

J. Cade Keith  
Holland  
Dickerson  
Comes Home  
A Novel

*Memory is only as good as the last time remembered. Who can say what really happened?*

# Chapter One

Alvin

October

2013

WHEN HOLLAND AND Samantha first started thinking about raising a family, they came up with the idea of writing an alphabet book in limerick form which they called *Alphabriks*. Holland would do the poetry and Sam the illustrations.

Holland doesn't remember exactly when it was—maybe in the fall?—when he moved in with Sam to that teeny, little third floor walk-up on Chilton Street. The staircase always smelled of cabbage and onions and bleach. What a job it was to bring up groceries. That apartment was sweet, with windows on both ends, the tiny kitchen looking out across the water towards Charlestown, and the other side overlooking a tidy little park. They were right in the North End, Little Italy, just a few blocks from the old Boston Garden, where Larry Bird played Magic Johnson on the ancient parquet floor. The North End had the best pasta, the best coffee, and wonderful breads and pastries. They could walk under Route 3 to Haymarket and buy their fruits and vegetables, cheeses and meats.

Holland was smitten with Samantha from the get go. Sam was naturally thin, with ash blonde hair and eyes the color of aquamarine. She had the muscular back and slim hips of a swimmer. Sam and

Holland never formally dated. They would flirt a lot at the restaurant where they both worked. There were days at the beach and movie nights with friends, but mostly they would meet up late after hours, someplace where they could drink and smoke and listen to music or make up stories about other people's lives. Then one night they just got together.

They had small studios on Portland Street where they would go every day to write and paint. Sam made her abstract pictures of hallways and doors and windows. She prized Grumbacher Sevres Blue above all other colors. Holland wrote short stories about people in restaurants and parties and friends. He prized Updike and Nabokov above all authors. They both had their own dreams of being famous someday, Sam the painter, Holland the writer.

Soon after they were married, when Henry was on the way, Samantha and Holland decided to move west to Denver to be closer to Sam's parents and two of her siblings. Sam set up space in the basement to paint but with the new baby, and then graduate school, and then another kid, her easel and palette table gathered dust.

For his part, Holland settled into a life of fatherhood and teaching English at a succession of public and private high schools, ending up at St. Annes, a small Catholic preparatory school for girls in the suburbs. He told himself regularly that his dream of becoming a real writer, a published author, was still alive, it had just been delayed for a while by the necessities of life, of marriage, parenthood, and the pressures of making a living. But the thought that he just might be kidding himself, that he might not have what it takes to really make a go of it, eats at him constantly.

The *Alphabriks* project had been repeatedly put on hold, but recently Holland has been thinking about it again. Getting a children's book made could be a good way to jumpstart his career—an easy entrée into the publishing world. After all, how hard can it be? He is uniquely qualified, being a fourth generation limerick writer and a Dad to two young boys. Many of the books in the children's sections aren't really so great anyway. He can do it just as well, if not better. Who knows, he might discover he really likes writing children's books and do it full time.

Inspired by the way his sons, Henry and Tank, used to recoil when their aunts come to visit, Holland writes the first of the twenty-six limericks he will need for *Alphabriks*

### *A is for Aunties*

*The Aunties are coming to hug me,  
To maul me and kiss me and mug me.  
I yell, 'STAY AWAY!'*

*But they just won't obey,  
And lately they're starting to bug me!*

As Holland dives deeper into the *Alphabriks* project, he becomes increasingly concerned about the purity of his output. He codifies his own Set of Standards. The limericks must follow the classic A-A-B-B-A limerick pattern and have the proper sing-song cadence. They must flow. There can be variations on the number of syllables per line, but the structure must be consistent within each individual limerick. Word play is encouraged, as is working with the actual names of people and places from life. The rhymes do not have to be perfect, but they must be convincing. Each limerick ought to tell some sort of story and there should be a logical progression of ideas laid out line by line, no matter how absurd.

There are certain creative liberties that Holland will allow himself, but he considers resorting to the trick of repeating the first and fifth lines to solve a rhyming problem rather conventional, as is the making up of nonsensical names. In short, Holland considers good limerick writing to be a true art form.

### *O is for Otter*

*I've always had fun in the water.  
My mom says I swim like an otter.  
My sister, she's cute,  
But she's stolen my suit,  
So I ran down the beach and I CAUGHT her!*

Holland's full name is Burcher Holland Dickerson. He is a good-looking man, but not overly so. He is an attractive specimen of solid Northern European stock with thick, tawny brown hair and soft hazel eyes. He has a circular, snow-white birthmark the size of a half-dollar on the left side of his head. Holland could measure five-foot-ten-and-a-half if he stood up straight, but he carries himself with the world-weary slouch of a perpetual cynic.

Burcher is an old family name on Holland's maternal great-grandmother's side. English, probably, maybe Scottish, maybe some Dutch. Holland's father, Jack Dickerson, hated the idea of calling his son Burcher, or Burch, and fought against it. In the end, he was overruled by Holland's grandmother, Margeet, who threatened to sell the house they were living in, move to Florida, buy a boat and spend

the rest of Jack's inheritance on a cabin-boy.

You would think with the potential for a nickname like Birch, people would enjoy knowing someone named after a tree. Apparently not. People seem to think knowing someone named after a country is more fun, so Burcher Holland Dickerson is called Holland.

From the time he was in his teens, Holland wanted to make his living as a writer. There were moments when it looked as though he might make it. His career had momentum. He once overheard a woman at a party say that the difference between a writer and an author is that a writer writes but an author gets published. At this point, Holland may be a writer, but he is not an author, yet.

Like most artists, the idea that Holland might not have what it takes gnaws at him. Holland's friend Sol, a successful editor and magazine publisher, once told him that good writing is good thinking. This bothers Holland. Sol was trying to be helpful, but the truth is that Holland hasn't always been the most clear-headed thinker. He worries a lot about this, his runaway thinking, which means he worries a lot about being a writer.

Holland assumes that he does the same things all writers do. He sits at the dining room table with his coffee, contemplates the sunlight warming the geraniums, and thinks about words.

Distractions abound. Do the plants need his attention? Will it help or hurt if he has another cup of coffee? Maybe if he moves around a bit he'll be able to focus better. He needs to get out more, get more exercise. When is he going to get around to fixing that brown spot on the ceiling? Is dinner under control? Does the cat need water? And where is that cat, anyway?

Holland's problem is that he is a good starter, just not a good finisher. He has the beginnings of at least five novels filed away somewhere on his computer. His solution is to write semi-autobiographical short stories and then string the short stories together to make a full-on novel. Like pearls on a string, he tells himself. Short stories have their own discipline, and he doesn't need to hold so many details and sub-plots in his mind at once. This strategy seems to be working—better thinking, better writing. This is where Alvin Beal comes in.

Alvin Beal is the unhappy protagonist of Holland Dickerson's major work in progress, *Happiness*. It is the story of an otherwise ordinary man who is driven to find true happiness in a world sickened by the false promises of conspicuous consumption and consumer capitalism. Alvin believes deep in his heart that only a spiritual solution and the love of a perfect woman can solve his problem. This is why Alvin is having an affair. In the meantime, there are dogs to walk.

# Chapter Two

## Two Dogs

### November

### 2013

HOLLAND IS WORRIED about Alvin Beal. Alvin may not be a very nice person much of the time, but Holland likes Alvin and wants him to do well. He wants Alvin to be a sympathetic character. The same goes for Alvin's wife Cathy, although that is turning out to present more of a problem. *Somebody* has to be the bad guy, and it looks like it may have to be her. Holland is just going to have to make up his mind how to play it. After all, he is the creator, the omnipotent, omniscient voice. He gets to decide who lives and who dies and who gets hurt and who thrives.

Cathy has come home from her regular Thursday night book club late, as usual, blousy with gin and ready for an argument. She has her husband in her drunken crosshairs. Holland likes the way he has set the table.

*Here's a question for you, Alvin,' Cathy Beal growls. 'If you are dying, and one of your children, the one you always fought with and never understood, who hated you, now grown, comes to you on your*

*deathbed and tells you she loves you, always has, always will, and that you were a good parent, and did the best you could, would it matter? Would it make any difference at all? Does it make the whole thing any easier? Well, does it?’ Cathy Beal demands. ‘Alvin? Alvin! Are you even listening to me?’*

*Alvin reviews this one-way conversation with his wife from the night before as he checks himself in the hallway mirror, flattening his thin nicotine-stained mustache and combing through his fine blond hair with his fingers. He looks at himself sideways and adjusts his Red Sox baseball cap.*

*‘What a ridiculous question!’ Alvin fumes. ‘Who asks such a stupid question? Cathy, that’s who. Cathy and her fucking book club.’*

Holland sits back and rereads what he has just written. At this point in the story, he is satisfied that Alvin is unhappy. Alvin has been unhappy since the beginning of the book. That is the point.

*Alvin looks down at his wife’s two annoying dogs, Winston Churchill and Lord Jeffrey Amhurst. He does not need to call the dogs. They know it is time for their walk. They stand at attention in the foyer, waiting dutifully for Alvin to attach their leashes.*

*‘And who are these fucking book club people, anyway? I’ve never met any of them,’ Alvin vents. ‘For all I know, Cathy might as well be spending her Thursday nights wrapped around some high-school boy from another town down at the Sea Spray Inn.’*

*Alvin steps aside as the two dogs scurry out the door and out onto the back porch.*

*‘And where are all the books? I’ve never seen any fucking books.’”*

Holland grew up in Pearson’s Bight, a small, New England township on the water. When Holland was a boy, the dogs of the town ran free. No one ever walked the dogs. This meant that dog shit was just a fact of life. It was very simple. You live in a town with lots of dogs, you look where you step.

Unlike the Labradors and assorted mutts that Holland grew up with, the dogs in Happiness are corgis. Corgis are not the kind of dog that Alvin Beal would have chosen to own but the decision was not his. Technically, the corgis belong to Cathy. Having a couple of corgi dogs is a status symbol for Cathy. Cathy’s mother Harriet had corgis, as did her grandmother, Maude, and as does the Queen of England. Both corgis are plump, just like Cathy. Cathy herself doesn’t exercise, but she insists that the dogs do, which means someone is taking them out on a walk at least twice a day.

As Holland writes it, Alvin is not a fan of town and city dog ownership, specifically when it comes to the manufacture and disposal of dog shit. As far as Alvin is concerned, dog shit belongs exactly where the dog puts it. People who walk around the planet behind small, four-legged creatures picking up hot



excrement and carrying it home in little plastic bags have lost control of their lives. Alvin is sure that when the aliens look down at The Earth they will think the dogs are in charge. Alvin always walks the dogs either early in the morning before sunrise or late after dark and keeps to the side streets and alleyways as much as possible. No one will see Cathy's dogs shit on their lawn and yell at Alvin for not picking it up. No fucking way.

