

## Chapter 15

Wiley strode into the living room. He perched informally on the edge of a chair, his back ramrod straight, his gut pulled in as if he needed to be extra sure he was the ideal law enforcement officer, even though he had been in this house many times before, as a friend, and not as a cop. He had changed from his rumpled noontime uniform into a newly starched one.

“Coffee?” Louise asked.

“I believe I will,” Eugene said. “I need my head straightened. You wouldn’t believe the meetings this afternoon – CIA, FBI, I wouldn’t be surprised at Special Forces. Then there’s the local Mafia --” he looked at Carl and took a breath. “Sorry, Carl. I meant your friends. Just an expression. They’re a tight bunch, but I have nothing against them. Don’t get me wrong.”

Carl said, “No offense taken. Yes, we lumber men stick together. Just an old boys club. Common interests, you know. You look out for your own. Hey, the den is the best place to relax. There’s a bar in there, in case anyone wants a bourbon.”

“I’m tempted,” Eugene said. “However, better keep this formal.”

The den was on one side of the foyer. The door easily passed unnoticed, being in fact behind the hall tree coat stand. In the den, Ray felt inconsequential. The dark ornate woodwork, built-in bookcases of dark wood, pale Persian rugs, weighty chairs three sofas grouped around a glass coffee table made everyone look small. Eleanor slumped against the pillows of one sofa. Carl paced around her saying, “Bear up, Mother.”

Ray shuddered. He hated it when a husband called his wife "Mother."

Carl did not waste time. “Tell us about the bullet wound, Wiley.”

"The bullet hit Michael – excuse me for being blunt – on the left side of the neck. Transected the aorta. He lost blood and there was

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water in his lungs. The bullet passed through him and the canoe. That is, one bullet hit them both. There may be other bullets that missed. By the nature of the wound and the hole in the canoe, ballistics said they suspected a .38. They haven't found the bullet. It was at close range, but not close enough to leave burn marks.”

Eleanor looked as if she was about to faint. Russ downed what looked like a quarter tumbler of scotch, straight up.

Ray remembered Wiley in another setting, without the uniform, when they used to swim under the falls, in the long summers of high school. Wiley cut his foot on a fishhook once, when they were climbing onto the bank. His big toe bled so much they drove him to the Emergency Room in Majestic Bay. They had all just gotten their driving licenses. Bacon had a car. Six stitches. And what did Eugene say? “You guys. It would have healed on its own. Now they're going to bill me a hundred dollars.” Ray, Bacon, and the others threw in the cash and paid the bill. Maybe Eugene had gotten it through his skull that day that they cared. They still did. Those bonds of childhood friendship never died.

Wiley said, "Please, everyone think about everything you did the morning Michael died.”

“So everyone is a suspect,” Carl said in a bitter voice. "Even us? That doesn't happen to us, Eugene. We're not that kind of people. We don't kill our own family. You law enforcers must be mad.”

Louise said quickly, "I think Eugene is trying to help us.” Carl shot her a sharp glance. She shrank, visibly, her shoulders caving together, her head down. Ray thought, “She is really under Carl's thumb.”

Russ said, “Everyone in Cascade County has a .38 of some kind. Mine is in my car in case I see a deer that's been hit by a lumber truck and want to put it out of its misery. A raccoon in the garbage. In case I want to go target shooting. I got it when I was 21. Had it ever since. As for my alibi – God, I can't believe it's come to this legal word -- people saw me on and off in the newsroom. I went out to research my story. Actually, I was pretty close to where Michael died that morning. At the river – not near the whirlpool. Upstream getting water samples for the laboratory test. And then I drove downstream to get readings below Alwyn Mills I don't think anyone can corroborate this. Eugene, you can check the date and times of

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the entries on my notes and my office computer that morning.”

"OK," Wiley said. He was taking notes in a small ledger. "You know that even if everyone has a .38, ballistics can identify each one. I will need to borrow each of your guns. You'll get it back in a few days."

Eleanor let out a weary sigh. "Let's get it over with. The morning of his death, I had a headache and stayed in bed until 10:00. Around 10:30, I felt well enough to take garbage to the dump around 10:30. You know the dump near the Falls – for the State Park. Hardly anybody uses it in this season. I go there because the dump at the town of Alwyn Mills is almost full to capacity. I never throw away paper. I recycle paper at the mill, of course," she said, sneaking a glance at Louise. "Oh yes, the gun. I keep my .38 in the gun cabinet. When the children were young, Carl wasn't home much. He worked so hard. We had raccoons in the garbage I used to shoot – I was a pretty good shot – but mostly, I felt safer as a young woman alone in a big house with young children if I had a gun. Even though I didn't need it of course."

"This is going too far," Carl said, patting Eleanor's shoulder. "You can't be serious about questioning his mother."

There was a silence of the kind Ray could remember from the last time he had been in the room. He searched for words to describe it -- sweaty came to mind.

"Anyhoo," Wiley said in his dogged way, "do you mind if I dust your guns for fingerprints? Before I borrow them of course. To eliminate you as suspects. I'll get a jump on the FBI. They'll wonder what hit them when we come up with the killer, while they're still polishing their protocol."

"You don't need a search warrant," Eleanor said, "or a key. The cabinet is in the dining room. We always leave it unlocked. "

"We'll go with you," Carl said. "In case you have any questions."

"I'll get mine from the truck," Russ said.

As they all trooped out of the den, Ray noticed the elk's head mounted over the fireplace, the bear head and deer racks on other walls. The stuffed rainbow trout at least two feet long. The trophies seemed strange, given Carl's aversion to animals, but of course there was not a contradiction. Carl only liked dead animals. Stacy followed Ray's gaze. "Michael refused to come in this room."

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They moved into the dining room and sat around the table. Wiley dusted the guns for fingerprints methodically, starting with the antiques. "We'll have fingerprints of all the people who handled the guns," he said. "Most of them won't be relevant, but they'll go into the national data base we're starting. Just warning you that the FBI is probably going to want your fingerprints. Not that you have anything to fear."

Carl said, "Many of the prints are probably those of guests, or even old ancestors."

Russ said, "Maybe the bikers shot Michael by accident. I guess not," he amended as he observed Stacy's horrified expression.

"They couldn't have," she protested. "Neat was there. They used shotguns. Not a pistol. From the meadow they couldn't have hit anything in the river. They couldn't see the river."

"I didn't see Neat there, Stacy," Wiley said.

She answered, "You didn't expect to see him. That's why you didn't see him. He blended into the background."

Wiley said, "Maybe he was down by the river with his dog."

"Maybe," Stacy said. "It's important to ask him that. But I would be very surprised if he owns a .38."

"We'll see," Wiley said.

Stacy said. "And if Neat went down to the river to give his dog a drink, I'm sure he didn't see Michael or anybody, or any canoe. Neat has no brain/mouth barrier. What he thinks comes right out, unfiltered. If he saw or knew anything about Michael, you'd know it instantly. He would have told the bikers, and you, when you came. Anyway, you came into the meadow, you said to stop shooting. You left. They packed up. What Neat did tell me was that he heard a single shot shot upstream. Did you hear it? Nobody thought anything of it at the time, but maybe we should think about it now."

"I did hear it," Wiley said, stopping his powdering of the guns for a minute. The front of his uniform was covered with white dust. He seemed to be intently recalling the moment. I'll have to check my log that day to get a close approximation of the time. "I think it was around 11:00. I didn't pay much attention either. Hunting season hasn't started, but lots of people target practice. I'll question Neat about the time. Anyhoo, can you make me a list of the bikers who

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were there?"

"I'll call Hummer," she said, avoiding Eleanor's critical glance. "He's the leader. Runs a bike shop on Moosehead Lake."

"What kind of a name is Hummer?" Eleanor demanded.

"Who could have fired that shot?" Carl asked.

"It could have been a stranger and have nothing to do with Michael."

"Could a Nunotuck could have shot him? Do you think Michael made anyone angry because of his poaching? He didn't respect property lines," Carl said.

"In the woods, it's hard to know whose land you're on," Louise said.

"That's ridiculous," Russ said. "You don't kill a person for poaching."

"One of the Nunotucks might," Louise said, staring unapologetically at Ray and Bacon. "A rival trapper. His campsite was on their land, and that's where he hunted. They might have thought he was an animal. He looked like an animal."

Ray got instantly belligerent. "He had permission. All the Nunotucks knew he was there. He'd been hunting there for years. We Nunotucks don't poach. If you know someone else is hunting the game you want, you work it out between you. We're not barbarians like you Anglos. You want to blame a Nunotuck?" He didn't care if Louise was a woman. He'd smack her right in the kisser. Then he calmed down. He was used to flaring up and calming himself down. He'd never been in a fight. Never hit anyone. Ever.

"It's worth checking," Wiley admitted straining to be fair. The law was austere, beyond human passions. He said, "I will make a full investigation."

Louise said, "I'm not accusing any Indian of shooting him on purpose. It could have been an accident. He wore animal skins. As I said, maybe they thought he was an animal."

"Just for the record," Wiley asked, "Where were you, Louise, the morning Michael was killed?"

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“No problem there,” Louise said with exaggerated cordiality. “I was driving to my newly-acquired property.”

The other Alwyns swung their heads toward her. “I haven't told you. I've bought a house on the river -- upstream from the Mill. I can't live in an Alwyn Mills row house all my life! I am not wedded to the Mill, despite what you may think!”

This was greeted by exclamations. She fended off the reactions. “I was supposed to meet the repairmen at my new house. They arrived late, so there's no confirmation that I drove by the river around 10:00. Yes, I was there too --” she looked challengingly at Wiley. “The drive took me right by the area where Michael was canoeing. I did see about fifteen motorcycles parked by the bridge, by the path that leads to the river. Of course you can't see the Falls from the road. I looked at the river as I crossed the bridge, but I didn't see Michael or a canoe, or any living soul in or around the water. I would have stopped if I had seen anything disturbing, but I didn't. I arrived at my new house at precisely 10:30. The work men showed up at 11:30. I told them that's the last time they're late, otherwise they're off the job. And just for the record, I do not own a .38 or any firearm at all.”

Wiley wiped his hands with a cloth from his fingerprinting kit. “I guess that's it,” he said, brushing the powder meticulously from his uniform. “Now I have a record, in case those other cops come in and mess things up.”

“Most of those prints are years old,” Carl pointed out as Wiley closed the fingerprint case. “And I say even the idea that one of our guns shot Michael insane, just insane.”

“Fingerprints won't mean anything unless they match the gun that killed Michael,” Wiley said. At least I have some prints, and if I need any of yours that weren't on the guns in the gun case, you can come down to the station and we'll do it quick. You do have two .38's in there. It would be fun – some other time--” he amended hastily—“to try those old guns out, see how they shoot.” He straightened his shoulders. “This isn't easy for any of us. I'll take these prints to the lab – after hours. Wouldn't want anyone to know I'm just trying to, you know, help you out.” He closed the gun cabinet door. “Just one more thing.” He turned to Carl. “I don't believe we heard your account of that morning.”

Carl exchanged a glance with Louise. He passed his hand over his face, covering his eyes for a moment, a gesture Ray remembered him making before, at the Mill, when a reporter had asked him a

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question about Michael's death. And Ray remembered his mother, years before, telling him that when a person closes his eyes, it is a spirit's doing. The spirit wants to be in that person's world but doesn't want to be seen. Carl's hand dropped to his side. He waited just a fraction too long to speak. All eyes were on him.

"For Michael's sake, I wanted to protect you all from what happened." Carl began. He continued vehemently, "Because I wanted his last moments to be honorable. That's why it's hard to give what you so easily call an 'alibi.' He stopped.

"Go on, Carl," Wiley said, quietly, calmly.

Carl said. "He came here to the house about 8:45 in the morning. I was preparing to leave for work. Usually I'm at the Mill by 8:00, but that day I stayed home to write letters and make phone calls. Michael arrived unexpectedly. He asked me if I had any books about the early Nunotucks. We went to the library. He chose the history book we have spoken about, the one the deed was in. When he opened it, the deed fell out. Of course, I had given him a copy of the deed the year before, and he had shown no interest in it. He told me he hadn't told the Nunotucks

about it because it had seemed so stupid. He said historical precedence was more important than a dumb piece of paper, and that the Nunotucks had occupied their land for hundreds of years. I have prepared a statement for you, Eugene, so we don't have to go over it now. But we can anyway. Seeing the physical deed gave both of us a shock. He started raving about how I wanted to act on it and how it would affect the Nunotucks. He started raving about bamboo. He had found a little stand I had planted on Nunotuck property. I told him Terence had given me permission. He said that was because Terence didn't realize how invasive bamboo was. He called me a villain. He said the copy I had given him was no good. He wanted the original. He was either going to take to to show Terence that I intended to turn all Nunotuck land into a bamboo plantation, or else he wanted to tear the deed up. I told him nothing had changed in my position and that I would not act on the deed. I said if he wanted, he could tear it up. It was just a photocopy, because since I had seen him last, I had put the original in a safety deposit box.. Michael got violent, threw a few other books around. He said he was tearing the bamboo out with his bare hands. He said Terence had found out how invasive bamboo was, and he was also getting rid of every single rhizome." Carl sighed, put his hand over his eyes again.

"I tried to persuade Michael to calm down. I said I was on his side.

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I supported his beliefs. I bent over backwards to try to placate him. He was beyond reason. He pointed a gun at me and told me he would kill me unless I gave him the real deed. He wanted me to drive him to Majestic Bay, to the bank. I said that was ridiculous. He said he had never told Terence about the deed, but he had to do it now that he had seen the extent of the bamboo damage. He said Terence could take me to trial and use the original deed as evidence. He said time was of the essence, or else, I would move the deed and it would not be found until it was too late because I would have already acted on it. I told him I was not the villain he thought I was. I got him to put away his gun. He wanted to take my car and go to the police. That kid didn't even have a license. He was hysterical. He was having a schizophrenic attack. Then he left. He raced into the forest, on the path that goes down to the river. He yelled to me that he was going to canoe downstream to either the police or Terence, that it was my word against his.

"What time did this happen?" Wiley asked.

"He left about 10:00."

In the silence that followed Carl's narration, Ray could hear the clock ticking from another room – an irregular heartbeat tick. "So that's why Michael took a chance and went down the Falls," Stacy said "And that's why he thought it was so urgent."

"What did you do after Michael left? Wiley asked Carl.

"I finished my letters and had lunch. I got to the Mill about 1:00.

Eugene Wiley closed his notebook. "Thank you Carl. "I'd like copies of the letters you wrote, or corroboration from people who received them. And your gun?"

"I keep it in my desk drawer. After Michael had been here, I checked. It was gone. I believe he took it while I wasn't watching."

Eugene sighed. "I want to point out that I have Ray's and Bacon's statements at the station. They made them on the day we rescued Michael. Everyone on the rescue team did. And the Nunotucks verified that Stacy was with them all day. Good night now. Thank you. I'll show myself out. I'm going to go home, make myself a Margarita and sit in the hot tub."

Nobody responded. "Take it easy," he called. Waiting to be appreciated.

The Alwyns were in shock. Ray could feel it penetrate him also. He



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felt as stiff as the action must be on the old rifles in the gun case. No one had expected an investigation. No one had expected to have to justify the actions they had performed on that or any other day.

Wiley's hand lingered on the doorknob. "Say hi to your wife," Stacy called finally.

"She left me," Wiley said bluntly, as if he needed to balance their disclosures with his own. "Said I worked too much."

"Sorry," Stacy called, but he was gone. There was a long silence after he left.

Carl asked, "What the hell were you doing with the Nunotucks all day, Stacy?"

"Same thing I do with everyone else. Educating. Asking questions. Providing information about ground water." She glanced innocently at Bacon and Ray. Obviously, that was all she wanted Carl to know.

Louise asked, "Now what happens?"

"We wait," Russ said. "Hope the police find the killer."

Louise shot Carl a glance and moved uneasily in her chair.

Carl said, "Yes, now that it's become public knowledge, I've got lawyers to check out the deed. I have alerted them to the circumstances surrounding Michael's death, and they told me to be ready to be questioned. I suspect the next set of policemen who question us will be more intimidating than Eugene."

