed that the rain had lightened up a little. At eight I called my office and explained in very vague terms that there had been a major catastrophe in my life and I wasn't going to be in today or tomorrow or quite possibly, ever again. I was beginning to feel a little loopy, so I called my parents. I didn't want to tell them what had happened. I just wanted to hear their voices.

My mother answered, and for the first time in a while, it was good to hear her voice.

"Hey," I said.

"Hello sweetie," she said, "You're calling early," and I could practically smell the coffee she'd be drinking, strong and black but always brewed with a touch of cinnamon.

"I'm at a hospital waiting for my friend Diane to have her baby," I said.

"Well aren't you sweet," she told me. "Been there all night?"

"Yup."

"Well tell her congratulations for us. Do they know what it's going to be?"

"Mom?" I said, hesitantly. That *Mom* carried a lot of weight with it, a basic assumption that no matter what, she was still my *Mom* and no one else's. That counted for something.

"Yes?"

"The house I live in was basically washed away by flooding."

"Oh good Lord! Was anyone hurt?"

"No," I said. "Well, the dog."

"Oh, I am so sorry honey. How awful." She exclaimed for a bit longer.

"All my stuff is probably washed away or ruined," I said.

"Don't you worry about that," she said. "At least it was just things. We'll send you money."

"I don't need money," I said. "I just wanted to tell you, that's all."

"Well I appreciate it, honey. You know you can come home if you want and stay here, right?"

"Right. I won't, but thanks anyway."

We talked for a while longer, and when I hung up the phone, I couldn't believe how nice it had been to talk to her, how much calmer and saner I felt all of a sudden. I realized that I'd forgotten to tell her that Elaine wasn't going to jail.

I reached the point of no more coffee by late morning. I was jittery and ill, but I wasn't going to leave. A while later I was reading *People's* picks and pans for TV shows back in February when Elaine came out into the waiting room and called my name. I looked up at her, and she was an absolute mess—sweaty hair clinging to her forehead and tucked behind her ears, clothes rumpled—but she had this serenely beautiful smile on her face. She beckoned me to follow her back into Diane's room. I got up and walked down the hall after Elaine.

When I walked into the room, the first thing I saw was Diane propped up in bed. She looked even worse than Elaine. Her face was almost purple from pushing and breaking blood vessels. But she was smiling broadly, almost looking like she was hurting. On her chest lay this tiny little baby, face down, a white cap on it's head. The two of them together were surreal. I'd never seen anything like it before. I felt like a privileged intruder. I think that's the kind of scene that could turn you to stone.

"Luke—come say hi to Sophie," Diane said.

I came forward timidly and peered at the little bundle. The wide dark eyes and deeply wrinkled forehead stared up at me, unfocused. Newborns *are* hideous, but sublimely so.

"Hi Sophie," I said, quietly.

"This is your Uncle Luke," Diane said, and I tingled as though someone had touched me.

I congratulated her and Geoff, and I couldn't take my eyes off of Diane and little wizened Sophie. I wasn't ready to hold her yet, but I wanted to watch, so I stayed there for a few minutes watching Diane and Geoff and their baby. I felt Elaine's hand slide into mine and squeeze, and we almost felt like a couple.

* * * * *

The brown water was no longer raging, but it was still flowing east faster than normal. Elaine and I stood under a sunny sky and looked across the river at the Farm. The floodwaters had fallen about three feet from their peak—a slimy brown line against the white clapboard made the water line obvious. The light pole from the bridge had disappeared, taken somewhere east and downriver. One of the outbuildings was completely gone—just picked up and floated away. An entire building.

The house was still there, crooked and squashed. It looked like it had been

abandoned for years already. The water still covered the island, about eighteen inches above the driveway from what I could see. The water had never gotten as high as the second floor, which meant that most of our personal stuff would still be there, and we eventually were able to retrieve it all four days later when the flood waters had completely receded below the bridge. Everything on the first floor or in the basement was ruined.

"You can sell the place," I said to Elaine. "You'll be able to recapture some of it at least." There was, of course, no insurance. The orchard was fine, and that was still worth something. But the house and the farm building were destroyed, and with them went most of Elaine's money.

"If I hadn't been in court, I might have been killed," Elaine said.

I nodded. It wasn't very likely, but she was in a strange mood. On the way out to the Farm she estimated that between her lawyer's fees, her court fines, and the destruction of the house, she'd lost about \$150,000 in one day. That doesn't happen to many people. And while she handled it fairly well, she was still kind of stunned by the whole thing.

"Look at it this way," I said. "After you sell this place you'll probably have at least twenty thousand left, right? That's still a whole lot of money."

"Poor Baggy," Elaine said, looking out at her destroyed property. I didn't like thinking about Baggy. Elaine shook her head. "You're right," she said. "On the bright side of things, I'll have enough money to relocate, find a job, do what everyone else does."

"Relocate?"

"Whoops. It slipped out. Okay—here's my plan. What do you say you and I take a month and go live in the Virgin Islands or somewhere else lazy. We'll live off the

last penny of George's money. It's obviously been cursed anyway. Then we move to New York, get a little apartment, and live off what we didn't spend in the Virgin Islands until we both get jobs. What d'you think?" She flashed me a big grin and put her arm around my waist.