*Alvin takes the dogs across the tiny yard and out the back gate into the alley. In the warmth of the late June, when the heat of the day still rises off the pavement, the neighborhood alleyways are choked with honeysuckle, the woody trumpet creeper vines, and indiscriminate greenery. It is that cross-over time of evening right after sunset when the sky is still light and the street lamps are just coming on—a little earlier than Alvin would normally prefer.*

*The dogs like to walk along the sidewalk where it's easier to find a nice stretch of cool, lush grass to squat but they have become used to Alvin's routine. After several blocks, Alvin heads up a familiar, dim alleyway towards home. The dogs, sensing that their time has come, snuffle over to a little patch of weedy ground with sparse gladiolas and a half dozen sunflowers growing up against the backyard fence. Perfect. A pair of little brown and white dogs shitting in unison.*

*Alvin turns his back and fishes a smoke out of his pocket. Who are these people who stand apart and watch their dogs defecate? What is that all about? Suddenly, Alvin hears the grating sound of a garage door opening across the alley. Security lights come on, and a girl of about fifteen ducks under the half-opened door dragging a large recycling bin behind her.*

*The girl looks at Alvin, and then she looks at the dogs, who are not quite finished with their business. Caught in mid-shitting, Winnie and Lord Jeff look back at her in deep, doggy embarrassment.*

*'I hope you're going to pick that up,' the girl says, letting go of the trash bin and gesturing at the dogs.*

*'Sure,' Alvin lies. He smiles in the most neighborly way he can muster and fumbles with the little purple bag dispenser hanging off the leash. Of course, there are no bags in the dispenser. Alvin knew it was empty when he left the house. He wasn't going to waste time looking around for more bags when he knew he wouldn't use them anyway.*

*'Dammit!' Alvin swears, trying to sound convincing. 'No bags.' he looks sheepishly at the girl. 'Oh well, good thing it's just the alley.'*

*The girl is not smiling.*

*'No, you need to pick that up.'*

*'But I don't have any bags. They're not actually my dogs. I guess somebody forgot to buy more,'*

*Alvin adds, blaming someone else to end the conversation.*

*The dogs finish up and Alvin starts walking again.*

*'Hey!' she calls. 'You still need to deal with that. You can't leave it there,' She is getting serious.*

*'It's the law.'*

*Alvin is pretty sure it isn't.*

*'I can't, no bags,' Alvin shrugs helplessly. 'Anyway, it's just the alley, right? Not even on your side.'*

*Alvin continues walking away.*

*'I don't care, you can't leave it there. They're your dogs, clean up after them!' She is getting louder.*

*'Sorry, not tonight!' Alvin calls over his shoulder, and picks up his pace.*

*The girl turns and yells into the garage.*

*'Dad!'*

*Alvin walks faster.*

*'HEY! Hey, you!' a man's voice behind him calls out.*

*This could get difficult. Alvin stops and turns around.*

*'Me?'*

*'Yes, you. Who else is there?' the man says sarcastically.*

*'Yes?' Alvin says, walking backwards, letting the dogs pull him further away.*

*'Come clean up your dog mess over here.'*

*'Sorry, I can't. No bags.' Alvin holds up the leash to show him.*

*The man's face starts to darken.*

*'I don't care.' He is insistent. 'That's not my problem. You still need to pick it up. It's the law.'*

*This man and his daughter are on the same page.*

*'Listen, man, It's just an alley.' Alvin says. 'I have no bags. I can't pick it up.'*

*The man reaches into the recycling bin, pulls out a brown plastic shopping bag, and walks toward Alvin, holding it out. Alvin is getting very nervous.*

*'Here's a bag. Go...pick...up...your...fucking...dogshit!'*

*The girl behind him grins approvingly.*

*There is no way around it. Alvin is not going to get punched in the face over two small piles of shit. He considers for an instant asking the man to hold the leash while he goes back to the sunflowers but thinks better of it. Alvin takes the bag from the man and pulls the dogs back up the alley. He turns the bag inside out—like he had seen other people do—bends over and picks up the two piles of warm, squishy dogshit.*

*'OK, done,' Alvin says, standing up and tying off the bag. 'Sorry to bother you.'*

*'And don't let me ever see you do that again, buddy.'*

*Alvin walks away with his dogs and his little brown bag of shit. When he hears the garage door closing, he looks back to see that the father and daughter are gone.*

*Alvin and the dogs reach the end of the alley and cross the street. Thirty feet into the next alleyway, Alvin stops and looks around. No one is around. He looks the dogs in the eye, as if to assure that they are watching carefully. Then, in big, wide circles, he swings the shit-filled bag three times above his head and lets it fly and watches it sail out over the trees, landing God knows where.*

*Fuck those people. Against the law! Right! Strike a blow for freedom and irresponsibility. Alvin feels like a hero.*

Holland glances at the clock—6 A.M. He has been up since four, carving out some quiet hours before the chaos of the day overtakes the house. He does some mental math to calculate the seriousness of his commitment to the life of a writer. He didn't actually get out of bed, feet on the ground, until four thirteen. Half an hour to dress, splash cold water in his face, brush his teeth, and slip quietly down to the kitchen to retrieve the cold coffee from the night before—he doesn't want to run the risk of being scolded by Sam for waking her up with the noise of making coffee in the morning. Holland figures his actual writing time is about an hour, maybe a little more. Not bad. That's about a two to one ratio, writing to bullshit. It takes two hours of living to get in one hour of writing. In a hypothetical eight hour work day maybe half of that time is spent doing what you are actually supposed to be doing and the rest is just the trimmings. This is the creative life of writers Holland tells himself. It's not like the life of other working people. He still might be able to squeeze in another half-hour before everyone is up and the mayhem begins. Holland turns back to his story.

*As he takes the last corner before home, Alvin's phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket to see who is calling and, distracted, he cuts in too close to a flower bed, catching his foot on the ivy. He hops to shake loose, but his other foot gets caught too. In an instant, Alvin slams face first down onto the pavement—BAM!*

*Pain shudders through his body. His head feels like it has been hit with a wooden mallet. Once he determines there are no broken wrists or cracked ribs, Alvin rolls over and sits up to take stock of the bloody mess. Surprising how much damage can be caused by a sudden fall onto concrete. His palms and fingers are badly scraped and bleeding, chunks of skin just gone. His pants are torn, more blood at the knees, his shoes badly scuffed, and his nose drips red onto his shirtfront. Five feet away lies his phone,*

*smashed. The two corgis sit and stare at him, too polite to run away.*

*'What happened to you?' Cathy asks when Alvin comes in through the kitchen door.*

*'Your fucking dogs tripped me.' Alvin lies angrily, not missing a beat.*

Holland is not completely happy with where the tale about Alvin and the two dogs ends up. He can't shake the feeling that there should be more to the story than hurling away a bag of poop, but he just can't seem to tease it out. What is the point here? What is the truth? Holland is frustrated. This is what he means when he says he is not a good finisher.

Alvin Beal is not a high-functioning adult. Holland knows this. He created Alvin, he should be able to understand Alvin's state of mind. Alvin is incapable of admitting when he is wrong. When Alvin trips over the ivy owing to his own lapse of attention, his knee-jerk reaction is to lie to Cathy about what actually happened and blame the innocent dogs. As ridiculous as it sounds, the dogs are the cause of Alvin's misfortune, not his own clumsiness. It's their fault he fell on his face and smashed his phone.

And, it is not just the dogs that Alvin blames. He blames Cathy for owning the stupid dogs. He blames the girl in the alley for busting him about picking up the dog shit, and he blames her father for backing him down and humiliating him. Without a moment's hesitation, Alvin blames everyone except himself for his own unhappiness. That is how Alvin operates. It's automatic. Blame and shame is the default pattern of Alvin's inner life.

Holland knows something about people who routinely blame others for their misery instead of taking responsibility for their own lives. He grew up watching one. Jack Dickerson was the poster child of self-righteous indignation. After years of absorbing Jack's emotional and psychological abuse, the thing that Holland had finally come to understand was that Jack had been a chronic, angry victim by design. Holland saw that for Jack, angry victimhood was a strategy, a small man's way to avoid responsibility for his own discontent by blaming the world—most especially his wife and children—for not treating him right. At any cost, Jack had refused to take ownership of his own life, forever finding ways to dodge the truth of causes and conditions. Jack lived inside a cramped, little world of his own making, constantly telling himself that all he needed was for someone to give him the big break he believed he richly deserved but would never do any actual work to achieve. For all his rage and bluster, Jack had spent almost his entire time on earth back on his heels, reacting to life with feints and defensive jabs, but never landing a solid punch of his own. In the end, all Jack's stunts and misadventures had taken him farther and farther away from living a rewarding, authentic life.

Jack looked down on people of faith with disdain. He insisted to anyone who would listen that he was a free man, that he had long ago left his Christian religion of origin behind him. Jack would hold

forth at length on the profound wisdom of a hodge-podge of Eastern religions, Native American spiritual practices, quantum physics, existentialist philosophy, and whatever wacko New Age nuggets he had recently come across.

Holland was twenty-six when Jack died at the age of forty-eight. Holland stayed with Jack through to the end, watching him become smaller and smaller, angrier and more afraid. Hurtling towards a dark end, Jack had no true spiritual life to rely upon, no vision of what would happen next to sustain him in his own private Everafter. Jack drove over the one-way bridge from Non-Being to completely unprepared Non-Being blaming others for his misery. Holland stood by and watched him do it. Afraid to live, afraid to die, at the end Jack knew that he had let it all just blow away.

As much as he hates to admit it, Holland is much like his father in many respects. As a younger man, Holland had always believed that once Jack was gone, he would be free of him and all the damage he had caused. But it doesn't work that way, as Holland discovered over time. It wasn't until Holland turned forty-eight himself that he was finally able to begin to let go of the conviction that Jack was the root cause of his own unhappiness and suffering. For most of his adult life Holland had been selling himself the same tired line. If his father hadn't died when he was young, if his mother hadn't abandoned him after losing her husband, everything would have been better. Holland would have become a better person, more successful, more attractive, more hard-working, funnier, completely at ease in his life. Holland discovered that the dead live on in our bones if we let them. That whole sad story was a lie.

When Holland was little, Alice would tuck him into bed, and they would say the 'Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep' prayer, the one that ends with, 'And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take,' Strong stuff for a small child. Alice would kiss Holland on the forehead and then, right on cue, Jack would poke his head in the door and say, 'Good night, and good luck!', which he thought was hilarious. Not exactly the most reassuring message for a five-year-old to hear just before being left alone in the dark to shut down for the night.

Twenty years later, when Jack was dying of brain cancer and careening headlong into his own eternal goodnight, Holland asked himself, if I go to him now, and tell him I love him, that every horrible thing he ever did or said to me is forgiven, will it matter? Will it make any difference, at all? Because if it really won't make any difference, I don't see any point in doing it. Plus, it will be a real pain in the ass. So, sorry Jack, good night, and good luck.

Holland's mother Alice liked to tell him that he was a child of God. His father liked to tell him he wasn't.

'I'm your Dad and, God knows, I am no...fucking...God', Jack Dickerson would say. 'Plus, there is no God.'



# Chapter Three

## Mike & Mickie

### December

### 2013

HOLLAND'S ESSAY, *THE EMERALD OF OZ*, imagines what life might be like for Dorothy if she never went back to Kansas. If Dorothy was sixteen in 1939, then by 1950, at age twenty-seven, she might have fallen in love, married and started a family. Holland pictures a daughter, named Dot after her mother, opening a yoga studio and fitness gym with all sorts of brightly colored gear for sale, driving around town in a shiny, green Mustang convertible with the top down, turquoise hair flying, and a toy poodle named Jade on her lap. There's no place like home.