Russ said, "We should hire a detective. The police are find what they want. Majestic Bay Cops and the FBI will outnumber Eugene. He'll be taken off the case. I've covered enough homicide cases to know that nothing's fair. And then, when it comes to court, the law has its own logic. By the time you get to court, the case has nothing to do with the truth. It's an abstract game of comparing one statute to another. We have to be prepared to protect ourselves."

Carl said, "Russ, trust me. I have friends in the police force and the courts. And my lawyers – our lawyers – are the best in the State. I know the judges."

Ray looked at the stack of Michael's journals piled on the coffee table. Maybe he had left some in each room. "May I?" He asked Eleanor. She nodded. He opened one and skimmed.

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“She was a girl with dancing eyes and disorderly hair, a pouting girl who pulled at a ribbon in her hair, a vixen girl in a flapper dress, caught in a careless Charleston gesture. She was someone then. All the childhood pictures show it. Who did she hope to become? She married Carl. Carl controls her every move. She pretends to be content but I know better.

Quickly Ray closed the volume. He wondered if Eleanor had read that passage.

She was looking straight at him. “Michael gave me so many journals. I read every one. Some parts I had to skip over. I often found their contents mean.”

“Mother,” Stacy said, “We need to relax. As a family, we haven’t sat down and remembered any of the good things about Michael. Don’t you think it would be nice to look back at his album? Where are the albums you made for each of our birthdays? With photographs of that person, from birth up until that day.”

“I don’t think this is the time, but they’re on the shelf next to where the journals were.”

Stacy went to find it and came back. “Voila!” She laid it open on the coffee table. “Oh look at this. Reaching for you, Mother. He’s crying.”

“He cried almost constantly the first year of his life. Colic. I thought it was because I was an inexperienced mother. I was only 18 when he was born.”

“You were a good mother,” Carl said formally.

“Stop it, Carl. I was a rotten mother to Michael. When he was around four, he used to hang around the kitchen and watch me cook and I used to tell him to go outside and play,” Eleanor said, “and he’d get such a hurt expression. I had to toughen him up, or he wouldn’t make it in the

world. So he learned. He would run in and out of the house shouting he was hungry, or he had fallen down, whatever. Once – he must have been about five years old -- he came charging into the house and there I was lying and crying on the sofa. “Why are

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you crying Mommy?" he asked.

"I'm not crying," I said. He ran out. I was glad. I was young, trying to be the perfect wife and cook. I didn't pay much attention to him. He started turning into a strange quiet child. Just his standing in the room would drive me mad. There was a distant quality about him. I made a pudding and he wouldn't eat it – wouldn't even taste it. You know what he said? 'I don't care,' he said. Then he said something so strange for a kid. 'I don't want you to be sad,' he said and then he ran out. Later began to betray me. He dropped out of graduate school. He abandoned the road that would bring him success in the world. He disdained the things I had prepared him for. A fine education. Nice clothes. Good manners. After all, he was born to be the successor to continue our family tradition. Isn't that what children are for?"

Bacon said, "Gee wilikers, Mrs. Alwyn. I gosh darn thought children were supposed to be important for their own little selves. Course I'm jus an ignorant Injun."

Eleanor ignored the barb. "After he started living in the woods, it got so I could barely stand his smell, his long hair which he refused to cut, his posturing in animal skins. He was repulsive to me. I couldn't believe I had given birth to such a... monster. It seemed as if he were already dead – as if the son I had had died and another one had taken his place."

Everyone was staring at her. She stared defiantly at them, "Don't ever have children," she said. "They'll ruin your lives."

"Mother," Stacy said softly. "We love you. Michael loved you. That's what it's all about. I think right now you should let your children take care of you a little. We'll pay back all the nice things you did. Remember the cookies we baked at Christmas? Remember picking apples?"

Eleanor closed her eyes, and put her hand over them, in a gesture that was just like Carl's.

Carl said, "You'll be fine, Mother. "

"Forget what I said," Eleanor said. "I just needed to let off steam. I didn't mean a word of it. Let's look at the pictures." Carl folded his arms around her. She moved into his touch. "My feet are cold, Carl."

"Here," Carl slipped off his lambskin slippers. "Put these on. We're

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all in this together. We'll get through it, Eleanor.”

They turned the pages. Stacy motioned to Ray to look over her shoulder. The pictures showed Michael at different ages, teething, riding a bike, graduating from college. Different hairstyles, long and army short. In cap and gown, holding a diploma, standing under lights, his forehead shiny with sweat. Another of him tending a roast on a spit. He got thinner with age, and his beard grew inversely to his weight. The last picture showed a skinny, tall, bearded man clothed in fur, holding a beaver trap with one hand and a beaver by the tail in the other.

As a boy, he had a sweet face. The teen-ager looked tough. The grown man's beard hid his face.

Carl said abruptly, "This has been an exhausting day. I'm going to bed. Are you coming Eleanor?"

“Yes, Carl,” she said, and leaned on him. They left the room, turning at the doorway to say good night, and good-bye to Bacon and Ray.

Bacon's thoughts were elsewhere. He said, "Michael must have left baited traps, and they should be dismantled.”

Ray said, "Terence will do it. He told me during the ginseng hunt.”

Louise asked. "More coffee anyone? She finished hers in one gulp. Bacon had barely taken a sip of his when she announced, “Since Bacon lives further from Quechec than here, I'll drive him back. I have to go through his neighborhood to get to Alwyn Mills. But I will not have a dog in my new Mustang, so Stacy will take Ray. Russ lives in a completely different direction. He can't drive anyone home.”

Russ said, “Well, I guess that's that.”

That was the signal for them to all stand up and walk out to the drive-under portico. Louise drove a surprisingly racy Mustang to the door. She got out and kept going in and out of the house with bags full of paper until the back seat was full.

Although she disapproved of Molly, Louise reminded Ray of a terrier. She held her head high, tense and cautious, in a state of alert. Bacon climbed in the front seat. Louise said, “We'll get going. I'll drop the paper off at the mill. We're all in favor of recycling," she said, pointing a scolding finger at Russ, "but I think your newspaper could do more. We sell to a recycling plant, and

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supply is way below demand. We could recycle three times more paper than we're getting."

"It's all rhetoric," Stacy said. "You pulp mill people are the only ones I know who use bleach and still call their industry green. What do you think the dead fish think?"

Louise slammed the door. As she climbed into her car and Bacon climbed into the front seat, she said to Ray and Bacon, "I recall you both from school. You were a few years behind me. You probably don't remember."

"Weren't you in my business class?" Bacon asked.

"I don't have the slightest idea. I do manage Mill finances."

The stare she shot Bacon was proud and challenging, and went on just a little too long. Ray watched in fear as she gunned n the car down the driveway, tearing down it -- well, as if she owned it. Bacon glanced back at him, as if the next time Ray saw him, he'd be wrapped around a tree, tangled up with paper, Mustang metal, and god forbid, Louise. Only he'd be too dead to care.

"Don't worry." Louise called back. "Never had an accident. Just have to get used to the juice in this car. My last car was a Civic." The Mustang disappeared from sight and hearing.

Russ said, "See you guys around. Thanks for coming, Ray." The truck backed out of its parking place, Pink Floyd flavoring the night.

Stacy sighed, "I'll just take a deep breath and calm down. Ray also consciously let everything go, emptying his mind for a minute.

"You're a breath of fresh air just by being yourself," Stacy said.

She looked so vulnerable and sad that Ray put his arms around her. This generated an almost shocking electricity that made them both draw back in surprise. They walked around the circular driveway holding hands. Stacy did not say a single word. Ray, who enjoyed silence, if it was the right quality of silence, found her silence eloquent and moving. The second time they started around the driveway, she laid her head on his shoulder, and they stopped walking and stood ostensibly gazing at a bed of chrysanthemums, while wild telegraphic messages seemed to go haywire all through Ray's body. She looked at Ray, and again, he was surprised yet attracted by the clarity of her golden eyes.

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“Let’s blow this joint,” she said.

## Chapter 16

She lived on the outskirts of the town of Lecook, a town on the logging side of the river. A narrow road passed a dock and stone boathouse, and then ascended from the cove, reaching a narrow plateau cluttered with houses and shops. A slab building was marked Grange. A dilapidated cape house had signs for two businesses, one had Pabst and Pepsi signs glowing, the other was a hairdresser. Beyond that, a pizza place and a real estate office. Two churches --- Congregational and Catholic. A sign at the bottom of the street read “General S ore.” The “t” was missing.

“I’m running low on gas,” Stacy said. “Thank God, the lights are on in the general store. It’s kind of a hang-out place.” They went in. The screen door slapped behind them. Three men had their boots up on a wood stove, which was not lit. “Hey,” they said. “Hey Stacy.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Stacy echoed, genially. “How’s it goin’? Can I get some gas?”

“Eyeh,” said one of the men, nodding at his toes, as if urging them to take him to the cash register. “Anything else you need? he asked before moving, assessing Ray with eyes that seemed lazy and big, as if he were five people rolled into one and could see with all their accumulated vision. “This here’s the Post office, gas station, and police station. Anything I left out?” he asked the other two, who shook their heads lazily.

After tanking up, they continued about five miles, and then turned right onto a long driveway. The A frame set on a cleared hilltop lit up as they drove past some invisible electric eye. They approached, skirting the edge of an embankment that plunged to darkness. “If it were daylight you’d see the Nunotuck River below and beyond that, lumber country. Some of the land looks shaved. From here, it’s easy to distinguish the cut tracts. All on this side of the river. Here I remember why I want to work in environmental

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science. Sometimes in the office, with all the paperwork and political forays, I forget."

Inside, the house seemed small.

Ray said, "You have a lot of decorations."

She laughed. "I've traveled a lot." Her eyes roamed. A many-armed Oriental figurine, Indian weaving, Southwestern pottery, Eskimo carving, African swords, Caribbean paintings. The place was not decorated. Everything looked plunked down, as if she had returned from a trip, unpacked, and left things where they came out of the suitcase.

"Check out the sky at night," she said, going to the picture window and peering out. In the clear sky, the stars glowed so brilliantly that Ray felt sorry for city dwellers, who saw only a blurred version.

"The Alwyn story," she said, startling him with what sounded like a non-sequitur. "It's up there. Perseus. Cassiopeia, Cepheus, Andromeda. You can't see Cetus, but he's there, snaking along the horizon."

"Okay," Ray said. "Snaking along the horizon."

She slipped off her jacket, unself-consciously opened a small bottle on the mantelpiece,

and dabbed on perfume. Instantly she and the cabin smelled of geranium, tart and exotic.

"Geranium," Ray said.

"Ciphers," she said, pointing again to the sky. "It's the square design that looks like a house turned sideways. Cassiopeia is the W that looks like a woman lounging in a chair." She traced them in the sky until she was sure Ray could see the ciphers twinkling in the clear night like lights of distant cities pulsing with life and significance. "There's Andromeda, chained to a rock. I hate her," Stacy said.

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"You hate her," he echoed. Then, as the vehemence in her voice sank in, "You hate her?"

"Michael used to say that. He preferred Perseus." Ray could barely see the shape she identified. It was obscured by the wash of the Milky Way.

"He took these stars personally," she mused. "Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing," he said, "although whenever someone says, 'don't laugh,' I almost always crack up." He started to laugh. She glared at him.

"I'm trying not to," he said.

"Scotch?" she said. "Beer?"

"Geranium," he said. "I mean water, with ice, lots of it."

"You want to know something?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"In the entire panorama of stars, galaxies, constellations, and nebula, Michael only followed Cepheus, Cassiopeia, and Perseus. And the related constellations Cetus and Medea. Because of the myth."

"What myth?" The ice water was delicious. Stacy must have her own well. Ray was a connoisseur of spring water.

"Michael equated Cepheus, a king of Northern Africa, with Carl. Cassiopeia, the vain and braggart wife of Cepheus, was Eleanor. The Greek gods did not favor boastfulness. They punished the kingdom with the snake Cetus. Cetus meant destruction, disguised as the lure of wealth and power, but really promising destruction for desiring these qualities. Michael thought the myth of Cepheus and Cassiopeia threatened by the snake Cetus was a perfect parallel to our family story. I was in high school then. Everything he said was so intellectual, alluring and unreal to me. I wasn't mature enough to know how real to him these symbols



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were." Stacy paused. "I didn't how profoundly Michael took these archetypes to heart. In the myth, Cepheus and Cassiopeia were so prideful that the Gods sent the serpent Cetus to attack their kingdom. To propitiate the gods, the priests told them to sacrifice their child, Andromeda. They agreed to do it. Michael always got angry about this. This was the place where he personally entered the myth. He was Andromeda, the child that his parents used as currency. It didn't matter that in the myth the child was a girl, Andromeda. The essential fact that Michael identified with was that the parents had cast the child out. So naturally, he idolized and identified with the hero who rescued the child. I can't tell you how many evenings I spent listening to him predict the salvation of the child. Perseus was the savior. Terence was Perseus for Michael. He loved Perseus' courage in rescuing Andromeda. He used to demonstrate to me the fighting skills Perseus used to kill the monster Cetus. Michael's only regret at this time was that he himself didn't have the ultimate weapon that Perseus had -- Medusa, whose snake-haired gaze killed anyone who met her. He thought that she had been good but life had turned her evil. Michael was in love with Medusa. He wanted her power. He wanted to kill the snake. But in the myth, Perseus holds up Medusa's head and kills the snake."

"Of all the powers to want..." Ray said. He peered again into the sky, wondering if he could see the story she had just related splayed across the sky. He couldn't. He saw the usual collection of tools and knife shapes. There was a bread knife with serrated edges. A utility skinner. In the Western sky was a carving set. A wash of stars near it suggested a sharpening stone.

'You know what Michael loved best of all?' Stacy said. "The fact that in the sky when Perseus holds Medusa's head, you can see her eye and she winks! She winks every 2.87 days. That was the best joke of all. The incredible cosmic joke. That an ugly woman was the ultimate weapon. He told me once that he knew how to use that weapon. He said he understood

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Medusa's wink. He had the power to see and reveal to women who thought they were ugly their incredible beauty." Stacy pointed to the sky and identified the star for Ray. "The eye is the farthest star of Perseus and the brightest. Her eye is the double star Algo, the double star with an eclipsing variable. So from earth it appears to wink every couple of days. Michael loved that."

She pulled a small trunk from one of the bookshelves, set it on the floor and opened its lid. "Here's Michael's collection of star maps. They unfold in calendar order. One year he pinned them on the wall so he could walk around his room, like walking through a year. "You know, if my parents hadn't confused that boy so badly, he might have been an astronomer, a physicist, who knows. He was incredibly curious, brilliant, and imaginative." She unfolded the pages like a scroll. "We did it together. This is what we'd do. We would walk, he would show me the way Orion, prominent in the winter sky, dips and cedes place to Scorpio in summer. He told me stories, about the seven sisters of the Pleiades, chased into the sky and changed into stars to escape being raped. Once he got started about stars you couldn't stop him. Cancer was another of his favorite constellations, because he was born under that astrological sign. It's filmy, hardly visible. He called it a diamond necklace on a black velvet sky." She paused, then she refolded the maps. "He was fascinated by all kinds of maps. In this trunk he put regional maps, hotel locations, ski resorts, hiking trails, state parks, bus routes, airplane connections, ferry lines, subway lines and bus routes, islands, barrier reefs, sections of cities featuring antique stores or gourmet restaurants. For heaven's sake, he could have been a cartographer. And some journals. He was a naturalist writer, and, as I said, I intend to try and publish his collection of journals. I want something of him left in the world to remember him by." She handed a notebook to Ray. It was creased open at a page written in a florid, exuberant hand, one of Michael's scripts. One thing that Ray had noted was that Michael had different handwriting in different notebooks. "Here," she said. "Would you mind reading this? I want to ask you about

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something in this journal. If you're tired, we can wait until tomorrow. You must be tired."

"I'm fine – if I'm spending the night here. I don't want you to have to drive me forty miles home."

"Do you want to spend the night with me?" she asked.

"Are you out of your mind woman? What kind of question is that. Give me that journal. I'm a speed reader."