"Virgin Islands?" I said. "Just the two of us?"

"Just the two of us," she said.

"New York?"

"Or LA or Paris or Cairo or wherever you want to live."

I took in a deep breath. "I want to live here," I said.

She looked confused.

"Not the Farm. But stay in Shifflettsburg. I like it here."

"So do I, but you can't stay here forever," she said.

"I'm not saying forever. Just for now. I'm thinking of quitting my job and working as full-time as I can for the Alternative Times."

"Then we'll come back here after the Virgin Islands," she said.

I watched an empty plastic quart oil container float by my feet. "No Virgin Islands," I said. "But I think you should go, if that's what you want. And I think you should go ahead and move to New York, too, if that's what you want to do."

Elaine took her hand off of my waist and stepped back from me. "What are you saying? That I just go without you?"

I'd been waiting quite a long time for this conversation, and I wasn't exactly ready for it, but there was no way that I was going to back away from it. I tried to breathe regularly to keep myself calm and not get emotional. I'd never broken up with anyone before. What a silly phrase.

We talked for about forty minutes, standing there beside the river. I'd been

dreading this moment for a long time. Even more, I'd been dreading not doing it, so it was a relief. I was afraid of Elaine's reaction—either getting really upset or not caring at all. Either one would have thrown me. Instead, she listened to what I had to say pretty calmly, we both cried a little, and then she asked me how long I'd been thinking about this. I couldn't be honest. It just seemed too rude.

"The past few days," I said. "I didn't want to spring it on you in the middle of the trial. Most of all, I just really need to live by myself, I think. I'm only twenty-six, but I keep feeling like my entire life is a rehearsal for the real thing."

"I know what you mean," Elaine said. "I mean look at what I've done in the past six months. Almost got myself thrown in jail—just blindly doing what I knew better than."

"Maybe we're bad influences on each other," I said.

"Maybe we're perfect for each other and it's just bad timing," she added.

Maybe.

"I would fly out of this town today if I could," Elaine told me.

"Send me a postcard."

She ended up leaving about a week later, without saying goodbye. I did get a postcard however, and then I kept abreast of what she was doing through Diane. Diane and Geoff bought a house in town that spring after he passed the bar. I guess they'll end up getting married. That's what people like them do. I lost touch with Claudia and Doug—they stuck around town until the summer, and then they disappeared off to Nags Head. Diane tells me what they're up to every now and then, but I'm really not that interested. I don't think I'd bother to look them up. I've got my full time job at the Alternative Times to keep me busy. Ranger Rick and Judy cleared out a space in the cobwebs for me, and I like it down there in the basement. It makes me happy.

I live by myself, which I've never done before, and it's great. Everything is on my schedule. Every now and then when I'm sitting alone, I miss having roommates. I miss most of all the stuff I used to do with Elaine. I miss her and I wonder. I think about the last conversation that we had, standing there on the banks of the wide, brown river.

We were getting ready to leave the Farm when she turned to me. "You know? This really isn't so bad. Maybe we *should* be apart for a while."

"Apart?"

"Yeah. I think I'll let you go for now." She was kidding around with me, but she was half serious.

"I don't mean to be indelicate, but we are breaking up. I am booting you. That's it. Kaput."

"Ha. We belong together. You and me, Luke. And you know it. Someday I'll come back and we'll be ready for each other. We'll buy a house and—"

She stopped talking. We both heard it at the same time. We looked at each other. We heard it again. Across the water, in the woods. The distinctly playful and neurotic bark of a very lonely and hungry Baggy, sitting on the opposite bank, and hundred yards across the swollen river from us, wagging her tail.

"Baggy!" We both shrieked, gleeful and disbelieving. She was alive—matted and filthy and probably reeking like a landfill in August, but she was alive and well.

"You *stay*," I yelled at her in my most ominous voice when she tried to swim across to us. I didn't want to recover her only to watch her get swept away and drown in front of us.

"Let's walk downstream until she can cross," Elaine said.

We walked down the river for a mile or so, with Baggy furiously barking at us on the

other bank, until we came to a bridge for a county road that crossed the Mawmannock. Baggy came dashing across the bridge to the two of us. She jumped up on and began licking my face and whimpering like she couldn't contain herself.

"Why don't you keep her?" Elaine said as Baggy licked my face and muddied my pants. "I just don't see her being too happy in New York or the Virgin Islands."

"You're serious?" I said.

"Yup. She'll be on permanent loan."

Baggy was sitting her stinking, reeking self down on my foot, waiting to have her back and neck scratched. "I'd love to keep her—if you're certain."

"Positive," Elaine said. She bent over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "That way, the two of you will be together when I come back." I hugged her when she left a few days later, but I think that's the last time that she kissed me.

I couldn't tell then if she was serious about coming back, and I'm still not sure. I've been on a couple of dates since she left. Judy hooked me up with her niece, who I think I may see again. But nothing special. Spending time with other people makes me realize how good it was with Elaine. Also how many really serious problems we had. But I don't know. I wonder. I did the right thing for the time, but is that the right thing forever? I'll grow up at some point. So will she. If she ever did come back, or if I moved away, could it work out? I don't know, but I wonder.

Vita