Holland had been quite pleased with the piece, but Sister Dane, St. Anne's headmistress, felt that Holland's Dorothy was not sufficiently unblemished. It had been a sticking point. She had asked for several rewrites before she would sign off on the entire exhibition.

This was a multidisciplinary art show that Holland had curated for the gallery at St. Anne's. The exhibition was called, simply, *Seeing Color*, and was designed as an exploration into the meaning and significance of color in American culture. Hardly exhaustive, but hopefully thought-provoking, and that

was all Holland was after.

In the end, his essay did not make it on to the wall of the exhibition, much to Holland's disappointment.

'You've done a great job, Holland,' Sister Dane had said. 'This is a fabulous effort. A number of our parents have spoken approvingly to me about it.' She said nothing about Dorothy. 'Well done, You!' Sister Dane is Canadian.

When it comes to Sister Dane, Sam is not so generous.

'I don't know how you can deal with working for all those nuns, Holland.'

'I have a family to support.'

'I know, and we love you for it, but Jesus knows I couldn't do it.'

Because Sam is the Visual Artist of the family she has been Holland's go-to consultant for all things Color. Sam sees the entire question of color and culture in the larger socio-political context.

'Color is the great signifier—immediate, pre-verbal, and powerful. St. Anne's was never going to let you really drill down into the true meaning of color. It is simply not possible to talk about color without talking about gender and sexuality, and, of course, it goes without saying, race. God knows they don't want to go there. Color is anarchy. It will not abide by any laws! It is literally not binary, not black and white, exclusively good or evil. Color is spectral, humanist, shaded, indiscrete. Way too much freedom for the nuns of St. Annes to handle.'

Sam knows her color.

'You can't pin a definitive meaning on color because color is completely disloyal. Take red, for example. Red is the color of the Catholic Church of Rome, and also the color of the Devil. Red can be for love—Valentines—and also for racist hate—Native Americans. Red is the color of The Red Badge of Courage—good thing—and the scarlet letter 'A'—bad thing. Just ask Hester Prine about the meaning of red.'

'But we're talking about green.'

'Especially green! Same problem. Green, the opposite of red, is also two-faced. The colorant itself was hard to make as a stable dyestuff or pigment. Green is the most hypocritical of colors, identified since the Middle Ages with the color of springtime, green wood, fresh sap in the veins, you know, fickle lust professing to be true love. Sex! Face it, you can't talk about color and culture without getting into bed with gender and sexuality. Not something Sister Dane is going to want any of the girls at St. Anne's to do. And you don't want to get me started about white, man. That's a whole 'nother can of worms. Color is diverse. Not a comfortable topic for polite society. It's going to be interesting to see how your essay goes over at Nautilus.'



Nautilus is Henry and Tank's elementary school. All parents of the students at Denver's Nautilus Charter School for Gifted and Talented Children are expected to donate voluntarily in support of the school each year, either in cash or in kind. Cash is tight in the Dickerson family. Holland has reworked the original *Emerald of Oz* article as a part of the Dickerson family contribution to Henry's fall term class color project.

'All I'm asking is, does this rewrite work for the fucking third grade?' Holland mutters.



Parenthood hit Holland Dickerson without any warning. Holland's own parents, Alice and Jack, had been absent without leave during most of Holland's childhood, and if it hadn't been for Holland's grandmother Mageet and her seven cats Holland might as well have been raised by wolves.

Holland and Samantha were not all that different from any other young couple expecting their first child. Most of the activity centered around Sam and her family, her mother and sisters, who were a constant presence, offering all sorts of practical advice and help. There was no information forthcoming from Holland's side of the family about the kinds of things to expect when bringing up children. Jack and Alice were no help. While the household preparation and general mechanics of pregnancy swirled around him, Holland was left outside of the circle of conversation. He had no warning about the emotional displacement and psychic transformation that was about to occur. Basically, Holland was instructed to keep showing up and do as he was told, and that is what he tried to do.

The day Holland Dickerson became a father, his world suddenly shifted on its axis dramatically. Holland stood alone looking down at his tiny son Henry lying under the heat lamp, shocked to see his own bloodline gazing back at him. To Holland, Henry looked exactly like his grandfather Thomas. 'Grandpa Tom, is that you?' Holland blurted out.

Holland's story about himself is all about his own childhood, his own parents, his own past present and future. Now everything is different. He no longer will be doing things in the world only for himself—he will be working for the benefit of others. The city he lives in has changed overnight. Leafy neighborhoods, traffic flow, crime rates, and proprietary school districts, all laden with new meaning. He begins to think about home equity, health care, property taxes, and life insurance.

Holland remembers the social gatherings, the playgroups, day-care, car-pooling and eventually school, and the power of the new experience of introducing himself as 'Henry's Dad.'

Sitting on a tiny chair in a circle with Samantha, doing his best to avoid eye contact with the other preschooler parents, he prays to God that Sam would not offer him up for some in-kind of

classroom duty or Parent Action Committee.

'Just remember, Sam, in every group of parents there is a mom or maybe a dad who has been waiting for this very moment since high school. If you can just be cool and sit still long enough, someone else is going to jump in with both feet and take on the job of Parent School Liaison or Special Activities Coordinator,' Holland had said.

But, typically, just when he thinks he is in the clear, Samantha will raise her hand and suggest some new project out of the blue.

Usually, Sam proposes some combination of writing and art-making. She comes up with them right on the spot. This way she can be the one to direct other people to work as a team. But in the end, Sam always fades into oblivion, taking on for herself an advisory role, and Holland ends up doing the work.

Holland worries that some of the other parents might think that he helps Henry out with his schoolwork more than he should, being an English teacher and a writer himself. He knows other parents probably behave differently, but Henry has to do all his own work.

'So what if some of them think you help out your kid?' Sam had said. 'You think everyone else isn't doing that? People always suspect others of doing the things they themselves are up to. You can't let it get to you. They're probably just jealous. Look what's happened to the school over the last ten years. It used to be diversified, urban, cutting edge, and then once the word got out and area gentrification set in, the upscale parents started hiring coaches to get Little Connor and Felicity in, and now it's all Audis and BMWs dropping off kids in the morning.'

Everything is political for Sam. It's all about the power of the patriarchy.

'Don't you think they are all donating money? They don't have the time to do what you do. They're all at work making the big bucks. What you're doing is so much cooler.'

Holland isn't so sure. This rankles him. He wonders if maybe Sam thinks he should be doing better financially than teaching English at a Catholic girls' prep school while he works to get his writing career off the ground. He had been chasing his dream of becoming a successful, published author long before they met, and now, with two kids, a mortgage, and married to a perpetual student, maybe she thinks that he should change his plan.

And then came the parties. Not just the neverending stream of in-school celebrations for this holiday and that, the birthdays and achievement recognition mini-ceremonies. There are the grown up parties as well, like the Christmas party when Holland met Mickie Park.



Holland doesn't really want to go in the first place, but Sam needs a night out badly. She is finally able to convince Holland that he will be meeting the kind of people he needs to know if he wants to move ahead and get something, anything, published. There will be some wealthy, influential people there, Samantha had said. You never know. Plus, she reminded him, he could always use practice polishing up his people skills.

Holland finds the address and deliberately parks around the corner. Before they are out of the car, Holland's mind is churning as he compares his own station in life with the house, the neighborhood, the cars on the street, the way the couples are dressed as they walk towards the party.

'Of course it's a nice house, Holland. What do you expect? These are nice, well-to-do people who are able to host. Whatever bullshit you are indulging in, you really need to drop it.'

Sam may have a lot to say about the politics of wealth distribution in the corrupt capitalist system, but she has no patience with Holland's insecurity about his own personal financial situation. Drunk or sober, it makes no difference, Holland will find a way to make himself miserable once he starts comparing his own lot in life with others he sees as more fortunate. If he's not been drinking, Holland's sense of inferiority makes itself known as chronic, low grade irritability. In his cups, Holland vacillates from morose self-pity to smug superiority, which is worse.

Another couple, walking arm in arm, approaches from the other direction. They are talking animatedly, excited to be going to a party. Holland feels cold dread moving up his legs.

'Who are these people again?' he whines.

'The Parks. Mike and Mickie.'

'Parents of?'

'Taylor is in Ms. Jacobs' class with Henry, and Manny is in with Tank.'

'Cute. And what do they do?'

'Mickie is a pediatrician at Duck Soup. Wasn't she the one you saw last time you were in there with Tank? Remember?'

'I don't think so. I thought her name was Gail.'

'No, not even close. Mickie.'

'And Mark, right?'

'Mike. I don't know what he does. You'll have to find out for yourself.'

The house is the kind of architecture Holland thinks of as Denver Modern, although it really could be found anywhere in early twenty-first-century America. Wood, steel, concrete, and glass boxes stacked together, large and small. The house glows like a lantern. Every light in the place is on, and

elegant strings of white Christmas lights trace the shape of the house along all of its right angles. The front yard is a tasteful combination of rock, gravel, and pampas grasses with one Japanese maple featured in the center of a square patch of beautifully manicured grass. Holland and Sam follow another couple up the stone walkway.

They step into the doorway and wait their turn to greet their host. Holland immediately recognizes Mickie Park, from the children's clinic. Mickie is petite, cute, with straight shoulder-length dark hair, dark brown eyes, and bright red lips. She is dressed like an elf, in a tight, short bright green dress and plush matching Christmas hat with bells and fur. She sports a necklace of small, multicolored origami boxes and earrings to match which look like they were made by a child.

Scanning for a place to drop their coats, Holland takes a quick look around. The house is exactly as he would expect—high ceilings, lots of glass and natural elements. Even with all of the Christmas decorations there is a sober elegance and taste that smells of money.

The whole house is hung like an art gallery, not all that unusual for an upscale home like the Park's. Except this house is crammed with one after another very large, heavily worked oil paintings, obviously the work of the same very unhappy artist. Angry faces and garish, naked women stare down from every available wall. The paintings are violent—big, ugly and everywhere, as if a crazy enraged teenager was given the run of the house.

'Hi! I'm Mickie! Welcome!'

Holland tears himself away from a five-foot, Picasso-like nude portrait with fangs and a gash across the cheek. He wonders if Mickie was the model.

'Hi, Mickie. Sam.' Sam puts out her hand, and Holland follows suit. 'And this is my husband, Holland, who I think you may have already met. At Duck Soup? Holland was there about six weeks ago with Tank, our youngest. He swallowed a magnet.'

Mickie leans back to mime seeing Holland more carefully a second time, flashing a big, wide smile of appreciation.

'Of course! How could I forget! The magnet and the writer! Am I right? You wrote that fantastic piece on the *Wizard of Oz* for the color show. We loved that!'

'Thank you,' Holland says. 'Sam is my color consultant.'

'Oh? Mickie turns back to Sam and repeats the same sizing-up motion. 'How so?'

'Sam is a painter. She's really where all my ideas about color come from.'