She laughed. "I'll make decaf." She pattered in the kitchen - Ray liked hearing the sounds. He had been living a quiet life with no sounds coming from his kitchen. When she returned to the living room with coffee, he was reading Michael's journal. It had a birch bark cover. The title "Journal #34" had been written with purple ink, maybe blackberry juice.

She put the tray down and went behind Ray leaning on his shoulder to read with him.

I've been experimenting with the approach to the Falls. If this stretch were charted, it would be class 6 white water. I think algebra -- river flow, depth, and force of my stroke, fallen branches, and variables in the equation. The last time, a beaver peered at me from the woods, flashing his axe-like teeth. The labor class beavers were cutting time into timber as my paddle cut water into strokes. I thought, I am of the worker class too -- only I do so little useful. And right then and there, I decided to prove myself worthy of surviving in the stream of life. I paddled ahead and went right over the Falls. It is, I think, the single bravest thing I have done. Since then, I've begun to analyze that descent and have completed it twice. If the waters are high, I avoid it. If I feel the day is right, but I might lose my nerve, I tie myself into the canoe with a double bowline. It makes me feel more one with the currents of the water. I don't do it for safety's sake -- I suppose most people would say it wasn't safe, since you can't bail out, but really safety is not an issue for me. Some people say it is safer because you can hang

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onto the canoe. It is irrelevant to me. For me canoeing is a meditation. My way of forcing myself to go to the edge. I'm always striving to go closer to a real meaning of life that eludes me.

When he had finished reading, Stacy said, "Here's the other passage I wanted you to see." She flipped through the journal pages until she found what she wanted. She handed the journal to him.

Today coming down the falls, I was afraid. I had all kinds of premonitions, had to tie myself into the canoe to make sure I wouldn't chicken out. As I tied the rope, I tried to visualize making myself one with the canoe. I would be sure to come out, battered, maybe, but intact. The falls, the canoe and I were one. It worked. I breathe. It is so exhilarating to tempt death like that, because now I feel so alive.

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "The thrill. Who doesn't crave that? I think Michael craved risk because it made him feel alive, it was the opposite of being suicidal. I think Michael was the ultimate pioneer." Rewarded by Ray's glance of acknowledgment, she said, "I guess you can identify. I sure can. He did like to live life at the edge."

"If you get too close to the edge, you're bound to slip over." Ray said.

"I want to think of him accepting the challenge. I want to think of him succeeding in running the Falls if it hadn't been for that gunshot wound. We still can't explain that."

She packed everything up and put the trunk on the shelf. As she sat down again, she crossed her legs at the ankles, and flicked a speck of dust from her leg. She leaned back on her tangerine futon and stretched her arms over her head. Ray looked at her breasts and ribs, outlined under her close-to-the-skin tee shirt. Ray took in the stretch jeans. He couldn't tell whether she was dressed elegantly or casually. She had one of those manicures his ex-wife Sheila started to get when

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she began seeing her chiropractor. French. The moons on Stacy's nails were white, the nails themselves a tropical salmon color that swam through her dark hair when she pushed a strand

back. She pressed her hands together, then let them fall at her side. Ray wanted to take those hands and press them between his own. It was a wild impulse. It was only her pale hands.

"Why are you staring at my hands?" she asked.

"I'm not staring at your hands," he said. "I was thinking about --" he cast his thoughts wildly about -- "salmon actually. I don't know why. I get these random thoughts, sometimes."

"I guess." She laughed, a surprising, sexy chortle that made Ray think of wine, a roaring fire, naked bodies on a bear rug, the head of the bear grinning, the hot fur...

"Let me show you something else," she said, confidentially. She went to the corner of the room, opened a cabinet and brought back another small trunk. "We Alwyns are collectors. When I was a kid, I collected Alwyn paper from every period, the beginning up to the present. I especially liked the early hand made paper. The mill made that up till around 1886. Carl consulted me when he needed samples for his museum. They made some fine grades, but great grandfather was all for modernization, and invented a way to use sulfite to break down wood pulp. The patent on it made him a small fortune. You see, I'm just as attached to history as Carl or Louise," she said almost proudly. "Let me see... Yes, this piece is lovely. See the watermark? One of my favorites. You can see the crossed metal wires of the screen the paper fibers lay on, and in the middle, see the design of the plow. That was the basic watermark from 1785-1831. The details changed, though. Here's 1788. You can see there's no motto engraving. Here's 1789. The motto 'Work hard and prosper' was added." She held the paper up to the light so Ray could see. "Here's 1789-92. Here is 1793-1831. They're almost the same, but in 1793 they added the bar across the top of the ox plow that 1789-92 was missing."

During her demonstration, Ray had gradually, reluctantly put the bear rug, the naked bodies by the fire in a corner of his mind he determined he would return to later. Now he was into the earthy texture of the rag paper. He liked learning that making paper could be a craft like making a knife. Touching the grained sheet, he

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sensed that considerations of weight, touch, and design were incorporated in the process of turning out a quality product. This paper focused your attention and put you in tune with fine things.

Stacy smiled at him. Ray, in a way he could not explain, could see a white-golden light around her. He wondered if it could possibly be him making her happy.

A fleeting thought crossed his mind that mixing Alwyn and Nunotook was like mixing oil and water, and maybe he should cut the evening short. Impossible.

Her bedroom was in the attic. The room was filled with flowering geraniums. Ray marveled at their bold red clusters. It occurred to him that he had never before paid much attention to flowers. But that was before now. Just look at that crimson.

"Personally, I love their astringent smell," Stacy said. "It's kind of like you – a very appealing mass of contradictions." Then she reached over and touched his arm. Her touch felt cool and cautious. "I've always been curious," she said, "about knife-makers' arms."

Ray pulled his sweatshirt sleeve up to his elbow. "It's true. We shave. We test the blades for sharpness."

She ran her finger across his flesh. "Smooth, like a woman's," she said.

"In the summer, I do my legs," he said. He half hoped she would ask to see his legs. Maybe touch them. He felt shy.

Her lips locked on his. He gave himself entirely to the exploration of her tongue and mouth. Her body was a map she was welcoming him to read. Her tongue swam back and forth on his

inner and outer surfaces. Astonishment and the thrill of a fantasy fulfilled overtook him. The scarlet geraniums became huge and hovered over them. He was on a tropical island. A kiss. His tongue was beaked, like a bee. He was sucking nectar from a pistil. Not all the poets and craftsmen could describe the exotic infinite taste of the common kiss. Stacy's bedroom, so quiet, and then that roaring in his ears, and his body turning molten all over. It was all so familiar. Ray's practiced helpless unfolding, the steady eye of passion. It never made sense. He hated/craved giving up. Liquid contradiction, kiss, pushing him farther, farther into outrageous geranium territories.

After she fell asleep, he lit a candle on the bedside table and

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watched the flame dance on the walls in tempo to a brief rainstorm, which gusted fiercely. There was a comfort in light on a rainy night like this. Ray couldn't sleep. The attic with its pine rafters, the bed with the rosette quilt needed only someone kneeling to pray to complete a rustic scene. On the night table was a notebook. Michael's name was on the cover, in a sprawling script.

While waiting, I wandered the halls. I opened a door that used to be a records storage room, when I played here as a kid. Now Carl is turning it into a museum and it looks like a shrine to Alwyn. Found some of the old handmade paper samples that Stacy used to like to play with, and a collection of feather quills and inks. The inks were fresh.

The journal jumped from subject to subject. He put it down and folded his arms behind his head. He didn't sleep much that night. In the candlelight he watched Stacy sleep in a tight neat curl beside him, as contained in sleep as she was awake. He discovered a picture of the Alwyn family on the wall beside his bed. It was formal; Michael was not there. Eleanor and Carl were flanked on the right by Louise, on the left by Stacy and Russ. Everyone smiled. Eleanor's lipstick was sharply etched. Louise wore glasses and looked studious, but she had a greedy smile. Russ looked curly and engaging, as if he were playing a role in a TV family series. Stacy had an earnest liberal frown, and looked straight ahead, as if she knew the youngest child was always accepted and never had to please anyone, because she automatically pleased everyone.

Beside that picture hung another, taken in a garden. Stacy, Eleanor and Louise in light colored dresses next to Russ and Carl in formal black, and lots of people and flowers. It could have been a wedding or a funeral. Ray stared at that one for so long he began to notice the flowers lining a picket fence. He began wondering why nothing in the picture moved, why Eleanor didn't wipe her eyes with the handkerchief she held, why Louise looked so stiff. Then his attention drew in and focused on a man outside the picket fence, a man in a jogging outfit who was just passing by, not part of the group inside. His face looked familiar. It was Michael, who had not come

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to whatever formal occasion was taking place, but who was running by it, present but not included.

Ray stared out the window at dawn creeping over a washed horizon and wondered how Stacy really could be sleeping when they had so much exploring to do. Her name sounded like straight-laced. Stays in one place. Old fashioned stays that hold flesh in. Something held in about her, like a tightly packed basket, full of surprises. He imagined taking the surprises out one by one, holding them like parts of her body, learning to know them from near and far. Then a protective fatalism engulfed him. Their relationship would never last that long. He wondered

why he even entertained the thought.

The clock radio beeped early in the morning. They listened to the radio. Further rain was predicted.

"You're listening to the wrong station," Ray said.

"93.9 carries HUG's advertising."

"I listen to the station that forecasts the kind of weather I want."

"Michael used to just sniff the air," Stacy said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I couldn't get to sleep for a while." Ray thought back. "I read Michael's journal. He wrote about finding some inks and some of the paper samples at Alwyn Mills." As he said it, he woke up to the crisp morning, the red geraniums standing bravely by the frosted window. Stacy became attentive at once. Her arms, stretching up like a knotted rope unwinding, stayed in mid-air. "I remember reading that. I've been thinking about that a lot."

While they ate breakfast, Stacy asked, "What do you think of this cereal? It has about fifteen additives. You don't have to eat it. You could wait and see if I die before you try it. If I die, sign the petition for that bill on food labeling that's stalled in



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the Senate right now." She finished her cereal and, still alive, meticulously folded the paper napkin before throwing it in the trash. "You know mainstream manufacturers are subject to quality control by the FDA, but natural food stores aren't. Ginseng, feverfew, goldenseal, dong quai -- anybody can package these up, and there's no way to check on a standardized dose. People have different reasons for wanting to control. The sponsors of the Senate bill think some of these are drugs and should be available by prescription only."

"Terence was talking about that the other day. How it would affect the Nunotuck."

"Terence is outraged by it. I'm lobbying against it in Washington. I just want clear labeling."

Ray looked at Stacy "You can't take on all the evils of the world, you know," he said.

"Don't worry," she said quickly. "The natural food industry is different from the commercial world. That has to be made clear. Real organic farmers have a connection to the earth. The government shouldn't take that away. HUG can help, because organic farmers need clean quality water for their crops."

The breakfast nook was cozy, and they sat next to each other on a bench.

She was including him in the issues of her life. Soon he would bring her to his house. He would show her his life. He didn't want her to take him for granted.

After breakfast, she went to the office and he went home. On his way, Ray became nostalgic about the sixties, when he was young and had multiple love affairs, intense and non-committed. He opened the window and belted out "Bridge over Troubled Water" to the trees. He could remember the music, but not the words. So he tried, "Hey you get offa my cloud," which fared better, textwise. Then he launched into a full-scale rendition of the chorus of "I wanna hold your

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hand." No problem with memory there!

## Chapter 17

It was Terence on the phone, not Stacy, whom he had been holding in the back of his mind like a charm, and who doubtless was the cause of his frequent, surprising breaking into song. Terence thought the Nunotucks should organize in case Carl decided to pursue the deed. Terence and the tribal lawyers were meeting at the herbal factory the next morning. Terence was also inviting adjacent Nunotuck landholders such as Ray. He was sorry it was short notice.

Ray, not wanting to arrive empty-handed, chose a knife he had in stock to give to Terence. It was bow shaped, with a chestnut handle that rose to meet the arc of the blade. Ray considered it well crafted. That meant it met his standards of combining utility with art, a fascinating balance, that Ray cantilevered each time he worked a design.

He worked all day on his new orders. Before he went to sleep, he brought his thoughts about Stacy up to the surface of his mind. Maybe she was a little forward. Maybe he liked it. It occurred to him that if he invited her over she would come. Had he ever dared to think this in high school – and he had – he would have told himself – and he had -- that he was crazy.

The Nunotuck herbal fields and factory were on the far side of Mount Nunotuck from the river, a two-hour drive for Ray through the reservation. At the outskirts of the fields were a gate and an unimposing sign, nothing that revealed the size and extent of the operation beyond. The factory was a football-field-size two-story cement block building. There were four outbuildings of similar proportion, of more primitive metal construction – garages and storage facilities, and flanking these, a couple of construction trailers marked "administration." Out of some scrupulous sense of leaving room in the guest parking lot, Ray parked in the employee lot, which held spaces for about fifty cars and was almost full. He went into Terence's office, a cluttered alcove

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partitioned off from noise of ringing phones, humming fax machines and assiduous office personnel.

Six people were with Terence, drinking coffee from paper cups. When Ray arrived, they were ordering breakfast. Terence was making it clear that this wasn't your big-time catered affair. A secretary handed them menus from a local breakfast diner. A half an hour later, the food arrived in take-out containers, and the secretary carefully collected from each person what he owed.

Besides Terence, there were two lawyers and three landowners and Ray. Both lawyers lived on the Reservation. One was stooped and had the furtive movements of a mole. The other lawyer looked as if he would be comfortable settling any dispute in the wrestling ring if the court verdict was not in his favor. His name was Hogan. The lawyers reported that they planned to investigate the legality of the new land deed. They would document the history of communication between Nunotucks and Nunotuck neighbors, and the historical land relationship between Alwyns and Nunotucks.

Ray experienced the meeting as both reassuring and ominous. The lawyers proposed no

strategies he hadn't already thought of. On the other hand, they seemed in command of a formidable vocabulary of unintelligible legal code phrases and numbers. The labyrinthine paths necessary to approach the bench to argue the case did not intimidate them. Ray didn't like his rights defended by others, but he understood that the system had become so Byzantine that experts were necessary. He hoped these lawyers were really on his side, and competent. More than that, he just wanted the whole thing to be over. He and the other private landowners agreed to be represented along with the Nunotucks in a group countersuit, should Carl file his new deed in court. When they heard what Ray had to say about counterfeiting, they agreed they should bring Carl to trial for counterfeiting.

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"Damn Alwyns," Terence said, looking somber. "They're all over the news. People were calling me all yesterday about that deed."

"How did they find out about it?" Ray asked.

"Me and my big mouth," Terence admitted. "I figure if there's going to be a fight I'll need public support."

After the formal meeting concluded, the lawyers hung around, and the mole started talking about Michael Alwyn's gunshot wound. That too seemed to be common knowledge. Terence said the police had reported it and asked for witnesses to step forward. The mole speculated that a hunter might have shot him by accident.

Terence agreed. "Look at the bikers who were target practicing upstream as Michael went down the Falls," he exclaimed. "Weekend warriors. They trashed the site. Looking at the targets they left behind, I could see they were mediocre marksmen. If people like that hunted, there'd be more hunting accidents. Some people just buy guns and think they can shoot if the need arises. They always miss. That's how accidents like this happen." He shook his head in dismay.

"Statistics say," the mole corroborated, "in families that own guns, someone is three times more likely to die by a gun than in families without guns."

"Statistics say what you want them to," the second lawyer, the buff Hogan intervened.

"If you want to give people guns, you need to educate them," the mole warmed to the subject. "Moral education, respect for life."

Hogan clasped his briefcase shut. "You underestimate the standards of the average gun buyer," he admonished. "Most people want to be good at what they do. Especially, if it's a question of ensuring their own safety. They're not going to take unnecessary risks. They take gun courses. Go target

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shooting. Statistics say most people who own a gun know how to use it. The way I look at it," he continued, as if he was presenting a case, "hunting is less wasteful of earthy resources than getting in your car and using gas to get to a movie that cost millions of dollars to make. People making the movie either misused animals during the filming or polluted some environment, or had Styrofoam cups for all the coffee the cast drank, or used up airplane fuel in those ridiculous chase scenes. If more people hunted, they'd know what survival was. They wouldn't need cheap thrills like expensive Hollywood movies. Those movies waste money, and usually waste the minds of the viewers."