'Oh, wow, really? *Really?* This is so exciting! I need to introduce you to my husband, Mike. He'll be so happy to have someone to talk to about art! He has been making all kinds of wonderful paintings lately and I would just love for him to have some people to talk to who actually know something about

it! I don't have a creative bone in my body, myself.'

'Oh, that can't be true.'

Holland is about to launch into his All-Successful-People-Are-Creatives- Not-Just-Artists spiel but Sam squeezes his forearm. Too late.

'You are a very successful pediatrician. You have to be creative, by definition.' Holland offers.

'Let's save that discussion for some other time when we're not blocking the door,' Sam says.

'Sure! I'd love to hear more about that!' Mickie gushes.

Sam and Holland step into the loud party. The place is packed. They make their way through the house looking for the bar, past friendly groups of twos and threes chattering away. Everyone seems oblivious to the heat Holland feels coming off of the hulking great artworks hung on every wall. Most of the activity is centered around the large kidney-shaped kitchen island and out onto the expansive deck off of the living room.

When Holland realizes that the party is catered he feels silly carrying wine and beer in a paper bag, but the bartender is happy to accept his offering with a smile. Holland asks for a can of Diet Coke and Sam takes a cup of Christmas punch.

Holland has the uneasy feeling that there are a number of people that he has met and ought to know to say hello to. He knows he will be unable to remember any names to match with the faces. Sam takes up a conversation with a woman named Ann, mother of Margaret, who is married to Rich, who works in some aspect of tech and finance that defies description. Holland migrates to one of the circles of husbands talking about the details of running their own businesses or some aspect of competitive sports. Somehow it always seems to Holland as if everyone at these school parties has known each other long enough to already be paired up, lawyers with lawyers, roofers with roofers, meta-techie with meta-techie. No one is a writer.

When asked, Holland tells people right away that he is an English teacher at St. Anne's. Everybody in the Nautilus social set knows St. Anne's, so that is a good reference point. Then he may also add that he is a writer, at which point he is asked what kind of writing he does. When he answers fiction, then people ask what kind of fiction, and so on. Eventually, the question of being published comes up. When Holland has to say that he hasn't been, not yet, most of the people lose interest. Holland is always on the lookout for someone who might be able to help him with his career but that never seems to happen.

*I went to a rich couple's house.*

*I tried and I tried not to grouse,*

*But the art was insane.*

*It tortured my brain.*

*The paintings were made by the spouse.*

Not great, but it will have to do for now.

On an excuse to hit the bathroom, Holland breaks off from the clump of off-road enthusiasts he has somehow gotten tied in with and escapes upstairs to a quiet area. He leans on a balcony and takes in the scene from a high vantage point.

This is the kind of house that was built for art. Lots of open white walls, clean sightlines and gallery level lighting. Whoever designed it knew exactly what they were doing. In any other house like this you would expect to see a collection of Fine Art, as tasteful and sophisticated as the architecture. You might see a focus on a few artists in particular and then an assortment of other fine pieces. In this house, every single square inch of wall space of this house is devoted entirely to the work of one artist, apparently a very angry person with a strong misogynist bent and plenty of money to buy lots and lots of paint. The effect is overwhelming, like being in some sort of aesthetic fun-house mirror.

What Holland finds most disturbing is that no one is paying any attention at all to the butt ugly paintings. By mutual consent, everyone at the party has agreed to ignore the drunk uncle in the corner.

Holland feels a hand on his lower back.

'Enjoying the view?' It is Mickie. Next to her stands another man Holland hasn't met. This must be Mike.

'Absolutely. Great party. Thank you so much for hosting.'

'My great pleasure.' Holland likes Mickie's electric lipstick smile.

'Let me introduce you two. Mike, this is Holland Dickerson, the writer I told you about. His son is Henry. Holland's wife is an artist also. I want to introduce you to her too, but I seem to keep missing her.'

Holland nods. He has trouble taking his eyes off of Mickie's mouth.

'Holland, this is my husband, Mike. He is the painter.'

'Ah-ha.'

Mike is dark and fit, fifty-ish, over six feet with a great head of hair brushed straight back above deep blue eyes. He wears a blue dress shirt, pressed, tan slacks, dark brown cowboy boots and a hand tooled leather belt with a large steer-head buckle. He doesn't look like an artist to Holland. More like a politician. Probably a Republican.

The men shake hands.

'I'm just looking at the paintings, actually.' Holland manages.

'I think you two are the only artistic people here, sadly. Except for your wife, Sandy, of course.'

She is a painter too, isn't she? Holland? We need more artists, don't you think, Holland?'

Mickie has had a few drinks.

'Well, I'm going to leave you two to talk about art. Maybe Holland can write something about your paintings, babe. I'm so glad I can put you two together. I'm so glad you came, Holland.'

As Mickie turns to leave, she knocks over the drink she had set down on the balcony rail and sends a cup of cherry red Christmas punch sailing down onto the stone floor thirty feet below.

'Oh, shit!'

Fortunately, the cup is plastic and doesn't score a direct hit, but several people are splattered. Mickie scurries off to see what she can do, leaving Holland and Mike alone together surveying the scene below. Something about Mike tells Holland he has seen this all before.

'So,' Holland says. 'You are the artist here.'

'Oh, fuck no. I'm no artist.'

No shit. Holland is starting to think this conversation could be even more difficult than he had imagined it would be.

'But you are the painter, right?'

'Let me ask you something, Holland,' Mike grumbles. 'Do you think artists are born or made?'

'I don't know,' Holland lies. 'A little of both, I would guess.'

Mike snorts. 'That's non-committal enough.'

Holland takes a breath. 'What do you think?'

'It was a lifelong dream, to be an artist.'

'And?'

'And? So I made some money and I thought, OK, time to do this. Two years ago I sold my company, rented a storefront downtown, and set myself up. Bought all the stuff, taught myself how to mix the paint and make my colors, and went to town.'

'That's great. It looks like you made a lot of work'

'Well, right. I did. Worked my ass off. I love to work. Never been afraid of work. I had a sign made, called it Park Gallery West. I was down there every night working late, and then during the day I'd hang around and wait for people to stop in and look at my pictures.'

'So what happened?'

'I had a couple of shows, invited everyone I could think of, and people came, very polite, but I couldn't sell one God damn painting.'

'Does that matter to you?' Holland can't imagine that money is a problem.

'Sure. Sure it does. I don't just make them for myself, for chrissake.'

Holland wants to ask Mike just who he thinks he is making his pictures for but thinks better of it. Mike rests his elbows on the railing and folds his hands.

'Hell, I look at these pictures, I don't even know where they came from. I don't know how other artist's do it. Is this me? I'm not sure I like what I see.'

'Well, yep, that can be an issue.'

'I think I'm making them as some sort of gift to the world but then I look at them and I think, the person who made them is a complete stranger to me.'

Holland feels as if he has been dropped in the deep end of a very dangerous conversation and isn't sure which way to swim. Why is this man he just met telling him this?

'They say the only person the rich man envies is the artist. I tried, I really tried But look at these fucking paintings, man. I can't give them away. No one wants 'em.'



If Dorothy were sixteen in 1939 when the *Wizard of Oz* came out she would have been a little over seventy-five at the turn of the last century. The question of the day in the thirties was whether or not the United States was headed for war in Europe. Public opinion was overwhelmingly against it. The U.S. had done that once, with great loss of life and treasure, and they wouldn't be fooled again, no matter how colorful Paris might appear in springtime. In the movie, America is reminded of the harsh, unvarnished truth in cinemagraphic black and white. In spite of War, The Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression, There's No Place Like Home.

Holland's story *The Emerald of Oz* paints a colorful picture of Dorothy from the Midwest who is having none of it.

'Fuck it.' Dorothy says. 'Roll the dice. I don't care what Auntie Em thinks, I'm going to have some fun. I'm sure as hell not ending up like her.'

Holland thinks about Mickie Park's mouth and wonders if Sam will have sex with him when they get home.

'Did you get to talk to Mike?' Sam asks in the car. 'I tried to avoid him. What did you find out?'

'Dorothy's staying in Oz. Mike should go back to Kansas.'



# Chapter Four

## Hazzard

### January

### 2014

THE GRAFFITI SHOW is entirely Samantha's doing. She came up with the concept. She pitched it to the Nautilus school's Special Arts and Activities Committee as a collaborative effort, but once the project was accepted and started to pick up steam, Sam, per usual, was gone. If the past is any measure at all, Sam will be back on the scene to bask in her glory at the opening of the event, but for now it is left to Holland to get the exhibition up and ready for the children's after-school party on Thursday.

The artwork itself is still in the making. Over the past week, four local Denver street artists and

their crews have been at work painting their neon-bright burners along the hundred foot length of shoulder high wall that surrounds the school playground. Since they are using aerosol spray paint, illegal on school grounds, the artists are working at night. This suits Holland just fine. He is happy to be the designated afterhours Parental Supervisor. It gives him a great excuse to be out of the house and stay out late, even if just for a week. Plus, he gets to hang out with the artists.

The lead artist is Josiah Alvarado, who goes by the street name Hazzard. Hazzard is working with the fourth and fifth graders under the direction of Mr. Lewis, the art teacher, to paint their own mural along an adjacent strip of wall. The theme of the children's work, *Walls, Real or Imagined*, is a key component of Sam's original proposal to the school. She has been very big on the idea that the graffiti project should have topical, social relevance.

The artists would have been happy to do the job for the price of the underpainting and a few beers, but Sam has managed to convince three parent families—including Mickie and Mike Park—to support the project with money for all the paint and artist stipends. The individual amounts are small, but it's a matter of respect, Samantha assures the parents. Sam has been very explicit about the importance of respect for the artists in the Latine art community.

Holland's main contribution is to produce the accompanying written material for the show, all of which has to be proofed, printed, mounted and hung around the interior rotunda. This last minute job also left up to Holland to take care of.

What about some respect for *this* artist, Holland grouses.

*I think I have somehow detected  
That my value is being neglected.  
Must this be inherent  
In the life of a parent?  
My feelings aren't being respected.*

Holland has taken the writing part very seriously. It is important to him to demonstrate excellence to the best of his ability, not only as an example to the students but also as a statement of value to any parent who might think that the Dickerson family's non-monetary contribution is somehow less-than any other parent's annual donation.

*There are walls and then there are walls. Not all are made of concrete and broken glass. Walls come in all sizes and shapes, and many are invisible. Some protect us, and some walls hold us back. They*

*can be real or imaginary. There are internal, emotional walls, spiritual walls, socio-economic walls, all kinds of walls, self-created, or imposed on us by circumstance. Everyone has a different experience of what it is to Hit the Wall.*

*The language of art can be quiet, generous, and open. Artists speak with a different kind of voice, offering a different kind of conversation. If you listen, art will speak to you, tell you things you didn't know, inspire you to think about the world around you in new and unexpected ways, take the universe apart and put it back together again.*

*Sometimes a wall is just a great place to hang paint.*

Holland is pleased with this bit. Not too much, but enough. Punchy, poetic, good enough to impress any Nautilus School parent, anyway.

Getting all the writing for Samantha's graffiti project finished and installed is just one of several ongoing tasks weighing on Holland's mind while he drives home at one in the morning. In addition to staying on top of his teaching job, which ties him up from seven-thirty to three every day, there is the short story he is trying to get ready for submission, and the Viking ship Henry is building out of balsa wood and cardboard for his Oceans of the World assignment. Plus, it's his week to clean the bathroom.

*I've got too many things on my plate.*

*I've been at it all day and it's late.*

*I'm sure I can do it,*

*I know I'll get through it.*

*But my writing will just have to wait.*

He counts out six short story contests he has entered since the first of the year. Add to that the seven from just last fall and that makes thirteen. Of those thirteen he has already received five rejection notices. Should he do more? He feels as if he's not getting anywhere. Rejections are just part of the life of a writer, but discouraging none-the-less. Underlying all of that, Holland is not sure if he has made a mistake by agreeing to have lunch with Mickie.

☆☆☆

The next night the graffiti group is mercilessly small, just five or six painters focused on their work. The two previous nights a party had grown up around the artists and Holland had to have a private

word with Hazzard about keeping the numbers down so as not to attract too much attention with their spray paint.

Holland gets along well with Hazzard, a true Denver native. Hazzard commands serious respect within the street artist community. He is starting to get some commissions and national recognition for his stylized lips that he weaves together in complex, multicolored patterns across any surface you can name; dumpsters, trains, RVs. He showed Holland pictures of a private jet he had recently painted for the owner of a small, independent spray paint company. In return, Holland had shown Hazzard a draft of what he had written for the school.

‘I like this. I like what you wrote about the wall writing, man,’ Hazzard tells Holland. ‘Maybe you could write something for me?’

‘Like what do you have in mind?’ Holland asks.

‘Like something serious, man. Put what I do in a serious context, you know? You can do that, you know how. Not like this bullshit that they write in these arty rags all over the place.’

‘I could do that. If I write something, who is it for? Who’s the audience?’

‘Maybe for the gallery, you know, like for a press release, for me to use on my post and shit. Something intelligent, that could be really useful,’ Hazzard insists. ‘I would really dig that, if you did that for me. Do people get paid for doing that shit? Who pays them?’

‘Yeah, people get paid to write stuff about artists, sure. But you don’t have to pay me. Just help me get whatever I write published, you know, if you like what I write, that is.’

Holland finds himself feeling extremely white, standing in the Nautilus playground in his Catholic girl’s school teacher outfit—khaki pants, button down shirt and striped knit tie.

*Am I altering his vernacular slightly to sound more street, like white guys in the locker rooms sometimes do when they're talking to Black guys. Is Hazzard picking up on any of this?*

‘I’m going to like what you write, I’m sure of it. Get me something this week and I’ll give it to Gus at Spot X Gallery and we’ll get it printed out, maybe put it up on the wall or something. I’m having a show next week, you need to come by, man. That would be very, very cool.’

Holland agrees. ‘I can do that,’ he says.

☆☆☆

The short story Holland is working on for a contest deadline presses down on his mind. He just can’t seem to settle on a title. He is especially pleased with the opening.

*If you have ever drawn a picture on a mirror with a ruby red lipstick, you have known a pleasure others can only imagine in their sleep.*

The story grows out of an episode from Holland's life that involved singing in the local church choir and a terrible crush on a high school girl when Holland was in the fourth grade. He leans towards calling the story *Lust*, because there is quite a bit about embarrassing erections and early sexual awakening in young boys.

*As a child, Stephen sat at his mother's vanity and traced his reflection on the glass, feeling the color slide smoothly across the polished face. He marveled at the shape of the pointed end formed by his mother's mouth, as the tip emerged from the metal tube, reminding him of the dog penis he had seen once to his horror in the park. That was when the Mathers lived in the house with the carport and the gravel driveway on Rockland Road and Cindy Mather drove a pale green Chevy Malibu station wagon.*

Holland feels good about the way he makes the turn from the very graphic image of a red dog's penis to the vivid memory of the cool green family car.

As a grown man Holland came to suspect that society in general doesn't like to think about the possibility that male sexual awareness begins well before the onset of puberty. This is especially true of many women. The steady, unrelenting rise of sexuality in boys is a force to be reckoned with. It starts early and only fades away later in life, kicking and screaming.

Holland kissed his first girl playing doctor in the second grade. He squirmed with joy when she brushed the back of her hand against his bare bottom. Growing up, Holland struggled with the same confusion and shame about his constant obsession with the opposite sex that most boys have to contend with, until one day right around his fifteenth birthday when he officially gave himself permission to look unabashedly, appreciatively, provocatively, directly, at women. Holland knew early on that he genuinely liked women, he liked their company, all sorts of women, and saw no reason to pretend otherwise.

Very early on in their relationship, Samantha made it very clear that if Holland wanted to get serious with her he was going to have to raise his consciousness about gender politics.

Sam gave Holland a required reading list. The list included well-known feminist titles like *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* by Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, Rebecca Walker's *Becoming the Third Wave*, and, for the young author, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender & Memory* by Lynne Hanley.

Holland dutifully did the reading and learned the lingo. He discovered that his neo-feminist education served him well, if not for the noblest reasons.

'All that feminist verbiage is great for getting laid,' Holland told his best friend Jasper years later, after his divorce from Sam.

Sam liked to have sex just before her monthly period began. She insisted that intercourse helped get her cycle started, so Holland had to get comfortable with menstruation or miss out. Holland didn't really care one way or the other, blood or no blood, sex was sex, anytime was good for him. Beyond that, Holland was expected to not only become comfortable with Sam's periods but to understand menstruation in the larger feminist political context.

Sam's efforts to push Holland into feminism gave rise to an equal but opposite reaction. Holland took the position that there was another side to the story that went largely ignored—that when it came to the shame game, boys were stigmatized by societal norms in a similar way as girls. Holland maintained that men experienced a similar stigma attached to male sexual awakening, in particular when it came to erections and wet dreams. Polite society, by which Holland meant women, forced boys and young men to absorb their own oppressive share of sexual shaming. This conviction became something of an obsession for Holland. He and Sam argued about who had the greater burden of shame, women or men.

Typically, Sam accuses Holland of being a whiner. She disparages Holland's arguments as a race to the bottom. Holland pushes back.

'The American women's movement completely ignores the way young boys are treated as sexual beings in our culture,' Holland insists. He is on his knees in front of the kitchen sink rearranging the recycling.

'Boo-hoo. There is nothing that comes close to the cultural shaming of young girls about their periods. Period,' Sam counters. 'It's universal.'

'Yeah, sure, but what about the sexual shaming of men?' Holland asks.

'What about it? Not even close. That's a joke. Please don't man-splain that to me, I don't want to hear it. Male sexuality is the cornerstone of patriarchal hegemony. On your knees and all hail the mighty cock!'

Sam reaches over Holland to fill the electric kettle.

*I'm the one on my knees.*

He flattens out a cereal box.

'That's just not how it is with young men and boys. Women, mothers, they all joke about penises, talk about them to their boys in ways no man would ever talk to daughters about vaginas.'

'Nobody is asking you to talk about vaginas.'

'This is what I'm saying. Your attitude is totally dismissive. Plus, you are implying that boys are tougher than girls when it comes to rough talk about genitalia. Jokey attitudes about penises, penis size, penis shape, erections, wet dreams, all that, that stuff can sting.'

Holland crushes a soda can in his fist.

'There is so much about natural, normal male sexual development that women just don't know how to handle or even just don't want to know about,' he insists.

'I'm not really sure I care.'

'What do you mean, you don't care?' Holland is indignant. 'You have two sons!'

'Don't tell me I don't care about the boys!' Sam warns. 'I just don't care about your political arguments.'

'Right, exactly. You don't want to think about your young son's early interest in women as being sexual. It's all got to be innocent and platonic, which it isn't. Boys are getting sexually aroused in the first grade, but women desexualize boys. They trivialize normal male sexual interest. They like to tell themselves that boys getting hugged and kissed is just innocent, non-sexual activity as if all the perfume, high heels, and tight dresses go by unnoticed. It's worse than just romanticized innocence. It's a kind of pre-pubescent cultural castration. The truth is, when it comes to young boys and sex, the Women's Movement romanticises male sexuality.'

'You're saying feminists are Romantics? Give me a break! That's a bit much. Male sexuality has to be controlled,' Sam walks across the kitchen to toss away her teabag.

Holland will not be deterred.

'And then there is the 'yuck' component. As an informed, enlightened twenty-first-century male, I'm supposed to be all in with my sensitivity to girls and menstruation, but women totally don't ever want to think at all about wet dreams, for example.'

'Think about it. Boys start looking at explicit porn from early on so they know the mechanics. But then at some point, around the age of twelve or thirteen, boys learn for themselves the difference between a penis and a cock.'

'What, exactly, is the difference?'

'Oh, come on! A penis is soft, a cock is not.'

'Thanks for the clarification.'

'Think about it, Sam.'

'I'd rather not.'

'No, seriously. This is exactly my point. You have two boys growing up in your own house and you don't want to think about it. In only about six months, a boy's penis grows from being the size of his

pinkie to the size of a bratwurst, and gunk starts squirting out with no warning. He wakes up in a sticky puddle and then has to try to hide the sheets from his mom. Suddenly he realizes in a whole new way, personal to him, that everyone has sex, all the time, everywhere, including his parents.

'And then, overnight, sex is all he can think about, day and night, 24/7. All he wants to do is stick his cock in any warm hole and spew his gunk everywhere like a firehose. It's the old joke, 'Why do men have legs? Answer: To carry cum from one place to another'.'

'Gross. That is a perfect description of rape mentality,' Sam says, heading into the living room with her tea.

Holland closes the cabinet door with a bang and stands at the sink to wash his hands.

'Perhaps. But it's also a perfectly factual description of a normal, natural, male sexual response,' he calls after her, turning off the water in disgust.

*Shit. How can I write about this stuff when I can't even talk to my wife about it?*

'You gotta throttle back on all this male sex liberation stuff,' Sol the editor had said. 'It's anti-feminist. You start in with this, you lose half your readership right off the bat. It's no good. Find something else to rage about. Have you thought about climate change?'



Holland carefully turns the key as quietly as he can so as not to wake the house. He slips off his shoes just inside the door, takes two steps in the dark and comes down hard on a LEGO piece point blank into the arch of his foot.

*Shit!*

Sharp, searing pain. Stifling a cry, he hops over to the bench and sits down to inspect the damage. No broken skin, no blood.

Holland limps into the kitchen. He hasn't eaten since midday. There is granola but no milk. He thinks about substituting yoghurt but decides he doesn't want the weight in his belly just before bed. In the end, he settles for a shriveled up hot dog leftover from dinner and a plum from the fruit bowl on the counter.

By the light of the refrigerator Holland turns his attention to Henry's Viking ship sitting in it's cardboard cradle on the kitchen table. It's nearly finished. Just like Henry to forge ahead on his own. All the hard work has been done. The papier mache ocean has dried and hardened on its plywood plank and waits to be painted the deep blues and greens of the North Sea. Next to that, the balsa wood hull is complete. The dowel is set for the mast, and the sixteen corrugated cardboard oars are in place on either



side. All that is left is to assemble the major parts.