The mole lawyer refuted this line of reasoning. "You're an idealist. We can't turn the clock back two hundred years. Nowadays, most people don't have the spiritual or practical education to hunt in a way which respects the environment and doesn't wound animals unnecessarily or kill people by mistake."

"Glenn," Terence said to the mole, "I want you to research how many .38 owners are

registered in this County. See if you can find out how they learned to shoot, what their level of expertise is. We can get some mileage from Michael's case. Put the spotlight on consciousness and hunting. Represent ourselves as the original pioneers, because we practice hunting consciously, and every one of our hunters is a sharp shooter and never leaves a wounded animal. emphasize our respect for life."

After the lawyers and other Nunotuck landholders left, Terence told Ray he had a meeting with the head gardener, he referred to as the Herb Curator. Did Ray want a tour of the fields?

"Sure," Ray responded. "I could use some fresh air." He had a headache. It wasn't that he had a native or naive mistrust of lawyers. It was just that he was suspicious of generalizations and abstractions, preferring the concrete and individual facts. He knew that about himself. That's why he had left college

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after a year in pre-engineering, and taken up knife making.

“We call them fields, but they aren’t actually fields,” Terence laughed as they stood behind the factory and he saw Ray’s mystified face surveying the forests which surrounded the buildings. “We began with the habitat and what grew there. We’ve been researching how to improve on it for 30 years.” He started walking into the forest. “Here’s a microclimate sort of like the forest we walked through the night of the full moon. It’s a cool moist woods that works well for ginseng. Remember I told you on the mountaintop that we just replace each wild root we harvest with a bunch of others, and let them grow for at least seven years undisturbed. But down here, we manage and try to enlarge our original microclimate, we encourage plant propagation with fertilizers, we manage the seeds, and transplant plants we start from seed. So these aren’t wild; we market them as wild crafted. We have 10 sites, and are always improving them, enlarging them, and cultivating others.”

“Sounds labor-intensive,” Ray said.

Terence sighed. “That’s what we have to consider when we bill. But it’s funny, the more we charge, the more eclectic we get, and the more eclectic we get, the more people are curious and the more curious they are the more money we make. It’s a vicious circle, man. Anyway, wild ginger shares the same habitat and we raise it the same way. Mixed with sugar, wild ginger tastes like cultivated ginger, only it has a woodier taste – much sought after by gourmet restaurants. That’s what I’m saying – we’re a hip trend in Soho. I bet as we speak, some movie star is bragging about his wild ginger dressing, his tony car, and his *recherché* designer clothes. Oh well,” Terence sighed in mock resignation, and shrugged his shoulders. “What can we do? We’re popular.”

“It’s tough,” Ray agreed. “Us Mainers don’t like to be part of the mainstream.”

“That’s it, Ray. But we tolerate it. We’ll be in it as long as it

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leaves us alone”.

“As long as it’s far away,” Ray agreed.

They continued their amicable walk. “The other woods product is heal-all,” Terence said. “It’s a little plant, pretty easy to grow. We make a salve of it. That was Monique’s idea. She started the beauty line. So now we’ve got that, along with the medicinal and the gourmet. We used to depend on ginseng, but we’re diversifying. Diversify. That’s the mantra of the new age. We had a guru from Babson Institute up here last week. Business breakfast.”

They had made a circle in the woods and were now heading back. “So that’s it?” Ray asked.

Terence chuckled. “You’re still looking for the herbal fields,”

“I know it’s too obvious,” Ray apologized.

Terence continued, “and we do have fields. They don’t belong to us, though. They belong to the lumber companies. Here’s the arrangement. Some of our members – we call them independent contractors – gather goldenrod that proliferates in the roadside waste of lumber country. It’s incredibly lush and abundant, and it’s organic. We couldn’t ask for better growing

conditions. Goldenrod loves disturbed earth. We take the flowers and leaves of the wild plants. Chemical assays have proved our selections very potent. Medicinally, it’s good for allergies, congestion, sore throat and sinus infections. An old Indian remedy.”

“It won’t be long before Georgia Pacific starts charging you by the mile,” Ray predicted.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Terence said laconically. “That’s why we’re always on the look out for new products. We’re looking at mullein now. It’s easy to propagate. We’ll start by selling the dried leaves in health food stores. It makes a tea that soothes inflamed nasal passages. Then we’ll start making

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powdered capsules as soon as our capsule facility is operable. Saint Johnswort is another herb we're looking at. We're collecting the wild seeds and preparing – get this – preparing fields of sandy soil like the roadside waste areas the lumber companies do so well. I've often thought we ought to rent from them, but the idea doesn't agree with my asthma condition."

As they returned to the factory, Terence discussed issues in the herb business. They had faced crises this past year. A competitor ginseng product had appeared, made by a company called Seabird. A chemist analyzed the Seabird product along with other competitors' wares, and discovered that Seabird's had less than .01% ginseng, the rest was cornstarch and trace elements, arsenic which is necessary in minuscule doses for human nutrition, a little iron, magnesium, calcium, vitamin C, a hodge podge of things. The product wasn't mislabeled, only misleading, and the chemist advised people to stay away from it. Terence had watched as a large advertising campaign for it was launched. He had noticed it in more and more stores, along side Nunotook products, and priced lower. Soon it was even selling in wholesale warehouses, but then suddenly it disappeared. The company had gone out of business. Six months later, a new almost identical brand emerged called Nature's Crystal. It went through the same distributorship as Seabird had. The business offices were in Topeka Kansas, and there they were only saying that they had various small suppliers. "There's no law about quality control in non-medicinal and non-food products," Terence said. "I'm of two minds as to whether more regulation is required, but I tend to think that people in Washington don't have a clue, so I prefer that we have free enterprise, and stand on our record of quality. We have to believe that quality pays off. Otherwise, it's not worth it for us to be in this business. I won't deny we've got a low margin of profit. We're in default some, but I think we'll pull through."

They had returned to his office. The intercom buzzed. "Phone calls for you. It's your wife. And a reporter on the other line."



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Terence winked at Ray. "Gotta catch that wave," he said. "Catch you later."

## Chapter 18

Inspired by Terence's devotion to commerce, Ray decided to take stock of his own resources when he got home. It was the end of the month, time to pay bills, file, make a list of supplies needed, and organize a plan for next month's orders. When he first started the business, he had resented spending time on these procedures, but now he enjoyed them. The figures carefully noted in his ledger book were proof that he was doing OK. People liked his knives. He didn't have to worry so much about money anymore – although he would anyway. As the afternoon hours passed and Ray's enterprises unfolded on paper in a way that would please the most exacting accountant, Ray enjoyed a modest sense of security. He made coffee, checked his supply of power bars and dog food, took Molly out in the yard and threw sticks. He thought of the way Cindy's dog Raffle Ticket used to love golf balls, which had landed her in the hospital with the rubber band of a golf ball's interior wound around each and every cilia of her small intestine. That had cost him \$800, but it had been worth it, every penny, to see her rebound and become vigorous enough to chase – what else, but golf balls once again. Now he had Molly. Having a dog was good for a man, he decided, especially a man who lived alone. It gave him something to worry about besides himself.

Molly kept him busy. Outside, she preferred tennis balls to sticks. When Ray got tired of her scrambling shunts, he rummaged in the shed, came up with an old tennis racket warped out of shape but good enough to whack the ball down the driveway and out to the untrafficked road. That gave Molly a longer work out, made Ray feel like an ingenious caretaker, and reminded him that he'd never been any good at tennis and should make sure and stay away from the stylish courts of the Alwyn Country Club. In the unlikely event that Stacy invited him, he'd have to invent an old wrist injury or something.

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Back at the books, Ray lost track of time. He was making a five year business plan. He looked out the window. It had gotten dark. He checked his watch. 10:00. He'd forgotten to eat dinner. He fed Molly, rousing her from her curled-up snooze in the bed he'd set up for her beside his own bed. The phone rang.

"I've been thinking about you." The sound of her voice relaxed him, sent him into subliminal communication with her lips pursing softly the word "you."

"I've been thinking about you too." He said, although he hadn't been. He'd been totally immersed in his plans. Ray's powers of concentration allowed him to shut everything extraneous out when he was working on something of interest. He was surprised she would call him so late. Well, late for Maine. In the sixties, in his youth, it would have been early. But now, he was a little sleepy, relaxed from a productive day. Romantic notions flitted through his mind. He said. "You want to come over?"

"Its 10:00 at night!"

"Well, you called me," he said.

"I'll be right there." It was maddening how illogical women were, first calling, then insisting it was late, then acting as if it didn't matter.

He gave her directions. They were not nearly as arcane as the ones to the Alwaysn mansion. Just your typical country directions. Turn left at the third stone wall. Right at the Old Colonial on the Corner of Tidesville. Straight on down till you see a driveway on your right framed by a brilliant Oak and a bright yellow-leafed Birch. Drive down. Park by the garage.

He took Molly for a walk. When he came back, he made sure his former girlfriend's make-up articles were no longer in the bathroom. He put on water for tea, which he had gone out and bought after his last girlfriend had commented that men

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never had tea in their cabinets.

The crunch of gravel. Firm strides on the step. He opened the door just as she knocked. She wore a trench coat and had a suburban purse slung over her shoulders. She looked European. Would she greet him with air kisses? No, a regular one, if such velvet convergence could be called regular. His jeans tightened, and he fought a cave-man urge to pick his woman up and carry her to his lair. Patience. When he knew her better, then he'd do it. Maybe in ten minutes. He had a hunch she'd like it, but would want to make sure she was respected for her mind first. Sure enough, after some groping, she pushed him gently but firmly away.

"Make yourself at home," he said, unnecessarily, since she was already slipping out of her coat and slinging it over a chair.

"I brought you a cake," she said. "I didn't make it of course. I can't cook. I brought it from the Alwyn Diner."

"Great." Ray feigned enthusiasm.

"I need to feel happy. I spent the day planning Michael's funeral. Tomorrow at 5 at the Methodist church in Alwyn Mills. It's what Carl wanted. The autopsy and the investigation have held up the funeral, but we have to do it. All this police and deed crap! The family's going nuts. My thoughts have been racing. I desperately need to be distracted." She looked at him hopefully.

"I'm all about distraction," he replied in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"I knew it," she sighed. "You're such an understanding person."

If she only knew. He removed the cake from the bag. Chocolate cheese cake. His favorite! He cut two large pieces. His would do for dinner. He took a bite. For the Alwyn Diner, it wasn't bad.

"And of course you've been with us since the beginning of

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this. That's some sort of sign that you're meant to be involved."

"I don't believe in fate," Ray said cautiously. He didn't want her to think he was easy.

"That's OK," she said magnanimously. "Fate happens no matter what you believe."

Where had he heard that before? Sage? Please, no. Oedipus? Stacy took a big bite of cheesecake. "Can't it be your birthday?" she asked wistfully.

"My birthday is November 13."

"Yet you seem so lucky," she exclaimed, touching his hand, a comforting gesture.

"Lucky is my middle name," Ray said. He liked the way she touched his hand.

She chuckled. "I'm so glad you called me."

He hadn't, but he wasn't about to remind her.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"If you have tea..."

"Of course!" he said, enjoying the surprised look that crossed her face. "Of course I have tea."

"Men never have tea."

"I got tea because I knew you'd like it," he lied. The kettle whistled. Ray got up and filled the teapot. He would let it steep for five minutes, as per ex-girlfriend's instructions. He noted the

appreciation on Stacy's face. He was making progress in understanding women. Stacy was leagues above any of the others. Experience was paying off.

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“Well, I do have a teeny ulterior motive for coming here tonight,” she confessed, as he poured tea into the only 2 cups with handles – the rest had either broken or had unsuitable pictures of naked women, or raunchy logos, the remnants of his and Sheila’s visits to adult stores. Stacy sipped from her cup of tea without commenting on one side of the cup: “40 is 4 perfect 10’s” and the other “1946 was a Very Special Year. “

“I brought another of Michael’s journals,” she said, as if it were a precious offering.

The task of reading was a way to pass time, and helped deflect his own teeny ulterior motive of getting Stacy into bed and having sex with her here, in his house, claiming her somehow then, as his. And was that what he wanted, or was he only acting on animal desires? They’d already confirmed those animal desires. Water over the dam. Unfortunate allusion. But he wanted her on his territory. She handed Michael’s notebook to him. As usual, he admired her manicure – peach today on those artistic fingers -- and she opened it, as was her custom, at a random place and read out loud.

I promised to visit Carl and Eleanor. Promises make people happy. People will excuse you anything if they’re happy. That’s one thing I learned from Carl. People can live for a long time on promises. Promises give people hope and hope can keep you going. For most people, hope is all they have, and it’s all they need. People can make do with just a little satisfaction, but they’re greedy when it comes to hope. They need a lot of it to keep going. Hope is the grand leveler. What happens after hope? Love, I guess, but I don’t know. To me, love between people is one of those grand delusions, one of those great hopes people have that blind them, that strike them dumb and deaf. Take a perfectly sensible person and make that person hope for love – you’ll have an idiot in no time. I’m not a cynic. Oh no, I have hope. I hope I’m wrong.

Eleanor and Carl said they missed me. Ha. They miss

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who I was supposed to be. I haven't lived up to their expectations, but then, the world doesn't live up to my expectations. I had hope for it once. Now I stick to loving the woods and animals. Except of course, for one exception.

"Who was the exception?" Ray asked.

"Search me," Stacy answered. He took her at her word, putting aside the journal and laying his hands on her.

Her laugh was like a volcanic eruption. It came from deep inside. "I didn't mean physically," she protested happily. "Oh you. Let's get back to the journal."

Reluctantly, Ray picked it up again, and opened to a page.

I've figured out that the happy people are those who are of use. I'm not. Though I try desperately to prove myself in the enterprise called life, my work is constantly undermined. I can't forget the image of when they came – actually men in white coats – to take me away. I forget what I had done to precipitate it. Probably goddamn nothing.

Carl and Eleanor, they're the insane ones. The idea of insanity is self-perpetuating. Call someone crazy and they become it, like turning a switch. Call them loveable, they are so. Call them Fido they bark. They called me Michael, and I'm rowing my boat down stream, halleluia.

The river's not muddy today, but wide it is, and I cannot cross over. There's a gulf separating me from other people – the sane from the insane – they labeled me to my shame. "How do you feel?" The

psychiatrist asked me, as I sat there so obviously small and worm-like, like bait on a line. "How you feel

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when you ask me that?" I asked him. "Why do you ask?" he said, so fuck him. But when Stacy came to visit, she said, "I feel sad." And I started to cry! As if I were a sponge and had soaked up the entire world's sorrows. I'm a fool. A fool that looks at the world as if everything were new. I become what I look at. I am what I see. You feel sad, I cry. You're crazy, but I get committed. My own family. Maybe not Russ, not Stacy. Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The worst are full of passionate intensity. But I know that they are the crazy ones. The best are simple, and I'm not alone. I just wish someone would come along to confirm that. Well, a skunk just did, loping in its humpy way through the clearing.

I used to feel normal and fine before they sent me away, but the hospital did something to me. It took something from me I will never get back. Why did they do it? Why?

Stacy said, "This is his bottle cast into the sea. I found it." She turned to Ray. "I miss him so much." She closed the book and sat silently with it, head bowed as if she could talk to it. Ray didn't want to interrupt. Finally, she lifted her gaze and seemed to remember he was in the room. She tucked the journal into her purse large enough to be an overnight bag. Ray wondered if she had a toothbrush and a change of clothes, tomorrow's agenda, today's agenda, what else could she fit?

Suddenly she was back with him. "What do you think?" she asked. "Does he sound crazy to you?"