Holland leans down to inspect his son's work on the sail. Henry has woven strips of origami paper together to fashion a red and white striped mainsail that billows out as it hangs from the crossbar. He has somehow managed to fasten down a perfectly cut eight-point star in gold leaf onto the woven paper. It looks to Holland as if he might have painted it with watered-down Elmer's glue to hold its shape and keep it all together. The effect is astonishing. Holland imagines the sail is wet from the salty spray. He finds he is unexpectedly moved by the patience and handiwork of his eleven-year-old son. Such clarity of mind and determination to bring a beautiful, sweet vision to fruition.

His younger son, Tank, is just the opposite. Tank is lazy. He is just as smart as Henry, maybe even smarter in some ways. He has an emotional intelligence that Henry lacks. Tank takes after Samantha. He will come up with a plan and then always find a way to get others to do the actual work. It makes Henry crazy. Holland considers that this might be a deceptively good strategy for success in life. It seems to be working out well for Sam, anyway.

The boys have been playing with the trains. A new Thomas the Tank Engine layout covers the entire living room floor. There are only two rules of the Dickerson household regarding train setups, but they are sacrosanct. The first rule is that the system has to work for the engines. Picking up trains and moving them through the air from place to place is not allowed. They have to be able to reach every part of the design, and there cannot be any dead spaces or any isolated interior loops where the trains might get caught unable to drive out naturally because of some poorly thought out switch arrangement.

The other rule is that everytime you build a layout, you must use every last piece of track and scenery in the house. Just like art, Holland tells the boys. That is the challenge. Nothing missing, nothing extra.

Holland notices a few, random pieces of track sticking out from under the sofa on the far side of the room. This would be Tank's doing. There is nothing for it. Holland has to find a place to fit in the extra pieces. After some rearranging he is able to transform a sketchy 'S' curve into one long elegant arc, and then extend a siding with a switch and the last piece of straightaway. He sits on the floor and marvels once again how the smartest, laziest people get everyone else to do the work for them.

*I think about all of the joys,  
Of raising two wonderful boys.  
Then, suddenly, when  
They turn into men  
They will put away all of their toys.*

It is two in the morning and Holland is not ready for sleep. The thoughts about Mickie he has been pushing away come rolling back to him.

*What about Mickie? What is going on there? Should I feel guilty about lunch with her alone? Why is she interested in having lunch with me? Is it really just going to be talking about my writing career, or is there more to it than that?*

Tuesday is the late start day at St. Anne's. The adjuncts cover the classes for the full time faculty to have planning time. Samantha will get the boys up and off to school so he'll be able to sleep in a bit. Careful not to make any noise, Holland pours himself a glass of ice water, sits down at his desk and lights up his computer.

Alvin Beal is in trouble again and Holland is not sure how to get him out of it. Alvin has gotten drunk and angry at a neighborhood backyard barbeque and painted himself into a corner.

*Cathy hears her husband talking loudly on the patio and disappears back into the kitchen to ask if she can help with anything.*

*'Take the 4th of July! Independence Day!' says Alvin. 'Every one of our ridiculous, artificial national holidays is just an excuse for us to run out and express our 'liberty' racking up credit card debt on installment, buying cars and furniture, kitchen appliances, lawn care gizmos, et cetera, in honor of Abe Lincoln, Jesus, and Martin Luther King, not necessarily in that order.*

*'Let me ask you this. What day is not a national holiday? I'll tell you! It's the first Tuesday in November, when we are supposed to vote, not shop, and express our actual freedom of choice, sort of. Most politicians aren't bothered by that small irony.'*

This part of the book comes easily to Holland because he is really writing about himself. Holland loves using Alvin to voice his own feelings about the corruption and stupidity he sees all around him, so he lets Alvin have his audience.

*'The pursuit of happiness is hard-wired into the American psyche,' Alvin blathers on. 'Americans believe, deep down, that the freedom to pursue happiness on our own terms makes us better than everyone else. That kind of happiness is overrated.'*

*Alvin is just getting warmed up.*

*'If getting rich means selling pork that flushes toxic effluent into the fragile aquifer, so be it. If I want to feed my children burgers and fries until they grow up to be overweight diabetics and bankrupt*

*whatever government-subsidized healthcare system we have in place, go for it. Pepsi or Coke, with or without cheese, you want fries with that? The Happy Meal, that's not real freedom.' Alvin is on a roll.*

*'The American myth is based on the belief that we control our own personal identity and future independently. We Americans want to think that getting to choose our poison, chocolate or vanilla, oxycodone or meth, that makes us special. But what is real happiness, huh? Shopping? Seriously? Americans spend so much time expressing their so-called 'freedom to pursue happiness' and distracting themselves from their own little lives by consuming junk which just makes them more and more unhappy.'*

Holland is pleased with his writing so far. From the very beginning, Holland has tried to portray Alvin as a likeable character, flawed but not inherently bad—just confused. He just doesn't know where to go next. Sol agrees.

'I've seen this book before,' Sol says when Holland shows him his latest draft. 'It reads like something Updike would write.'

'Well, being compared to Updike is not so bad, is it?'

'It is when your story is turning into an angry screed about an unhappy marriage that ends in divorce.'

'Screed?'

'Look, Holland. Your main character needs to be more sympathetic. Can't he be a little bit nicer? Does he have to be so much like you?'

'I need to be true to my own experience.'

'Well, sure, by all means, do that. But if you want to get published you're going to have to find a way to turn this guy around somehow. At this point he seems kind of boxed in.'

'Right. I'm not sure I'm going for a happy-happy ending.'

'Ok, but so far your readership consists mostly of men who are angry about being stuck in unsatisfying marriages, and that doesn't spell best seller.'

'I don't need a best seller. I just want to get published.'

'OK, fine. You've created this guy, Alvin, who has a problem. He's unhappy. He blames everyone else for his misery. That in itself is not so special. Where is this leading us?'

Holland doesn't have an answer.

'Here's a hard truth for you, Holland. If you are writing about relationships, women are your readership, and women don't care about an angry immature man-boy who hates his wife and cheats and wrecks his family, no matter how much he suffers for it. They know that character intimately. They have

*lived* with that guy. They're sick of him. The question is, can he be *redeemed*? That's what women want to know. What's it going to take? Can he become a real man? Someone who can make them feel like a woman?'

'I'd like to think he can, sure.'

'Well, Holland, if you want to get published as a writer of contemporary fiction, you are going to have to expand your appeal. Your boy Alvin is going to have to grow up a little. Alvin has to come to some sort of cathartic realization in the end. Redemption, that's what your readership wants. People need to believe that they can be better than who they think they are. It gives them hope for themselves. It doesn't have to be a blinding light. Just ask yourself, Holland, where has all this playing around left him? Does he gain any self-knowledge? How has it changed him? What has he learned? Anything at all?'

*Alvin is in a bad plight.*

*He has some remorse, but it's slight.*

*He's not really sure,*

*If his motives are pure.*

*Who's to say what is wrong and what's right?*

# Chapter Five

## Barcelona

### February

### 2014

LUNCH WITH MICKIE was her idea. She phoned Holland to say she thought it would be a great way to thank him for all of the work he did to make the graffiti show such a smash success for the kids.

'Let's do Wednesday,' she said. 'That's my day off at Duck Soup.'

Holland decided then and there that lunch with Mickie Park was worth taking a sick day.

Afterwards, uncomfortable doubts crept in about the wisdom of spending one-on-one time with Mickie Park. Is there something more to it than just thank you? She said something on the phone about wanting to run an idea by him, some kind of artistic collaboration. Much as he would love an excuse to spend some more time with Mickie, that's the last thing Holland needs.

Is it just him, or is Mickie Park up to something? He has seen her several times in passing over the last two months but never outside of Henry's school—never socially. Holland thinks she is attractive,

but is it mutual? She is a sexy woman. Is she actually flirting with him, or is that just how she is with everybody?

If she is flirting with him, how should he respond? How does he *want* to respond? That should be an easy enough question to answer, but Holland is baffled. There must be something going on for him, otherwise why would he be so sure that he shouldn't mention his lunch plans with Mickie to Samantha?

And then there's the question of Mike. Why would a woman married to someone like Mike give Holland a second glance? Who is Mike? What is he all about? What is their relationship like? Holland's only contact with Mike had been at the Christmas party. His impression had not been favorable. Mike is a successful businessman who made a bunch of money and played around with being an artist, only to find he wasn't really cut out for it and quit.

*Mike is just an arrogant, angry fuck, and no one I want to mess with.*

Usually, when Holland looks at himself, he is not really sure he likes what he sees. What could a woman like Mickie possibly see in him that he doesn't see? Maybe if he could see himself through Mickie's eyes he would like himself better. Isn't that what love is, seeing yourself through someone else's eyes? The possibility of such a thing quickens Holland's pulse. Holland is not in love with Mickie. Certainly not. But the lure of spending time with someone who genuinely likes his company, who supports his aspirations, who might just think he is kind of a neat guy, is undeniable. Holland tries to visualize himself through Mickie's eyes, but the effort makes him very uncomfortable. He has no idea why. It just seems unnatural.

*Maybe this is all just meaningless head games. Maybe it is just a thank you lunch.*



Mickie suggests Barcelona, a popular wine and tapas bar in the RiNo Art District, just off the old downtown. Holland has never been there. He and Sam rarely go out to eat. He Googled the restaurant so he knew it was popular. When Holland arrives a little after eleven thirty the place is already packed. He puts in his name with the hostess and finds two seats at the bar.

'At the bar,' he texts Mickie.

'Go ahead & get something good,' comes right back. 'CU in 5.'

What does that mean, something good? How should he know what she likes? Why is he so ill at ease? This is supposed to be a simple, friendly get together, a thoughtful thank you lunch, as Mickie had said. Holland is convinced she wants something from him, but what? What does she think he has to offer

her? Does she think he is going to introduce her to the art scene? Does she know her husband is a terrible artist?

Holland anxiously scans the menu looking for something that might be interesting and not too weird. Also, not too expensive. Hopefully, that is what this lunch will turn out to be—interesting but not too weird, and not too expensive.

The barkeep introduces herself as Sharon, a friendly young woman, warm, with an easy smile and a smoky voice that belies her wholesome looks. She brings Holland a glass, a large bottle of cold water, and a basket of assorted breads with a saucer of olive oil seasoned with salt and red pepper. After some thought, Holland asks for the marinated olives and the Marcona almonds. He decides against the bacon-wrapped dates. Mickie could easily be a vegetarian, for all he knows. He goes with the potato tortilla—safe enough. Then there’s the alcohol issue. Sharon wants to know if she can get him anything from the bar. Mickie is a drinker, but he is definitely not going to drink. He’ll wait for his lunch date to arrive. The water is fine for now.

Holland scans the room. Mixed crowd, loud, young, hipster, the place is hopping. Well dressed, attractive clusters of friends and couples jam the bar—tan, fit, very Colorado. Suddenly self-conscious, Holland feels awkward and out of place. Not exactly old, but older, and very much married. Should he order more olives? He’s already eaten half of the bowl.

Just like the night at the Christmas party, Holland feels a soft touch on his back and turns to see Mickie standing behind him. He had been watching the door and somehow missed her. She must have come in the side entrance off the patio.

‘Holland!’

‘Hi Mickie.’

Mickie takes both of his shoulders in her hands and, with a big smile, kisses him lightly on the cheek. She is wearing a short black dress, low black lace-up boots, and a large contemporary silver necklace. Her lips are blood-orange red.

‘Careful, no lipstick on you,’ she says, wiping his cheek with her thumb.

Mickie slides up onto the barstool Holland has saved for her and swivels around to set her purse on the counter.

‘How great is this?’ Mickie beams, holding up both her hands to take in the entire scene.

Holland nods appreciatively.

‘This is my current favorite place in Denver,’ Mickie declares. ‘Have you been here? It’s fabulous! The food is great, and you can sit here at the bar, eat something, drink a little wine, and hang out as long as you want.’

'No, I haven't been here before,' Holland says sheepishly.

Mickie twinkles. The elf outfit was more than just a costume.

Mickie greets Sharon with a wide smile.

'You can take us off the list,' Mickie says. 'We don't need a table. We'll stay right here.'

Mickie jumps right in and orders the purple-skinned, drunken goat cheese, Grilled Hangar Steak with truffle vinaigrette, and a plate of sauteed kale, chard, and shallots.

'I don't need to think about it. This is the meal I have been craving all week. We can share but you should order something that looks good to you. Go on, whatever you want. Find something.'

While Holland is looking over the menu Mickie discusses riojas with Sharon and settles on a split.

'Holland, what are you drinking?'

'I'm not much of a drinker,' Holland lies. 'I'll stick with my sparkling water, thanks.'

'Don't be ridiculous! You're having lunch on me at a Spanish wine bar! You will drink.'

Sharon brings two glasses. Holland lets Mickie pour him a glass and then opts for the chorizo with sweet and sour figs.

'A toast!' Mickie says, raising her glass. 'To art!' Holland dutifully raises his glass as well. Mickie takes a large sip of her wine, and Holland barely wets his lips.

The conversation moves in circles, mostly about the kids, Mickie's Taylor and Manny, Holland's Henry and Tank. Neither spouse is mentioned. They talk about the school, various teachers, Mr. Lewis and the art program.

'It's really you that I should be thanking', Holland says. 'You and Mike put up the money to underwrite the project.'

'Well, the Olingers and the Darnells chipped in too. We all put in the same amount.'

'Yes, but, we were able to buy really great paint, all sorts of colors. You know what school paint looks like.'

'Shitty,' Mickie said.

'The spray paint looked great though, didn't it?'

'Absolutely.'

Mickie sips her wine. Holland can not help but notice the tinge of color left on the glass from her lipstick, reminding him of his short story about choir practice and erections. Yes, he will stick with the title—*Lust*.

'And the artists got stipends, which, by the way, surprised them. They're not used to getting paid to tag walls, except for Hazzard,' Holland says.

'It was your wife, Samantha, who pushed for that.'



Mickie's mention of Sam makes Holland strangely uncomfortable. He wants to keep the conversation moving in a different direction.

'And then there was the party, which wouldn't have been half as nice,' Holland adds.

'We didn't have to pay for the party, that was all those other moms who put that together.'

'Oh, right, of course. But I got to see my writing on the wall, so that is all great.'

'And that *was* great! After all their hard work, the kids were thrilled to have a show that looked so grown-up. The little individual bio-bits you wrote for each of the student artists were awesome. They loved that. The parents did too. I think you got in good there.'

The next wave of food arrives and Mickie digs right in.

'Did you get a chance to talk to Tim Glazer?' she asks, cutting into the steak. I pointed you out to him.'

'No. I don't think so. Who is he?'

'You should know him. He's an editor for West-South-West Press. They publish magazines for the airlines. Most of the output is electronic now, but he knows people in the industry. I was thinking he might be a good person for you to talk to. He was happy about the writing you did.'

Airline in-flight magazines are not exactly what Holland has in mind when he says he wants to get published.

Mickie likes to eat. Holland thinks there is nothing sexier than a woman slipping slices of rare beef into her mouth with unabashed pleasure. She follows the steak with a bite of sauteed kale and another sip of her wine.

'Plus, he and his wife Joyce collect art. They have quite a good contemporary collection. They're connected in with the Contemporary Art Museum, MOCA. Come to think of it, I should have asked them for money for the graffiti project. God knows they have it. It all comes from her,' Mickie adds with faux confidentiality.

Mickie eats and talks fast at the same time without missing a beat. She has finished off most of the steak and cuts a piece of goat cheese which she eats with her fingers. Holland has completely lost interest in food for himself.

'Mike was pissed that they didn't buy one of his paintings,' Mickie goes on. 'They collect mostly younger artists, up and comers, alot of it through Paul Hughes at Inkfish Gallery.'

Mickie abruptly stops talking and sits up straight. She turns to Holland, looking him directly in the eyes over her glass, and sips her wine.

Here it comes. The big question. Holland suddenly realizes with a pang how much he has been dreading this moment.

'So,' Mickie asks, 'How do you like Mike's paintings?'

Holland sits with his glass in both hands, staring intently into the pinky-red liquid as if his answer lay at the bottom of a deep well. Except for miming the toast, Holland hasn't touched his wine. In fact, Holland hasn't touched a drink of anything for over three years, the longest continuous amount of time he has ever gone without anything to drink since high school, as far as he can figure. The quiet between them extends outward. A woman behind Mickie absently turns to look. If ever there was a time for a drink, this is it.

'Well,' Holland carefully begins. 'I only just met Mike that one time, at your Christmas party, which is also the only time I've seen the paintings. But from what I got out of talking to him, I think the paintings are very sincere...and that counts for a lot. I think they are very...authentic. They really seem real.'

'Oh, they're real, all right,' Mickie snickers. 'I live with them. They're really, really real,' she laughs.

Mickie smiles at Holland appreciatively. 'That was an excellent answer. You are very diplomatic.'

'I try.'

'Tell me this. If you were to write about Mike's work, what kinds of words would you use?'

'Hmmm...well, they're big, most of them.'

'Ha! They are that!'

'Exuberant' isn't exactly right,' Holland continues. 'They're pretty dark. 'Enthusiastic' might be better. I think I would want to talk about the attack, the way he goes after the canvas. And I would also have to say something about the thick paint and the slashing strokes. Looks like he uses a palette knife, mostly, right?'

'But, aren't they just so angry?' Mickie asks. 'I mean...tell me. I want to know what you think. It's not just me, right?'

'No. Yes. They are a bit angry.'

'Violent even. And with those faces, the teeth! Some of them are just plain ugly.'

'OK. Sure. I see that too.'

There is a pause while Mickie looks away thoughtfully.

'I think they scare the kids,' she says with a grim smile. 'Maybe not mine so much. Taylor and Manny are used to them, but other kids when they come over, I can see it in their little faces!' Mickie sputters, a huge grin on her face.

'Jesus!' she gasps, laughing harder and harder. She raises her arm and puts her face into the crook of her elbow to cover her mouth. When she lowers her arm there are tears in her eyes. Gasping for

breath, she bends over double. People around the bar glance over, laughing in company for the pure joy of it.

'Jesus! What a fucking madhouse we are!' she shrieks.

Holland can't stop laughing along with her. He has no idea what to say.

'OK, OK, get a grip, Mickie,' she says to herself, emptying the last of the split into her glass. 'We need more wine, don't you think?...No, better not.'

'Fuck, though! Really,' she says, smiling broadly, head in both hands, looking straight ahead across the bar. 'I don't want to talk about that little problem today,' Mickie says, squaring up on Holland with a mischievous smile. 'I want to talk about us!

Holland's heart stops. *What?*

'OK,' he ventures. 'What about us?'

'I want to talk about *us!* You and me! Doing a collaboration together, your writing with my photographs! You didn't know I was a photographer, did you? Snuck up on you I bet.'

Mickie looks down at her plate and surveys what's left of their meal. She finishes her wine, reaches into her purse, and slaps a credit card down on the bar.

'Here's what I say. Let's go look at some!' she says.

Holland puts up a respectable fight but in the end Mickie pays for the lunch and leads the way out the door, thanking the waitstaff as she goes. Once outside, Mickie puts her arm around Holland's and leads him down the half block to where she has parked her large dark blue SUV.

'You got a good spot,' Holland starts to babble. 'Good parking karma. I have it too. It comes from my grandmother, Mageet. Although it didn't really work for me today. I'm like, four blocks away.'

*Shut up, Holland. Why are you even talking?*

'OK. Look!' Mickie says, opening the back of the car. 'I just picked them up from the framers. I want to know what you think. Of the framing, obviously. Not the pictures themselves. You can just get an idea of what I do now, we'll have a more serious talk when they're up on the wall.'

There must be twenty freshly wrapped photographs in two neat stacks. Mickie takes one off of the top and stands back, holding it so Holland can see. It's hard to get a sense of what the picture actually is, it just looks like abstract colored shards of light.

'What about these frames? Too much black?' she asks.

'I'm not sure. Maybe. It's hard to see with the wrapping. But they are very dramatic. I like that. You don't see black much now with photographs, mostly it's white.'

'I know.' Mickie sounds disappointed.

'I'll have to look at them again when you've unwrapped them.'

'Yes. You'll have to come over to the house, I guess. That's where my studio is.'

Mickie turns the framed photo around to look at it from the front.

'Shit. Maybe I should have gone with the white.'

Mickie replaces the photo and closes the car. Brightening suddenly, she turns to Holland and says, 'OK. Quick, jump in.'

Holland does as he is told and closes the door. Mickie produces a vape pen from her purse and fires it up. She takes a long pull, and hands it over to Holland.

'Here. Take this. I'll drive you around to your car.'

# Chapter Six

## Tabula Rasa

### March

### 2014

THE TITLE OF Hazzard's show at Spot X Gallery is *Tabula Rasa*. There are two openings, a Thursday night invitation-only preview and the usual Friday night opening for the public. Holland and Sam, Mike and Mickie are all on the VIP list.

Hazzard loves the piece that Holland wrote. It is exactly what he asked for, a slice of the history of wall writers and graffiti artists that sets his work squarely at the center of a long and noble tradition. He took it straight to Gus, the Spot X Gallery Director, and insisted that it be printed and mounted on the wall at the entryway for the opening.

*Riding the rails across America during the Depression Era, hobos marked boxcars to tell each other which local sheriffs to steer clear of, or where they could hope to find a dry barn or a hot meal. They used the rail network to communicate within their own subculture.*

*Modern graffiti art on the East coast can be traced to Philadelphia of the early 1960s, from which it migrated to the boroughs of New York, notably Washington Heights and the Bronx. Graffiti art began to gain notoriety with the help of the NYC subway system, whose cars facilitated the rise of another community of subway graffiti writers and muralists. A vast gallery of elaborately tagged mural-cars sprang up on New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority rolling stock.*

Hazzard particularly liked the bit about the hobos.

*For young, hip-hop artists living in the margins, who often saw themselves as disenfranchised and voiceless, tagging was a way to create art that owed nothing to the dominant socio-economic culture. But not everyone was pleased. With the insistence of conservative politicians and law*

*enforcement, wall writing was criminalized and the artists characterized as vandals, their artwork described as a blight on the urban landscape. Graffiti art came to symbolize everything that was wrong with American cities: violent street gangs, hard drugs, and crime.*

Sam approved of the phrase 'disenfranchised and voiceless'.