Ray thought back on all the journal passages he had read and heard. "I can think of a few passages where he freaked out," he said. "But I think anybody could get that way at times. He's not your average well-adjusted middle of the road movie-going fast-food-consuming upwardly mobile American on the fast track. But they committed him. They

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could have sent him to Harvard instead. I think he felt doomed because he could never accomplish the things he really was born to do. Everyone has a mission. If they know it and can't do it, it's a terrifying thing. They try to overcome, to do accomplish something else instead, but they do get a little crazy at times. I would say the majority of people are like that. They don't know who they are. They're just taking it one day at a time. I like the guy," he said. "He's honest, and original, and well, I keep using this word, but I am really attracted to pioneers. That's what he was. Not in the usual sense. One of a kind. Custom made."

She laughed. "Like one of your knives. He'd like that description. I can't tell you how

relieved I am to hear you say that. I honestly think that Carl and Eleanor just didn't understand Michael's originality. They created Michael's problem. I'm sure there are real schizophrenics, but I never thought for a second Michael was one. It was so tragic for a while. But of course, Michael just pulled out of the family and made his own life. I think he was happy. Anyway, enough about my family. Can I see the rest of your house?"

"Not much to see. The living room," he stood up, and pointed her through the door.

"Oh!" She was entranced. "May I?" She crossed the room to the piano. She checked to see if all the keys worked. Then she began a simple tune that Ray thought even he could play if she would teach him. Ray breathed a silent thank you to his mother Eileen who had insisted the piano come to the cabin from the house he and Sheila had shared. Was foresight a mother's gift?

The tones sounded full, the pauses right. Stacy stopped and took her shoes off, to stop the sound of her heels tapping the floor. When she played again, the music seemed to lift and climb. "This is a fine piano," she said, pausing, the melody suspended, the ceiling of the cabin having lifted higher.



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Thinking she must mean it sarcastically, he answered, "I should get it tuned." She shrugged. She was playing again. A warm feeling of friendship came to Ray. She was playing in his house, including him in music. For no reason – he was prone to random thoughts -- he remembered how he'd driven one evening to Bacon's house to borrow a drill bit -- clear across town without even calling. All the lights were out in the house. It was nine o'clock at night. Maybe they'd gone to bed early. Maybe no one was home. Maybe they were watching TV with the shades down and lights off. Maybe they'd had an accident and needed help. Maybe they'd been broken into, vandalized, robbed, mugged or had a heart attack. He rang the bell resolutely. There were movements inside. Ray could imagine Bacon saying, "Who the hell could that be?" Then a light popped on upstairs and footsteps descended and the outside light flooded over the porch where Ray stood, and somewhere deep in the house Rose's pit bull barked ominously, and then the door opened. Without asking questions, Bacon said, "Come on in," as if it were six o'clock and Ray had been invited to dinner and it really wasn't dark, Bacon weren't standing there with a towel wrapped around his waist and his hair all tousled. Rose came down in a bathrobe. They'd had cheese and crackers. Ray had gotten the drill bit, he'd been included in their happiness. That feeling of sharing was what Ray got listening to Stacy playing the piano.

When it looked as if she were going to keep on playing, he went into his workshop to test the blades he had made the previous day. As he held each one against the belt grinder, complex, bright sparks indicated just the hardness he wanted. He started cleaning the blade surfaces with a worn down abrasive belt -- no need to waste a new one.

He listened to the music from the living room. It was a cheery and companionable sound, and made the cabin homey. Since the divorce, he hadn't had a home. And the home he had had with Sheila had been towards the end, a place to get away from. He polished, concentrating on the equipment, on keeping his fingers out of the way. He got so into it he didn't

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notice that Stacy had stopped playing until she stood right beside him. She watched him for a while, then, when he had finished the blade he was working she asked, "How did you decide to become a knife maker?"

"Well," he said. "It's a long story."

"OK," she said. "Let's finish our tea."

He finished the blade, turned off the equipment and they walked into the kitchen and sat

down at the table. Stacy heated water, and they had more tea.

"When I was a kid," he said, "I thought there was nothing more basic than metal. I would read geology books, read about how the molten core of the earth formed different kinds of rocks. I wanted to understand the earth. After high school, I spent two years in engineering school, in industrial engineering. I pulled all A's. The designs, the procedures were really complicated and sophisticated. I liked it. There was money in it. Lots of opportunities. But, man, I was miserable. I didn't like the city. The idea of industrial progress just didn't turn me on. I didn't like working in a team. I realized I was a simple guy. I wanted to go home. I wanted to get back to basics. I had one thought. I thought about it all the time. I dreamed about it. I would make knives. I would learn about metal and machines, and I would make the best knives I could. That's my story. Pretty simple. I did what I wanted. I got what I wanted. I haven't regretted it for one instant. It works for me."

Stacy said, "I'm the opposite. I aimed to do what I was really bad at. When I was growing up I was a slob. I was disorganized. I couldn't plan anything. I felt so inadequate. Maybe I'm an activist because I need to organize. When I was growing up my room was always messy. Mother always said I was a natural slob."

"There's a lot of people like that. Look at Bacon," Ray said. "He doesn't have that good a sense of direction and he's a wilderness guide. My ex-wife Sheila breeds Rottweilers."

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Makes up for the wimpy aspects of her character, although I can't think of any. I used to wish there were more."

Stacy said, "Maybe she's the exception that proves the rule."

"She said I was hard to get along with."

"I don't think you're hard to get along with," Stacy said.

"One thing she hated was when I worked at night. She said I was obsessive."

"I work at night all the time," she said. "Obsessive is in the mind of the beholder. Besides, you've got nice hair."

"Hair and brains don't grow on the same head. I'm mostly bald."

"You have the best of both worlds, Ray," she said.

Was she just being nice? He didn't want to pursue her. He didn't want to lump Stacy together with other women. To make her special, maybe they should be celibate. Now that was an odd thought.

They were walking to the sofa and she was settling herself, stretching out with abandon on the cushions, letting her hair spread out onto the pillow. She had something in mind, and it was going to be drawn out. As he watched her, he fell into a kind of spell, and, entranced, he headed toward her, forgetting the celibate life. Then he realized she was falling asleep. He could hardly believe his good fortune. Now he would have to carry her to bed. This would wake her up. First he woke Molly, who had jumped beside Stacy to snooze. He carried Molly into his bedroom and set her firmly onto the blanket on the floor he had prepared for her. Then he returned for Stacy.

On the sofa, he inhaled Stacy's fruity odor, caressed her melon skin, felt her touch him in every right place. It was a long time before they made it to the bedroom. An even longer time before he was satiated. Longer still before she

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was. After each bout of their lovemaking, Ray felt nostalgic, reluctant to let the pleasure go. He was sure that such aching fulfillment was transitory – he needed to seize it again and again while it was available. Although he'd had plenty of women, when he tasted Stacy, he knew he'd been in a long famine.

Finally, as she abandoned the waking world, she muttered, "Wake me when you wake up."

Russ' article on river pollution is coming out tomorrow morning." Not even the throes of passion could shut off the complications of the outside world.

Ray listened to the wind outside in the trees. Dry leaves clattering. A symphony of browns, leaves clapping. Textures of tree trunks, bark and its interior life. Scales like bird feathers. Light went into night. Patches of sunlight turned to moonlight like fluff on the ground. All the somber shades, the joy tones. In woods terms, Ray could understand it better. Someone stood in the forest before him, eternal. Someone always stood before you. Love was a lightening of wanting to keep. The word keep was a key, but these things, no one could lock them up. As people slept, they belonged, as they always had, to earth, metal, ash, and water.

The next morning, Ray jumped out of bed, let the shade fly upward and was overjoyed to see sunlight flood the bedroom. The house felt peaceful with a woman in it. The newsboy had thrown the paper to the edge of the driveway. Ray scooted over a light frost that made his bare toes tingle and snatched it up. Maybe Molly would learn to fetch it. He wondered if dogs could smell bad news.

The headline read RIVER PROBLEMS. Ray made coffee and sat down to read. First he skimmed the article. Words and phrases jumped out at him. "Poisons fish." "300 acre sludge mat." "Sulfides, titanium, zinc, phenols, bleach." "Acid." "Phosphorus, nitrogen." "Water used in the machinery-cooling process."

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Then he reread it from the top, taking in whole sentences. "On June 4, 1986, a valve on the chemical supply for the digester broke, and 150,000 gallons of chemicals were discharged into the river. At a pH of up to twelve, fish were literally jumping out of the water." "On May 6, 1990, after a fuel spill, Alwyn Mills painted the tank, and cleaned up around it, but let the spill stay in the river." "Independent lab reports show sudden rises of arsenic, sulfuric acid, selenium in samples taken over three months, from four mill outlet spots and three public landings on the river." "Regular mill discharges include sulfides, titanium, zinc, algaecides, phenols and surfactants. Careless management and poor equipment cause white liquor spills as often as once a month." "The stink of hydrogen sulfide tarnished metal and discolored the paint on houses up to a half mile away. Pollutants and resulting algae bloom consume the oxygen in the water that fish need to survive." "Even a rise of five degrees in the water temperature kills fish." "Further research will reveal whether the Mill has willfully covered up data. The acceptable water pollution levels they report are not corroborated by independent labs." "The mill is responsible for loss of significant revenue from fisheries and the fish industry. Its monopoly on river water prevents other social and economic uses."

Stacy came into the kitchen. He asked if she wanted tea. "I'll have coffee. It smells good," she said. He thought he had no real food to offer – then remembered -- cheesecake! And cut two pieces. He handed her the newspaper.

She read, eating absent-mindedly. The smile was replaced by a frown. When she finished the article, she sighed and pushed a wayward lock of hair away from her face. She took another bite of cheesecake and a sip of coffee. Her face was free of make-up, unarmored. Little laugh lines, worry lines, the furrow between her brows, pale smudges beneath her eyes. Ray was seized by an urge to protect her. He wished he could offer her reassuring conventional breakfast food – oatmeal, bacon and eggs, sturdy whole wheat toast with jam

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and butter. His way of living suddenly seemed vagabond.

She said, "Carl and Louise must be flipping out."

Trying to be positive, Ray said, "Russ does offer some helpful suggestions." Quickly scanning the columns, while keeping an eye on Stacy's worried face, he found the passages he needed and read aloud, "There are solutions. The technology exists. A magnesium recovery system could replace the sulfite pulping process. A plant in Michigan filters the nutrient rich organic waste from water and sprays it onto land as fertilizer. Crops are then planted, harvested and sold. The water becomes clear enough to drink and the entire operation turns a profit. We need to expand our thinking. Get more experts involved – soil engineers, geologists, agronomists and many others. It can be done." He ignored the sentence that followed, "Unfortunately the mill has reserved a twenty year option for all new technology. Upgrades could be done in three years. But the mill has not guaranteed that it will do it at all."

Stacy stood abruptly and put on her coat. "Russ practically crucified Carl. It's the first time. Until now, Russ has stayed away from the pulp and paper industry. But it's been getting hard. There's been a lot of public pressure on him to address the problems the paper companies cause in this county. The paper companies are the largest landowners, and they have a huge impact on the land. And Alwyn Mills is the only mill. There are other industries that use water, but people are saying Alwyn Mills is the biggest water polluting industry. Russ has been agonizing over taking this step. I'm elated and dismayed. Russ is trying. Dad's trying... I don't want to discuss it."

"Fine." But she given him the signal to look out for the article. Good bye logic. Sheila had been the same. It used to bewilder Ray, but now he felt warm, almost furry.

"Will I see you at the funeral tonight?" she asked.

He nodded. Stood in the door and waved good bye as she

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hurried to her car and slammed the door. He didn't take her actions personally. She was upset and embarrassed. Sympathy, generic and overwhelming located itself in a region of the heart, a pounding near the upper left ribs. He immediately strode into his workshop to temper the blades. He still had half the batch to work on. He would draw out the brittleness, and this would smooth his turbulent emotions, and leave him feeling calm, himself again.

Before he began, the phone rang. It was Bacon. "Seen the paper?" Rhetorical question. Bacon knew that Ray read the paper first thing every morning. "A buddy of mine in Majestic Bay works for a lab that did potability testing for Russ. He just called me. Wanted me to take him bear hunting this winter, by the way. You interested? Anyway, results were pH 4 – now that's acid! Iron .5 --. 3mg/liter are normal, sodium .50 – standard is 25 mg/l. I said, 'what the hell, no one expects to drink mill water. Why use a potability test.' But my buddy said even with the additional effluents of industrial pollution, the goal of water purification is potability. He said there are all kinds of filters and mechanisms that can clear waste water."

Ray said, "Russ' article says Alwyn Mills doesn't use them."

"Who does?" Bacon asked. "I read a few other studies. Apparently no paper company in this state. We're in the Middle Ages here, Ray. Logging companies, Mills, every industry connected to making paper. They control the Maine economy. Logging industries own the whole Western part of the state. Mills are big employers and generate a lot of revenue. Together, they can do what they want. Alwyn Mills is a small fry, even though it's the biggest mill in Cascade County. But it's no different from the bigger mills in other counties. Because they're so powerful, they don't have to listen to the little guys. People don't want to lose their jobs. The public is afraid to speak up. Everybody wants money. Environmental groups don't have any. People aren't

invested in a long-term plan for the survival of the planet. They need to get the next meal on the table." He paused. "It's

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the CEO's responsibility, and they're letting us down, Ray. That's where we should start. Convert the CEO's."

Carl's face flashed before Ray's eyes. It shone with sweat in the room that was not hot. Carl's eyes bulged. His son was dead. His family relationships were falling apart. Louise's nasal voice came back to Ray. "Nothing is more important to Carl than family."

Bacon said, "How about dinner at our place on Friday? Give you a break from power bars. Bring Stacy if you want – or any other current flame."

"I'll ask Stacy," Ray said cautiously, not wanting to divulge the details of his incipient romance. Not wanting to jinx it. "You heard about the funeral?" he asked.

Bacon said he had received an invitation and he and Rose would be there.

No sooner had Bacon hung up than Terence called. "Russ is very fair, very objective. That boy's got guts. Exposing the family business. That had to take soul searching." He paused to make room for that thought. Then he continued, "Russ' article ought to generate public pressure on Carl to make some changes."

"Do you think an article like that can make a difference?" Ray asked.

"Every little bit helps," Terence said. "Public pressure mounts by degrees. It's a slow process, but it's our only hope. By the way, the knife, your gift – I was showing it off to some visitors yesterday. We gave them a tour of the factory. You can expect a few calls. They said they wanted to order. They said it was a real primal knife."

Ray thanked Terence. He hung up and turned off the ring. He couldn't be interrupted during the process of hardening the batch of knives. He heated the electric oven to 450 and put the blades in. Did his own small industry leave any hurtful by-products? He couldn't think of any. In the slow



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heat of the oven the blades turned gold, then bronze. For a utility knife he needed something hard but not stiff. If it were a vegetable knife, he'd stop the heat process at vermilion. These he stopped at straw -- better to leave them plenty hard. If he left them longer, they'd turn vermilion, then peacock blue, and finally into the dark blue of soft steel.

Using a small welding tip, he annealed the backs of the blades, to make them flexible enough so they wouldn't snap when pressure was applied. Making sure the heat was even on both sides, he turned the areas behind the blades deep blue. Doused them in water to cool, then did the same to the tangs.

Before he left for the funeral, he took Molly to his parents' house. Eileen thought she was cute. Steward said he would appreciate her help in the garden digging holes. "If I can teach her the difference between a perennial and a weed..."

Ray arrived early. Only a few people had begun filing into the church in Alwyn Mills. Louise stood by the imposing mahogany door and greeted people as they entered. Her black linen dress sagged in the damp air created by the misty rain outside. Her hair was more shriveled than usual. Ray sat in a pew near the altar, on the opposite side of the aisle from the section reserved for the family of the deceased.

Stacy emerged from a door beside the altar space marked "Office." Her face was etched gray in the dull light bathing the altar. In that moment she seemed to have aged twenty years. Age gave her dignity. Ray liked that glimpse into the future. She appeared distracted, but when she saw Ray, she waved and years and stress fell away. Ray liked that also, the effect he had on her. She came up to him and said hurriedly, "I hate the thought of his body in the ground. That's what

Carl wants to do, when the investigation is over. I think he should be cremated. Furthermore, it's uncivilized to cosmeticize -- I guess I'm inventing that word -- his body like that. He doesn't look like himself. He looks like a vacuum cleaner salesman. You know what I did, Ray? I slipped the

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Perseus star map into his casket. So he can find his way. Maybe doing that helps me more than him, but isn't that what funerals are for? For the ones left behind?"

People were now crowding into the church. The church bell began to toll. Inside, Stacy, Russ and Louise joined Carl and Eleanor in the front pew. A number of visiting Alwyns shared a resemblance to Carl. His large head appeared to be caused by a predominant gene. Eleanor looked pale but resolute. She evidently had family around her too. Two women resembled her closely -- they might be her sisters. They seemed to have husbands and children. The family group as a whole occupied six pews.

The church was full now. Bacon and Rose had arrived. Ray had saved them places beside him, and they slid into them. Eugene Wiley sat a few rows back.

The minister stood up, a tall man with an effete voice. He was new to the area, and people weren't taking kindly to him. That would take ten years at least, if he lasted that long, and then they would still refer to him as "the new minister."

"It is my task to speak to you today of a young man whose time on earth was troubled. Michael Dublin James Alwyn was on this earth forty plus years." He didn't even know him, Ray thought. "Let us remember him in the small, but meaningful ways in which every person, even the disturbed, reaches out to the community. Let us not dwell on his tragic death. Scripture teaches, 'This cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled.' John 15:25. If we can't understand the meaning of Michael's life and death, we have but to accept and believe in Jesus. 'Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.' John 14:1. In praise of Jesus we gather here today."

The minister sat down as if he was glad it was over. He didn't look comfortable. Ray was guessing he was already looking for another job. Cascade County wasn't for everyone. People rustled in the pews.

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The open coffin lay at the front of the chapel, surrounded by the stiff gladioli and pink carnations that seem to grow in funeral homes. There were belled lilies too. Why did these plants always accompany death? It was because the ceremonies were performed on automatic pilot, Ray decided. It was dial a death, fax a funeral, 1-900-PRAYER. There was something obscene about it. Where was Michael in all this? He had just been shoved into the generic line of suckers shuffling toward Purgatory. Ray compared this ceremony with the Nunotuck Full Moon ceremony. This one was dishonorable, in comparison.

People began slowly filing past the open coffin. Some touched the sides of the oak box. It was so highly polished they could see themselves in it. When it was his turn to pass, Ray saw Michael lying in a bed of baby blue satin. His face and hands were white as lilies, pink as carnations, stiff as gladioli. His face was as blank and open as a flower. His beard had been shaved and his hair cut. All the crinkles on the body had been erased. This body was truly a shell left behind, and Ray wished the mortician had had better taste. The suit they had put on him was too large, a pool of a suit that might have fit him before his rugged life whittled him down to muscle and bone. The paisley tie seemed out of place, a rich swirl of orange and browns, an exotic worldliness that Michael had surely never seen on earth. Only his hands seemed right. They were pressed together in a V like geese flying home. Ray couldn't help but remember

Michael at the river. Ray reached in his pocket for the 2" dropped edge utility knife with a lignum vitae handle that he always carried. He placed it unobtrusively in the casket, sliding it into a pocket of the ridiculous suit. "Use it, Michael," he muttered. "Cut your way out of this shit. Find peace."

It was a relief to sit down on the stiff bench. How long it had been since he'd been in church. He was spiritual, not religious. The last time was the day he got married to Sheila. That day cherubs swooned around a prone female figure in

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one of the side alcoves of the church. Cupids, Sheila had called them. As they waited for the minister to come out of his kitchenette behind the altar, where they had seen him eating a grilled cheese sandwich, she told him the story of Cupid and Psyche, how in love they had been, only that love had been spoiled by jealousy. "Jealousy is poison in a marriage," she had said. It had seemed foreboding to him that on their first day of married life, she would use words like "jealousy" and "poison." Then she had made a joke about "matrimonial duty." That was ominous. Sure enough, it wasn't long before sex did become a chore to her like vacuuming or, as she said, going to her job at the chiropractors where she answered the phone and made appointments. When she and Ray split up, she ended up with her boss. Ray didn't want to speculate on her present activities, but if he had to bet, he would make a list of all the things she'd joked derisively about, and he would bet that she was doing them now. Sometimes life upset your deepest convictions. Looking up at the cherubs flying toward the shining light of God on the church ceiling, he wondered if humankind was aiming toward goodness, or just thrashing around on earth without direction.

Ray sat on the hard bench as people filed past the casket. Eugene Wiley. Carl's secretary Evelyn Waites. Ray recognized workers from the Mill. The waitress from the diner. Dave the barber. No one from the Nunotuck Reservation. But of course, they'd already had their ceremony. Ray listened to the fluted tones of the organ, wishing for another kind of sound. If he had to orchestrate a funeral, he would do it differently. He would have a band with drums, bass, guitar and oboes. He liked the clarity of oboes, a clarion, strident call you couldn't ignore because it cut through any other sound sharply and said what it had to say. Ray liked that in an instrument.

The Alwyns, who had been the first to pass by the body, had returned to their front pew. Louise gazed at the people filing by the casket. Russ looked everywhere but forward, and Stacy looked fixedly at the ground as if she had discovered

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bugs already crawling toward the coffin. When everyone had passed by the casket and sat down again, Carl stood up. "My son is dead," he began, then stopped and cleared his throat and looked up above him on the ceiling to where cherubs blew golden trumpets in a gilt-edged sky. Carl shifted from one leg to the other. His voice had deserted him. There was a rustle of clothing and squeaking of wood as people shifted on the benches. Eleanor began to sob, but her back stayed as straight as the back of the pew.

Carl cleared his throat and started again. "No one knows why we die. Why someone dies one day and not the day before. Why the heart stops beating. What determines the timing of natural causes? The way Michael died illustrates the poignancy and mystery of death. I for one don't think we'll ever find out exactly what happened the morning Michael pushed his canoe away from shore and started his last journey."

A woman stood up at the back of the church. Heads turned. She looked around the group of people gathered in the church. Her voice was edged with hysteria as she said loudly, articulating each word, "I loved Michael -- and you killed him. His own family!" She turned and ran out the door.

A stir passed through the room. Wiley leaped up and ran after her. Some people stood up and seemed confused about what to do. A hum of comments erupted.

"Who was that?" "She's crazy." "What a thing to say." Carl leaned against the casket for support. "I don't know that woman," he said, "but I know she is grieving his death. Grief can make a person crazy. One wants to blame someone or something. It is so difficult to believe that a random accident can take away someone you love. Please let our last memories of Michael contain some dignity." He took deep gulps of air, and everyone in the congregation did the same, collectively seeking relief.

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The organist began playing something pasty. People filed out into the damp evening. Ray heard Eleanor ask in an urgent hushed voice, "Was that his girlfriend?"

"Did he have a girlfriend?"

"He never mentioned anyone. What's her name?"

"Wiley ran after her. He'll find out."

"What is she trying to do? Kill us all? I nearly had a heart attack."

"She was just upset. Spouting off."

The family gathered in the outside courtyard, talking to people. It had been made clear there would be no burial yet. The investigation into the cause of death wasn't closed. There was little conversation, only respectful, murmured comments. The mysteries and questions about Michael's death were common knowledge. People knew about the ongoing police investigation, but at least for the moment were discreet. The melodramatic interruption of the shrieking woman was an episode, like a soap opera, Ray thought. How easy it was to ignore things that bothered you.

When most of the crowd had left, Eleanor turned to Carl and said, "What did Michael tell that woman to make her scream out like that. Did he really hate us?"

"We never hurt him. Michael was just over-sensitive, let him rest in peace. This is his funeral, for God's sake. Let's not waste our time on a maniac." Carl said. "She was venting her sorrow on us."

"She was accusing us, for God's sake."

The minister came over to them, rubbing his hands together as if he were washing them. He obviously wanted to offer help, but his murmured formulaic consolations, sounded as much like exhortations for the family to leave as anything else. "You'll feel better tomorrow... Nothing to do but rest,

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try to forget..." He left.

Eleanor apologized to the family for not organizing a funeral dinner, but said the effort of cooking was too much. As if she had to make excuses.

Louise left.

Russ looked deep in thought. "Wanna come on over?" he asked Stacy. "You too, Ray?"

"Maybe I should get going," Ray said to Stacy".

"Oh Ray. You've been such a support in all this. I truly appreciate your coming tonight. You're a beacon in the fog."

Ray said dryly, "A foghorn in the night."

"A harbor in a storm," Stacy said, as Louise drove away, and Carl ferried Eleanor off in a Lincoln Continental.

"You two work it out. I've got to go to the can."

Ray and Stacy stood alone in front of the church. "You've been like family, only you're sane."

That compliment was more than he had bargained for. He said tentatively, "Well I'm not the one in a --uh -- stressful -uh - situation."

She looked so worried. Her brow furrowed up so that her whole skull moved. He put his arms around her.

"I appreciate your steadiness. You reassure me. The Nunotuck ceremony was so much better than this. This church makes me feel like as if worms are already eating my guts."

"There was a crack of thunder and a few seconds later lightning flashed a jagged line beside the church spire lightning rod and raced down to the ground. A shock wave jolted Stacy against him. Then he forgot everything around them. She was deliciously fleshy yet at the same time

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disembodied, as if she were a lightning rod herself and a current was charging through both their bodies. He touched his lips to her forehead. It was a priestly kind of kiss. There was something holy about it. He could have sworn the air around them folded and turned as if it were a page in the universe.

She looked into his eyes, ran a finger down the frown lines, circled his temples.

Russ came back. "Well, you coming?"

"Sure," Ray and Stacy said at the same time.

## **Chapter 19**

They followed Russ. It wasn't a long drive. Russ' house was on a dead end street of box houses. His rambling ramshackle house was located directly behind – and this seemed odd -- a small barn. It seemed you had to go through the barn to get to the house. Six vehicles were parked outside. The mailbox was purple with a white star. It looked like a hippie place.

"Russ is an odd guy," Stacy said, anticipating Ray's reaction.

"Yeah, I'm an odd guy," Russ said. "Rich hippie. Alwyn, anti-Alwyn. Contemporary environmentalist and sixties life style. I own the house, but it's a commune. Carl and Eleanor hate it. They never visit. Michael and I designed it when Michael was an architect and engineering student at Yale. That was before Michael got committed. We thought out every detail. For instance, I wanted people to go through the barn on the way to the house, to ground them, calm them. Horses are great levelers."

They opened the gate to the chain-link fence surrounding the yard. Immediately, they heard a deep bark and a growl. Stacy said. "It's a Great Dane. He sounds fierce, but he's a pushover. His only vice is chewing the mail." They entered the two-horse barn. The cement floor was clean-swept. The stalls were spread with fresh sawdust. The air smelled of hay and dung, an earthy smell that smelled wholesome and good



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to Ray. The horses' nostrils flared and they clucked softly as they passed. Russ gave them an apple from a bucket by the door. Saddles on racks, saddle pads washed and laid over them, bridles hanging from hooks. The bits were clean, and the leather smelled of oil. The barn looked inviting, in spite of the bare light bulb, which swung in the aisle.

Stacy said. "The barn manager keeps everything shipshape. She exercises the horses. Russ almost never rides now that his girlfriend's away. He built the house for her, really. That's what I think, but he'll deny it."

"I deny it. See the barn door molding?"

At first Ray didn't see anything unusual about it. Then he noticed that since there was no room for the molding to fit on all sides, the right molding had been turned sideways, and was on the wall of the lean-to that jutted out at a right angle to the barn. "Nice touch," he said.

"Isn't it? Then there's the drainage system. Michael and I designed this house. We banked and graded the ground away from the walls of all the buildings and built a system of drainage pipes underground. It recycles all the water to the back pasture. The grass is always green there. And there's an engineered pond. Everything -- house, barn -- is heated by ground heat. The pipes went in with the drainage system. When Michael finished at Yale, everyone said, why don't you do your doctorate at MIT? He was summa cum laude in architecture. Instead, he went for an associate's degree in environmental science from the community college. He was going down in ambition, going up in the nature relationship quota. When we went for walks in the woods, he'd stop and just take it all in. It was so peaceful. We hardly even needed to talk. I miss that. I miss him. I miss the two of us. He left a lot of diaries here in the house. He spent a lot of time here before he moved out to his campsite in the woods."

They started toward the back of the ranch house. The living room didn't look like an architect or designer's dream. It was furnished with a Sears' style plaid sofa and chairs, a

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collection of seashells, a dead potted plant, coffee table strewn with scientific journals, and file cabinets in the corners -- the atmosphere of a college dorm. Shoes of different sizes rested everywhere, as if people had kicked them off as they watched TV. A few empty soda bottles of the natural flavor variety graced the floor beside lumpy easy chairs. Ray looked at his face in the mirror over the mantel and his twenty-year-old self stared back. The year he started his knife business, he had lived like this. He'd been half Russ' age. As a matter of fact, he still kind of lived that way. The phone rang. Russ went into the kitchen to answer.

"What's up?" Stacy inquired, when he came back and she was ensconced in one of those recliners that are terminal.

"Wiley caught up with the woman who caused the stir at the funeral. He followed her to Majestic Bay -- she's originally from there, and she's back visiting family. She'd heard about Michael's funeral, word of mouth. She's his old girl friend. She's for real. Wiley got her story. Gave me her name. Gail Peterfreund. She's an English professor and an author. I called her. She'll meet with us tomorrow morning. I'm glad I caught you both before you drove all the way home. If you want to stay tonight, tomorrow we can see her at 10:00."

"I can do that," Stacy said. "Ray?" The lamp shone on her dark hair and illuminated the smooth planes of her face. The light brought out the gold flecks in her brown eyes. She looked beautiful and she wanted him to help her.

"OK," he said. "My parents are watching Molly."

Russ looked at him knowingly and said, "You've got a caretaker complex."

"He certainly does take care of me. But, Ray, I want you to know, I'd do the same for you," Stacy said, as if having a caretaker's complex were the most natural thing in the world. Maybe it was true. Maybe that's why the divorce had left him so bereft. It left him with no one to take care of -- so he had moved next-door to his parents to keep an eye on them, and

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now he had a dog. It was almost like having a child. He remembered when Cindy was little he had worried about her every minute. Sheila had called him a Jewish mother. "So?" he said to Russ, a little defensively.

Russ laughed. "Just as long as you take care of my sister. Anyway, about Gail Peterfreund, I already told her we'd be there."

"What about Wiley. Did he say anything else?"

"I asked how the murder investigation was going. Whether the big shots were making progress. He said they plotted the trajectory of the bullet that hit Michael. They could tell from the angle of the wound the gunman must have fired from the riverbank, and Michael was close to shore. They found Michael's campground, but the shot hadn't come from there because it's on the wrong side of the river. The shot was fired from the Alwyn side. The police have located a scuffle of bushes and drag marks of a canoe on one of the Alwyn beaches." Russ sighed, and cracked his knuckles. "You guys want something to eat? Drink?"

"What do you have?" Stacy asked.

"Someone usually makes carrot juice, some kind of soup, I don't know. Let's see what's left over. We change duties. This week my housemates made a stew for the week." He led the way into a boxcar shaped kitchen. "I have three housemates, he explained to Ray, as they ate stew on the kitchen table.. "College friends." He paused. "You married?"

"Divorced." Ray wondered Russ knew he and Stacy were involved with each other, or if he was the oblivious type. So far he and Stacy had acted discreet in public. They all washed the dishes together.

"You ever love someone so much it hurts?" Russ asked,

Ray thought about it. "Always," and "Never," would both be appropriate answers. "It hurts most when it stops," he said.

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Stacy gave him a quizzical look.

"That's when it's time for the violin solo," Russ said, pouring them each a glass of carrot juice from a pitcher.

Ray drank. Carrot juice. Blatantly healthy, not bad.

"I got a letter today." Russ took an airmail envelope out of his shirt pocket and traced the elaborate foreign stamp with his thumb. "From my fiancée. She's with the Peace Corps in Tanzania. Got a year to go."

"When's the wedding?"

"We haven't set a date." He put the envelope back in his pocket. Somewhere upstairs a door opened and closed. The sound of someone taking a shower. The Harlequin Great Dane padded in, gazed at them disdainfully, trooped into the living room and lay down on the rug in front of the TV. It growled, then closed its eyes and rested its huge square head on its paws.

Russ picked up a spiral notebook that lay open on the counter, as if he had just been reading it. Michael's name was written across the top of the page in an erratic script. "I was re-reading the notebook Michael gave me a few days before he died. He had stopped by to leave me some acorn flour. Listen to this." He hoisted his shoulders and relaxed them, like a baseball pitcher before the pitch.

Russ, I write because I can't talk with you. I'm not interested in futility. You are being really small minded. Do you think I'm stupid? Don't make me less than I am Russ. You seem to me to be desperate to prove yourself. You have no identity unless you brush against something -- people, or issues. You need conflict to define you, -- you openly seek conflict with Carl (I just do my own thing) and you seek conflict with me. We had one venture in common, your house. But I'm tired of being blamed about the house. I did my best, and all you have to do is maintain the damn ground heating/cooling

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system. Ask me to work with you. Don't just blame me when things go wrong. Every system needs a retuning once in a while The last few times I've talked to you about the glitches you've been experiencing with ground heat, you've been angry. I tell you how to maintain the systems, but you don't pay attention. You say they need too much maintenance. They've been running strong for twenty years Russ. Remember how the last time you saw me you said, "I could kill you, Michael?" How do you think that makes me feel?"

Russ looked up from the letter and said, "He's right. I was rude and stupid with him"

Stacy replied quickly, "I don't think there is a person who hasn't said at one time or another, 'I could kill you,' to someone else, especially people they're close with. It sounds paradoxical I know, but we all say it."

"I wondered if anyone else reading them would think that I resented Michael and might have

a reason to want him dead."

Stacy said in a shocked voice. "Nothing in the writing suggests that. Anyone who knew the two of you could tell you loved each other."

"When the police suspect something criminal, they always find it."

"This is just a journal," Ray offered, "for jotting down anything that comes to mind. Fantasy, conjecture, nothing admissible in court."

"Yeah, that's true – and although I don't believe in the diagnosis, he was diagnosed paranoid-schizophrenic, which pretty much discounts anything he says." Russ said;

"That sucks, and it's not true," Stacy said. We can always

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bring in the testimonies of the other psychiatrists. I hate their jargon, their pigeon-holing, their holier-than-thou attitudes, but at least they found Michael normal.

“Russ,” Stacy said. “It’s over. We need to change the subject.”

Russ opened the refrigerator and inspected the contents of a neatly foil-covered container. They ate the jello desert standing up in the kitchen. Might be a habit of unmarried men. Ray wondered if at her house Stacy ate standing up..

“How about a movie?” Russ suggested. “I’ve got ‘2001.’

Stacy said. “Cult classic. Psychedelic. That’s what I remember. Haven’t seen that movie in twenty years. Where’s the popcorn?”

“You’re making it,” he said. “There’s a package of microwaveable in the corner cabinet. Nothing you can ruin.”

“Don’t be too sure,” she said. Ray wasn’t surprised when Russ had to remind her to stop the microwave before the popcorn burned. She’d set the timer too long, and forgotten about popcorn, moving from cabinet to cabinet, inspecting the contents, commenting on different kinds of salt – rock salt, sea salt, flower of salt, for god’s sake, that cost \$9.00 for a 2 oz bottle.

“Marketing,” Ray said, sampling it. “Surprise! It tastes like salt.”

“You have no appreciation for the subtleties of salt,” Russ said. “Ask my housemates. They’ll educate you.”

They salted the popcorn with flower of salt gathered from the “garden of the sea off the coast of France,” and joined the dog in the living room. Russ started the movie. “Lately I’ve been nostalgic for the sixties,” he sighed. “Man, the eighties seem so stagnant – boring! Reagan. The kids today just want status jobs, good money. They don’t ask questions. They don’t care about the planet. And they’re supposed to take care of the future! I’m worried. No matter what 60’s problems were, we

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cared about more than lining our pockets. I want to keep that idealism alive." His eyes were glued to the TV. Images of the Earth seen from outer space floated in slow motion across the screen.

Ray remembered having seen the movie '2001' on the big screen when it first came out. He'd been mesmerized.

"The beginning is brilliant," Russ enthused. "Think in the sixties what it meant to see Earth from outer space. 1969, Neil Armstrong is walking on the fucking moon! Seeing our little diamond in the jeweled firmament of the sky. How small our planet is in the scope of things, how precious. That's something older generations of capitalists didn't understand, and if they do, they want to mine other planets for oil or something. Find a habitable one the chosen few can

live on after those rich fuckers have destroyed this planet. And this 80's generation just doesn't see it as a threat to life on earth. They take it for fucking granted. Think it's all about marketing."

"I love the screaming monkeys," Stacy said, as the movie scene shifted. "Looks like a corporation board meeting, a hostile takeover. This part was sixties' parody of the establishment."

"We're in the dark ages now," Russ said. "We've got top bureaucrats of the land endorsing pollution – sponsoring it for god's sake, by giving polluting factories tax breaks! Profit is NOT the bottom line, folks. Soon we won't have a planet to save. I mean, Maine is a poor state. Paper mills employ a quarter of our industrial workforce. We have the lowest per capita income in New England. Ask Ralph Nader. His people just put out a scathing report on the Maine lumber industry. He's a super-ego but he tells it like it is. How the companies hire the best lawyers and put a glowing case before the legislature and the public, but actually the paper companies are monopolies enslaving us. He calls Maine a paper plantation! We need more of that sixties radical idealism to

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jar us out of our 80's slump."

More screaming monkeys. A background hum, like a chorus of lamenting humanity, a moan about eternity. "The sixties," Stacy mused. "That was when we had flowers in our hair."

"That's when we had hair," Ray said.

"The 60's were ideological," Russ said. "I was in SDS, in Chicago, Washington, Berkeley. Tear-gassed. Buck shot. In jail twice."

"I was in 'Nam," Ray said, aware of an irritable edge to his voice that made Russ and Stacy look away from the screaming monkeys on the screen and focus on him.

"What is this guilt trip you Vets try to put on guys who didn't go?" Russ exploded. More monkey screams. "I had a bad knee," Russ said. "I failed PE. I wasn't fit, I was a wimp, couldn't fight for shit. You Vets think only real men went? Only the rich pansies stayed home?"

"Yeah, that's what I think. I guess 'Nam would have made you fit, taught you to fight. Yeah I'm bitter. I took two years out of my knife making work to put my life on the line every day. You wonder why I'm paranoid? It sure changed me. The lower class kids went. I'd dropped out of engineering school in 'the 60's to start my knife business. I was 19. I was drafted in '65. The college kids, or the ones who had strings to pull, they stayed home. It's not like there were a lot of career soldiers in 'Nam. It wasn't an idealistic war. There was no glory in being there. It just sucked. My chopper got strafed and I jumped. Ended up all tangled up in ropes. Like Michael." Ray reached for popcorn. Something to settle his stomach. "All tangled and in such pain you wouldn't believe it. Both legs multiple fractures, 4 broken ribs, internal bleeding, torn ligaments. They sent me home, expected me to linger, a twisted invalid. I showed them. Unexpectedly, I healed fast. They said it was a miracle. I have almost no residual symptoms. I'm one of the lucky ones. They probably would have sent me back, but the war was over by then.



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"Let's drop it," he said.

"When we started bringing you guys home – the protests, the newspaper articles, the photos, the stories, that's when I saw the power of the press." Russ' eyes shone. He looked more animated than Ray had ever seen him. "I thought, 'here's where I can make a difference. I can save lives. I can stop this war.' And we did. We fought too, Ray. 'We fought for you.'"

"We can choose the ways we go back to the sixties," Stacy said tactfully.

"Yeah. Sure," Ray said. "I practice mind control. Gotten pretty good at it. I've erased Vietnam."

Russ picked up a Nikon from the coffee table and aimed it at Ray. "You don't mind?"

"Shoot," Ray said.

Russ clicked. "I'm addicted to the living image."

On the TV, the silent black tower was rising up in the middle of the desert. The monkeys didn't know what it was. The male monkey raised a bone high in the air and smashed it down on a pile of other bones. Again and again. Rage. Destruction. The bone looked like Ray's body felt after the jump from the helicopter. When Ray came back to the present, the computer Hal was asking, "Just what do you think you're doing, Dave? I'm entitled to an answer."

"I always felt sorry for Hal," Stacy said.

"Even though he killed that astronaut?" Russ asked.

"Yeah," Stacy said. "I feel sorry for everybody." She played with a lock of her hair. "I was in grad school during the Vietnamese War. My husband had a low lottery number. He was a telecommunications specialist at Bell telephone. They put him in communications in 'Nam. He was shot right through the heart the second week he was there. Came back without a scratch on him – dead. We'd had an argument

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before he left. I was a pacifist. I wanted us to run away to Canada. We made up by mail before he died. I saved his letters -- he wrote every day -- another one of those trunks, Ray, another part of the Alwyn archives." She smiled sadly. On the screen, one astronaut was floating helplessly away from the module. She brightened. "Let's make this Michael's apres funeral party. I rethink his death every day. Christ. The guy's getting a lot of mileage out of his death—" she stopped. "Sorry, guys. I know I'm the one who wanted to change the subject."

"Maybe remembering is a good thing," Ray said, although he had expended a lot of energy disciplining his mind to forget.

"Could you BELIEVE that phony music at the church?" Stacy burst out. "I wanted to scream, but it came out as a laugh. I could hardly stop myself." She giggled. "That service was so ludicrous." Her giggle deepened. "God, I'm sorry. It's not funny."

"Dave, Stop. Will you?" Hal pleaded for his life. "I'm afraid, Dave. My mind is going. I can feel it."

Now Russ was laughing, "That minister, I think he came to the wrong funeral by accident." Stacy doubled over in another fit.

Hal's voice was deadly quiet. "I know everything hasn't been quite right with me, but I can assure you it will be better again soon."

Ray remembered laughing till tears came, lying in the hospital looking at his body, casted and plastered, feeling unbelievable pain, deciding to laugh instead of cry. He said, "In Vietnam, I went to Hell and back," he said, and was shocked when both Russ and Stacy laughed even harder, gasping for air. They were all getting slap happy.

Stacy grabbed a handful of popcorn. The front of her black dress was littered with pieces of white. "God," she brushed them away. "I'm a mess."

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The astronaut in the movie had broken into some kind of elegant castle. A very old man lay in the bed. The sound of breathing. Now there was a baby on the screen. "They discovered the hole in the Ozone layer," Russ said, catching his breath. He sounded as if he was setting up a joke. "And we're not doing anything about it. Famines in Africa. AIDS. Toxic fumes from Union Carbide. Reagan is telling us to dream heroic dreams. La la land. The stockbrokers are telling us greed is good. Yuppies are getting fit, loving their own physiques, having power

lunches, dressing for success. And the gap between the haves and have nots is widening. You just gotta laugh,"

Stacy took a deep breath. "You know what Michael said once? He said 'What do you want, Justice? Holidays? Harvest?' I said, 'Harvest sounds good.' Then he started to cackle this manic laugh. He said, 'he heeh ha ha heeeeh -- I'm the grim reaper!'"

The credits rolled on the screen. Ray was faintly disappointed. The movie hadn't impressed him as much as the first time he'd seen it. It was dated.

Russ went to the corner of the room and turned on the fluorescent light over a fish tank. Two chairs were arranged in front of it for viewing, as if it were another TV screen. He sat down in one. "29 gallon tank, weighs 300 pounds," he said. "Sometimes I just sit here and watch. It's like a kaleidoscope. Same fish but never in the same place."

Stacy sat in the other chair and Ray knelt beside her. He could feel the heat emanating from her body, the force of her concentration on the fish. "Do they eat each other?" she asked.

"Not these. We chose compatible ones. We had a newt but the goldfish took chunks out of him."

"It's always a goddam war," Stacy said.

"Not always," Ray said, later, after Russ had shown them to

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the guest room, a large room with a queen mattress on the floor, sixties style. At some point during the evening Russ must have gotten it that Ray and Stacy were “seeing each other.” “It’s not always a war.” He put his arm around her thinking how right it felt.

She traced the flesh of his forearm and said, “I love your arms. Each muscle is so defined, and your fingers are so square and practical-looking.”

“I’ve been fascinated by your hands,” he said, taking them into his, “ever since I met you. I never thought I’d have the chance to touch them and get a close-up view.” He turned them over and gazed at her palms. Your palms have all these little tiny lines on them. It’s like a traffic jam.”

“I know,” she said, blushing a little. “I think they’re worry lines.”

Ray said firmly. “You should be comfortable and accept yourself. Wait a minute. Who arm I talking to, you or myself?”

She laughed She pushed him back until she lay on top of him. Her weight on him and the way her breath timed his were perfectly comfortable. Ray slipped into a familiar place in his mind where there were only bodies, the surprising white of skin, like fish come up from the depths, and they both were swimming, sliding past in and out of each other’s bodies. He must be a shark, so hungry he was for her.

## **Chapter 20**

Over breakfast, they talked about Gail Peterfreund. Since Gail Peterfreund had told Wiley she was an author, Stacy was curious to see what she had written. They drove early to Majestic Bay and entered the library at 9:00, the minute the librarian unlocked the door. “Oh yes, Professor Gail Peterfreund!” the librarian exclaimed. “We’re proud of her. She used to come here all the time. She’s very scholarly. Let me see,” she continued, checking the old-fashioned card

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catalogue, "her book's on loan, but you can find a number of her articles in the academic journals." When Stacy slipped the name Michael Alwyn into the conversation, the librarian became positively loquacious. "They were 'together' I guess you'd call it now. But they went to different colleges. She majored in English at Wellesley. After college she went to Oxford on a Fulbright. She's a Keats specialist, a scholar of the Romantic movement. I guess they remained close even after Michael moved into the woods. She visited him in the hospital when he was committed." Christ, the woman knew all the details. Weren't the Alwyns and all their circle a rich source of gossip. "She's a professor in the English department at Ohio State, but she guest lectures at the University of Maine. She has published a couple of papers on romantic sensibility, on altered states of perception, on heightened sensibility. And don't I know you?" The librarian couldn't contain her curiosity. "Aren't you Russ and Stacy Alwyn?"

"Glad to meet you," Russ said. "You obviously know all about us."

"Oh yes," the librarian said, taking it as a compliment.

The Park, otherwise known as the waterfront, was a long and narrow slope of lawn snaking along the river, carving a green space between the water and the shops, cafés and narrow wood houses of Majestic Bay's bohemian quarter. Ray, Stacy and Russ stood next to a Mexican restaurant, sheltered from the wind. They scanned the judiciously placed benches for a tall blond woman in a camel hair coat. That was the description Gail Peterfreund had supplied Russ of herself. Ray had only a blurred impression from the funeral. Maybe 5'8." He had been too shocked by what she had said to retain a focused physical impression.

She was not sitting on a bench, but pacing impatiently along the concrete bulkhead. When they spotted her, they left the shelter of the restaurant. Ray swung open the spiked gate of the fence bordering the park. She turned and headed up the incline toward them. Without preamble, she said, "Let's get

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out of this wind. I thought the weather might be milder today, and I love to walk, but it's hard to talk in inclement weather."

They entered a small coffee house. Once they were seated, and coffee was ordered. Gail Peterfreund said, "I'm not one for chitchat. Let's get right to the point. I suppose you came to hear about Michael and me, about our relationship."

"That would be good," Russ said, "considering what you said yesterday at his funeral."

She looked straight at him. "Yes. I'm sorry. I became overly dramatic. Perhaps I exaggerated."

Stacy avoided Gail Peterfreund's eyes. She kept hers cast down, and twisted her napkin into a tightening spiral.

"Would you tell us about yourself? Russ said, as if he was conducting an interview for the newspaper. Russ allowed himself liberties in the name of journalism that he wouldn't dream of taking in real life. Gail Peterfreund seemed grateful for the artifice.

"When I was five, my mother left my father and took me with her to Majestic Bay. She had fallen in love with a machine tender at Alwyn Mills. She worked as a waitress."

It was an economical narrative. Ray thought she might have rehearsed it.

"I met Michael while giving blood at the Red Cross in Majestic Bay. It was summer and we had both just graduated high school. I had gone to school in Majestic Bay so I didn't know any of you. I thought he must be malnourished and giving blood to get money for lunch," she stifled a small laugh. "He told me he didn't believe in giving blood, but had seen me walk into the trailer and had followed me. When he told me his name was Alwyn I couldn't believe it. 'THE Alwyns?' I asked. He denied it. Said he was from Spokane. Went on about the West Coast. Said he was a computer programmer in Berkley, but came here because he had

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discovered family ties to the Nunotuck. It was only by chance about a year later that I discovered who his real family was.”

“Didn’t he want you want to meet us?” Stacy asked. “We never knew you existed.”

“I’ll get to that,” Gail Peterfreund said, seeming annoyed at the interruption. “I was a shy repressed girl. Through Michael I discovered the world. He started at Yale. I started at Smith in Women’s Studies. It seemed he was a rising star. He wanted to devote his life to architecture. He was very involved. We went to lectures and movies and visited a lot of building sites. He brought me out of my shell and through him and school, I began to find things in myself I had never known were there. I woke to the beauty of nature. We had wonderful conversations, scintillating adolescent exchanges about love, convention, ambition, philosophy of reality and perception. He fascinated me. Even then he was an extremist. Things were right or wrong. People were right or wrong. It enchanted me that he thought I was so perfect. He defended everything I did. We were a little club – and only we were allowed.

“That should have been a warning to me. He became increasingly paranoid. I discovered he was from your branch of the Alwyn family by finding a letter from Stacy on his bureau. I admit it. I snooped and I read it. He said Alwyns were assigned enemy status, except for Russ and Stacy. He decided he couldn’t communicate with you, but he persisted in giving everyone journals in the hope that maybe someday, his parents and Louise would understand. Michael began cutting off his ties to the world. He still had friends – mostly Nunotuck by that time. I continued in college and went to graduate school and had many associates. I visited him as often as I could and we walked, especially along the riverbank. The Falls fascinated him. He analyzed the pressure and the currents, observed the course of river debris.”

Stacy took a deep breath as if she wanted to say something, but Russ shot her a warning glance, and she slumped in her

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chair. Her napkin was in tatters. Ray thought, *now I know she fiddles when she gets stressed.*

“Sometimes we went to the top and he threw large objects in to see how they would be swept along. Once he threw in his bicycle. I was sure it would sink. We raced down the path to see if it went over. It had escaped the whirlpool and was rushing downstream. He laughed with relief. He laughed and laughed, hysterically.

“When his family sent him to the ward, I visited him there and could find nothing wrong with him except a vitriolic rebelliousness toward the status quo. He was sensitive and tender to

me. We were still very much in love. Even more so when he got out.” Gail Peterfreund seemed to lose herself in the memory, and Ray felt it safe to look at her. She was very beautiful. Her blond hair piled softly on her head, loosely braided. Her complexion was robust ivory, with pale swirls of rose in her cheeks. Eyes of Baltic blue and a kinetic, thin build, an azure knit suit. Any man could fall in love with her, he thought, and she had chosen Michael.

“I think it was through Michael’s eyes I began to see, really see things. We watched the seasons change. We would notice a bush, and note its every transformation. We tracked animals and learned their habitats. The animals were our acquaintances, each badger with a personality, each bear familiar.

“We had five good years. But when I went to grad school, my world was growing academic and his was increasingly involved with the natural world. Toward the end I began to be aware of the longing to pursue my own dreams – and they no longer coincided with his. When I stopped accepting him unconditionally, he became critical of me. I delayed my visits to him. By that time I had finished my Ph.D. in romantic literature. I had a heavy teaching schedule and obligations to publish. When my book “The Liminal Moment,” was published, I gave Michael a copy. He returned it after a few



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weeks, saying it didn't interest him and he wasn't going to read it."

"Oh dear," Stacy said, trying to be sympathetic. "That must have hurt you."

Gail pushed the sleeves of her sweater above her elbows. She took a bite of her blueberry scone. Ray admired her ability to eat a scone without crumbling it

"There was nothing I could do. I began to feel that he had gone beyond a point where we could understand each other. It made me terribly sad and very angry at your family. I didn't think Michael would have become diagnosed schizophrenic if he had been raised in a more understanding family, if he hadn't been committed. And of course it was just one doctor who gave the diagnosis And he was, excuse me, an asshole. Michael was not accepted, so gradually he lost hope and he became intolerant of others – including me. But I'll swear to you one thing. He wasn't schizophrenic – at least not to begin with He never was, but sometimes he acted it."

Some say schizophrenia is a disease," Russ said, "not a psychological leaning. It takes different forms."

"Maybe." Gail sat up straighter, assuming a professorial posture. "He may have had a propensity to it, but I think it's like an exotic flower. It only blooms in certain conditions. In many people who also have the seed, it lies dormant, or else it finds a healthy unashamed release. I think many artists, people of singular expression, might have become schizophrenics if their urges had not somehow found a nourishing climate. But Michael was not a certifiable case. It's your family that's messed up."

"Not all of us," Russ said. "We are all highly functional."

"We loved Michael," Stacy said in a low, pained voice.

"He didn't lack love. He lacked the right kind of love." Gail Peterfreund spoke with conviction.

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Russ looked as if he had been slapped.

The meeting ended as succinctly as it began. Gail Peterfreund drove away in an academically correct Volvo.

Ray and Stacy stopped at Stacy's office before he drove her back to her car, which was still parked at the church. In her office they ran into Neat, who said, "I read a book review Gail Peterfreund wrote in the MLA journal. I liked what she had to say, but I found her vocabulary a

little plain, too decisive for a romantic."

"I don't think she's a romantic," Stacy said. "She writes about them."

As Ray drove Stacy back to the church so she could pick up her car, Stacy said, "I want to go to Alwyn Mills tonight. Will you come with me?" She added quickly, "It's about the deed. I want to see the paper collection. If you don't want to come with me, I'll go alone,

He heard the determination in her voice. "I'll go with you," he said. No point in prying, he told himself. Women never told you anything until they were good and ready.

But, he thought that evening as he went out to wait on the porch, when women were ready, they told you plenty – everything you wanted to know, and sometimes more.

All the way to the Mill, he refrained from asking questions. Stacy parked by a side door. She pulled a key ring out of her jacket pocket and said, "This is Carl's private entrance. I've got a master key."

They climbed metal stairs and entered Carl's office directly. Stacy did not switch on the lights. The only light came from the waning Hunter moon, which shone directly into the room and made shadows of objects. Stacy headed toward a set of file cabinets. Not knowing what to do, he walked to the picture windows and looked out on the Nunotuck River surging over the dam. On the far side of the river, Indian

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Reservation forest formed a black smudge, which rose into a postcard view of the bald top of Mount Nunotuck.

Stacy was rifling through the files in the cabinet. "What are you looking for?" he asked finally, unable to restrain himself.

"The obvious," she answered, removing a file and frowning as she checked its contents."

"The obvious," Ray said.

"I wish you wouldn't repeat what I say...Here's the deed." Her voice tapered off. She held the deed up to the light of a flashlight she had brought with her. After scrutinizing it, she replaced it in the file and closed the file drawer. "Let's go downstairs," she said.

"Downstairs?"

"Yes, Ray, downstairs," she sighed, then quickly added, "Don't mind me. I'm just edgy. I'm glad you're with me. This place is a little creepy at night." They walked through Evelyn Waites office and out into the corridor Ray and Bacon had come down the first time they visited Alwyn Mills. Their footsteps echoed eerily in the empty building. The hall lighting was sporadic. As they walked toward a light, their shadows loomed up, then disappeared behind them.

"No night watchman? No alarm?" Ray asked.

"Oh no," Stacy said. "You know Cascade County doesn't have a lot of crime. That's why Eugene Wiley can be such an eager beaver about investigating Michael's death. He doesn't have much else to do. Carl's not worried about security at the Mill. He feels right at home here. Sometimes he even spends the night if he has a lot of work. That's why I'm a little nervous. I feel as if even if he's not here, his ghost is. If you haven't guessed already, he's a workaholic. Especially when we were young, he was hardly ever home. Mother brought the four of us here one evening to visit with him. He was sitting in his shirtsleeves in his office surrounded by papers. I was impressed. He looked important. Ah, here we are. God, I

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hope he doesn't come."

"You're afraid of him."

"In this situation, yes."

They were outside the museum door where Carl had held his press conference. Stacy's key worked on the locked door. She flipped on the fluorescent lights, a pale glare, which startled

Ray's eyes. "Why turn the light on in here and not in Carl's office?" he asked.

"Aren't you the detective!" She looked amused, surer of herself now. "Carl's office has windows to the outside. This doesn't. Anyway, I'm pretty sure he's not in the building. Still we have to be fast. If you hear anything like steps outside, turn off the lights, and we hide behind those file cabinets."

"Is this legal? And do you know there was a security guard here when Bacon and I stopped on our way downstream, and Carl was giving a press conference?"

Stacy laughed. "Typical Carl. He probably hired the guy for the day, to impress reporters. I'm not expecting anyone here. It's not illegal for me to be at the Mill. I'm family. It's just when you grow up an Alwyn, you learn to be cautious about what you say and do, especially around other Alwyns. Let me explain what we're looking for. You've been so good and patient. You have the temperament of a saint."

"Don't overdo it," Ray muttered.

"We're looking for the old printing presses, the old ink collection, the old paper collection," she said, surveying the room.

"Last time I was here, the workmen had put up a display of hand-made paper. It's on that wall."

'I know But he had extra samples. They're missing. I

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think he used the extra paper and the old paper making equipment, to make the deed of 1789. But there's something missing," Stacy said. "Where are the old watermark templates and inks out? Aha. I should have been a detective. Closet." She walked to a back door and tried her master key on it. Nothing turned. "God dammit," she swore.

"If you want to be a detective, you'll have to learn how to pick a lock." Ray took an ingenious key ring of his own making out of his pocket. On it hung a bottle opener, nail file, skeleton key, pin, and various other things he had thought over the years might come in handy. He'd never done anything illegal, but knowing the enemy's tricks was part of being a man. He inserted the file, but the lock didn't budge. Deadbolt. Pin and skeleton key took care of that. The door swung open.

It was a large closet, almost a small room. There was a desk, with inkpots and pens neatly laid out on blotting paper. Against the back wall, three small printing presses, and on shelves overhead, a collection of templates. A filing cabinet.

Stacy headed for the cabinet and Ray followed, intrigued. She was like a scenting hound on hunt. From a shelf she withdrew manila files marked 1788, 1789, 1793.

From these folders, she took out papers and held them to the light.

As she replaced the papers, inspected the inkbottles, sniffed the pens, turned out the light and locked the little museum door, he prided himself on his discretion. Just keep quiet and wait. That was the trick. Any hunter knew that.

When they were back in the car, she said in a somber voice, "I owe you an explanation." She started the motor. The headlights cast shadows on the old brick walls as they left the parking lot. She drove slowly through the town of Alwyn Mills. Dark at this hour, except for a few porch lights and illuminated storefronts -- including Dave's Barber Shop, with its old-fashioned barbershop pole. Dave and the good

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citizens of Alwyn Mills were sleeping the sleep of the innocent.

"This morning, I asked Carl if the lawyers had returned the deed to him. He said they had. They advised him to file it in court. He's planning on doing that tomorrow. I wanted to inspect it

myself. She continued in a level voice, "The deed is dated 1789. But checking the watermark, I saw that the deed is printed on paper that wasn't made until 1793. Remember I told you 1793 added the handle to the plow to make it complete, because the earlier version left it out? The watermark on the deed has the handle – it has the whole plow. So the deed must have been written in 1793 or afterwards, but it's dated 1789. In other words, it's a forgery."

It was a simple statement. Like many simple statements, its implications were intricate. He asked, "Who forged it?"

Stacy sighed. "That's why I wanted to see the old paper making equipment. To see if it had been used recently. It has. The inks are fresh. It's a recent forgery. Done by someone who didn't know the details of the watermarks."

Ray said, "A recent forgery."

"Ray! Stop it! When you repeat what I say, it, you make me sound bad. I'm having a hard time even thinking about what's going on. This is my family we're talking about."

"Sorry," he said. There was nothing he could do about it. "Who do you think forged the deed?"

"I don't know," she wailed. "I don't want to imagine. I'll have to tell Carl, and when he finds out that the deed is forged, he'll be very upset. I mean, it could even be him."

"Maybe," Ray said in the gentlest voice he could summon. He had suspected Carl as soon as he knew why they were at the mill. Who else would have the keys, means and motive?

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They drove in silence for a while. Ray looked out the window at the forest shadows.

Stacy sighed again. "Michael's death seems even more senseless, now that we know he lost his life for a forgery. If that's why he was hurrying over the Falls. Of course, his concern was also bamboo, but there was no urgency in that message. He and Terence were already digging up the bamboo." An even deeper sigh. "I'm sorry about making you dance with the skeletons in my family closet. Murder, forgery, schizophrenia. "We're a mess."

He patted her arm and said, "I'm used to dangerous women."

"I don't want to hear about your former love life," she snapped.

They were coming up to the Cascade Fish and Game Club, where Ray was a member. "How about some shooting?" he asked. They'd been up almost all night, but he was wide-awake

She gave him a sideways glance. "I always carry my .38 in my purse." At his inquiring look she added, "Seriously. I never know what or who I'll come up against in my various networking and trail managing travels. For the same reason, I carry a make up kit – lipstick, eye-liner and mascara." She smiled and batted her lashes.

Thrill coursed through Ray's body like a wave. Danger and pleasure. In one woman. A momentary warning also flashed in the back of his mind. Michael had been shot with a .38. But of course, Stacy had an alibi, and her gun had been cleared by ballistics.

Ray unlocked the gate of the Fish and Game Club, which had an indoor shooting range. A floodlight highlighted the gravel path to the bungalow clubhouse. "The shooting range is in back," Ray said, unlocking the door, feeling proud of the ping pong table, the sagging furniture, the atmosphere of home, and, especially, in the small kitchen, the coffee maker,

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filters and a club-size can half full of Folgers. He set the coffee on while Stacy opened cabinets and searched the fridge in vain for food. The coffee was good, though. Rich and steamy.

Ray opened his locker and got a gun -- he chose his .347 magnum, because he happened to have it with him for tracking bear with Bacon, and Stacy pulled her .38 out of her suburban purse. "I always carry t," she said. "That's how we were brought up. We lived so far out in the woods and Carl was always working. Eleanor said it was better to be safe than sorry. We're all good shots, except for Louise. She really does need glasses, you know."

Out back at the shooting range. Ray set his coffee on a stump, and loaded his .347. Stacy's .38 was already loaded. She unlocked the safety and took a stance in front of one of the targets about 100 yards away. She drew a breath, exhaled, and concentrated. Ray sensed her calmness, knowing that in that moment she had forgotten about him, about the time, about everything but the little blue dot in the center of the target. She squeezed, the trigger, not a jerk but a smooth pull, letting her body absorb the kickback. After 5 bullets, she said, "Let me go check."

He walked with her, counting out the 100 yards. In the bull's eye was one shot. Right outside the bull's eye were 3, and 1 was on the lid.

"I over-compensated for the arc of distance," Stacy said, flicking her finger disappointedly at the high one.

They walked back and Ray shot a round. His shots were all on target. They walked back to the shooting line, but Stacy put down her pistol, latching the safety. She put a hand on his left arm, and he put his gun down. She traced the muscles on his forearm. He felt her attention to where each muscle leading to each finger tightened and relaxed. Her hands worked down his arm and he put the gun down, latching the safety. Maybe she was like him. Maybe guns turned her on. She held his palm in hers. Just before he stopped thinking, he



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saw, briefly and vividly, an image of himself at the top of the waterfall. He couldn't help going over. It worried him to get involved with Stacy. He knew he should have his doubts. Every person had a shadow side. What about hers? Her family had so many problems. Still, he reached for her.

Continued ....