*There is a tendency for people to lump together any wall art made with commercial spray paint, from basic tags to the more embellished 'burners,' through permission graphics, graffiti-style commissioned murals, all the way up to large-scale, competitive aerosol art. For the artists, there may be distinctions between different kinds of wall art, but it's not easy for those outside the community to perceive them or to appreciate why those differences matter. It's worth learning something about the varying kinds of spray can art before deciding where exactly to draw the lines.*

*The most significant dividing line runs between art that has been made legally and art that has been made illegally. Many artists who started out tagging illegally insist that, in order to be truly authentic, the work must be guerilla art before there's a chance of gaining credibility within the artistic community.*

*More than just a matter of law, it's generally understood that this legal/illegal boundary determines the essential elements of 'authentic' graffiti art. Among these elements are intent, personal history, ethnicity, socio-economic background, audience, and relationship to the art market (if any). Contributing to the distinctive signature of the artist's work, these are all read in the way each artist attacks the wall. Advance authorization to paint a wall can automatically signal lower credibility and detracts from perceived authenticity within the community of street artists. Each artist has to negotiate this issue in his or her own way.*

*From the early part and into the middle of the 1970s, street artists Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others became darlings of the New York gallery scene. Since then, guerilla graphics has mainstreamed, morphing into a kind of pseudo hip-hop, urban décor. 'Permission Graffiti' is a phrase the old-school street writers derisively use for graffiti murals endorsed by city councils and business interests to decorate the urban environment and drive consumers to bars and restaurants. Somewhere between the illegalized thrill of 70s subway art and today's consumerized murals, artists like Hazzard forge more complex identities, resisting easy classification.*

Holland is secretly thrilled that Hazzard is so happy with what he wrote. They both need a bit of success. It had been a welcome break from the regular stream of 'we regret' and 'we're sorry to say' and

just plain 'no' in his inbox. The energy he needs to keep up with his job, tend to his family, and nurture his marriage is getting harder and harder to find. The stream of rejections from contests, residency programs, and publishers is wearing him down.

*The workload has steadily grown.  
My time is no longer my own.  
I try to stay sane,  
But it's burning my brain.  
And wearing me down to the bone.*

For her part, Samantha is sorry to miss the Thursday night party, but she has a late class in Boulder and won't be able to get there until after nine-thirty, if at all. She makes Holland promise to go both nights if she can't make it. Holland always has to force himself to go alone to any kind of social event when he would far prefer to have his wife by his side. Both Sam and Mickie separately tell him that he has to be at the Thursday night opening. He doesn't dare cross either of them.

Spot X is a moveable gallery with no permanent site. Gus, the Director, has been very savvy about gaining connections with the young, hard-charging entrepreneurs who are taking over Denver's Lower Downtown and Upper Larimer/RiNo, sections. The brutal combination of developers and the exploding pot industry is forcing artists out of their warehouse digs. For the last six months, Spot X has been located in the old Denver Rock Drill compound.

Denver Rock Drill is one of the last remaining obsolete factories still standing in Denver, much of it built in the 1920s. Holland parks on Williams and walks down the length of the ivy-covered warehouse frontage, worried that his khaki slacks and tweed jacket are not quite right for a chic, downtown art opening. As he approaches the massive wrought-iron gateway into the compound, he catches sight of Mike and Mickey heading in.

Holland's stomach gives a lurch. Of course, he will be talking to them both, probably together. This could be awkward. How should he behave towards Mike? Did Mickie mention that she had lunch and gotten high with him just the day before? Does any of that matter, or is he just making too much of things?

*It will be interesting, navigating these waters. Let's see how Mickie plays it.*

Holland checks in, gets his nametag, and heads for the bar, looking for a Diet Coke. Scanning the crowd, he spots Mike and Mickie standing together on the far side of a large colonnade that looks like it had been brought in by the gallery just for the opening. They are talking casually with another couple

that Holland doesn't know. In fact, Holland can't find anyone he thinks he knows except Mike and Mickie. Holland is somewhat reassured to see that the other two men are also wearing slacks and sports coats.

As Holland gathers his courage to make his approach, Mickie happens to catch sight of him and waves him over with a smile that leaps across the room. Mickie favors short, tight dresses, Holland remembers. Black again tonight, but also with high heels that exaggerate her lithe, elfin body. She is wearing another piece of silver jewelry around her neck, more a work of art than a necklace. Holland struggles not to gawk.

'Mike, excuse me,' Mickie interrupts her husband as Holland approaches. 'You remember Holland, don't you? You two talked about art at the Christmas party last year.'

'Sure. Hello there, Holland,' Mike says perfunctorily, not bothering to offer his hand. Holland has the impression that Mike is not enjoying himself. Mickie moves on.

'And, Holland, do you know the Smits? No? Let me introduce you to Sherry and Arnold. Everyone calls him Arnie.'

Holland nods to Sherry and shakes hands with Arnie.

'Did I hear that you did some writing for Hazzard recently?' Arnie asks.

'Yes. That's right.'

'What do you think about Hazzard's wall pieces?' Sherry asks Holland. 'I think they're really different.'

Holland hedges. 'I'm not sure. I really just got here. I haven't had a chance to look around. What's your take on it?' he asks the group.

The general consensus is that Hazzard's new work is colorful, aggressive, and challenging. Holland makes a note that no one commits to actually liking them. In fact, no one really seems to want to talk about the art at all. Topics shift. The women compare notes on yoga retreats, the men talk about bass fishing. Holland stands dutifully by, absently listening to two separate conversations, woman to woman, man to man, hoping he looks engaged. The timbre of Mickie's voice has him enthralled—flat and sexy, with just a touch of gravel in it, like a smoker. So far, no mention of the day before.

The talk hits a flat spot Sherry and Arnie peel off, saying they had better go look at some art.

'We've known them for years,' Mickie says, once they are out of earshot. 'Well, Mike has. They're really *your* friends...' Mickie trails off.

'Uh-huh, you could say that,' Mike grumbles. He squints around the room at the neon-bright collages as if he is getting ready to make some pronouncement on the artwork's value to the world.

'I'm getting another drink,' Mike announces abruptly. He doesn't ask if anyone else is interested, just walks away.



Mickie ignores her husband's rudeness. She presses Holland on who else he has met when Hazzard saunters up from behind, giving her a start. Delighted, Mickie air kisses Hazzard and the two start in like old friends, chattering about the opening, the crowd, the response to his new work. Hazzard sports a shirt streaked with brilliant color that looks sutured, as if the maker slashed it over and over with a machete and then repaired every cut. Holland is surprised at how much he likes it. Hazzard is also wearing a gaudy pair of colorfully stitched cowboy boots and a cowboy hat.

Holland is relieved that Hazzard does not go in for some kind of street handshake.

'You're lookin' hot tonight!' Hazzard tells Mickie.

'Thank you, thank you. And congratulations! You are looking fabulous as well in your goin'-to-an-opening getup.

'Thank you, thank you.

Hazzard turns to Holland. 'I am so glad you guys are all here, Holland! Where's Samantha?'

'She has a class that she can't miss. She is still going to try to make it tonight, though, and she will definitely be here tomorrow night,' Holland replies, confidently.

'OK, great, I'd hate for her to miss seeing this show.'

Mike returns with a fresh drink in his hand.

'Hey Mike, how you doin'? Still painting like a madman?' Hazzard's generosity of spirit is wasted on Mike.

'No, not so much,' Mike grunts.

Hazzard grins like sunshine. He is too relaxed to ask for their opinion about his new work. Holland thinks he must be very high or supremely confident, or both.

'Yes, congratulations,' says Holland. 'This is really something.'

Mike says nothing.

'So, Hazzard, this new work is really different from your wall art,' Mickie says. 'What happened?'

'Yeah, right. Sure. So...I wanted to do something new, you know, and my art has always been about the wall, right? Tied to the wall. I wanted to try to come off the wall some.'

'So...does that mean the stuff I wrote for you isn't current?' Holland asks.

'Oh, no, no, no! Not at all, man. Not...at...all. I love what you wrote. The homies love it too, very popular with the krew, Holland my man.'

Hazzard drifts for a moment as if he has forgotten something, then snaps back into focus.

'In fact. In fact! Let me introduce you to Gus. He's the boss here. He was talking about you

maybe writing something specifically about the show that he would put on the gallery website and publish on his blog. Maybe something in print, too, I'm not sure. But you need to meet him. He wants to meet you too. He told me to be sure to bring you over if you came. Come on, he's over there. I see him.'

Mickie sees another couple she wants to talk to so Holland lets Hazzard lead him away over to the bar where a short, portly man stands talking to three attractive young women. Gus stops talking when Hazzard arrives.

'Gus, this is Holland who wrote that great piece for me. Holland, meet Gus.'

The two men nod to each other.

'Hey,' says Holland. 'Congratulations. This is really a great looking show. So much new work! And a pretty good turn out, it looks like.'

'Well, congratulations go to Haz, he did the work. But thank you. Yeah, I'm pretty pleased.'

'I was telling Holland that you might want him to write something about me and the new work for your blog and shit,' Hazzard says.

'Well, sure, I really like what you wrote about wall writers and that. You see we have it on the wall, so thank you.' Gus says.

'Would you ever be interested in doing something like that?' Gus continues. 'I might be able to pay you something, not much. But hell, Haz can pay you. We just sold another piece.'

'Really? Fuckin' great, man!' Hazzard says. 'Which one? To who?'

'That married couple, Sherry and Arnie, they bought the pink one on the end there.' Gus points.

'How much?'

'Thirty-five'

'Cool, man. That's very cool.'

'Congratulations again, man,' Holland adds in.

'This is very cool, now. So yeah, I can pay you now myself. Or maybe work a trade? How about it? A piece on me and the new work. An interview, like.' Hazzard is very excited.

'Sure. Let's set up a time to meet here, at the gallery, it'll have to be over the weekend. We can toss some ideas around,' Holland says.

'Great, man. This is great!' Hazzard holds up his hand for a high five. 'Here's something you can think about, man. A quote from me,' Hazzard says to Holland. Holland slaps his hand.

'Lay it on me.'

'Right. The quote is, 'Painting for me is like visual poetry.'

'Painting for you is like visual poetry,' Holland repeats. 'Sure. I can work with that.'

‘Good! Good! Say, listen, we’re headed over to Fort Greene later,’ Hazzard tells Holland. ‘You should come.’

*Should I?*

Holland hasn’t been in a bar for years.

‘When?’

‘Hour or so. After the opening,’

‘Who’s going?’ Holland asks.

‘We are, man! Gus, Remy, me, you. Fritz. Some of my team. We’ll talk about art, man. It’s still pretty early, but people will come later. You can meet some more artists, it’ll be good. Help you with your writing about the scene, you know. Come on, man. Hang with the homies.’

Flattering that Hazzard wants Holland to join them. This is good, a chance to chum around with a younger, hip, artist crowd. Hazzard is a player. Writing a piece for him for online publication and social media moves him in the right direction.

A little after nine Holland is on his way to Globeville, not a part of town that he knows well at all. He has to use his navigator to find Fort Greene. The roads are slick and the visibility is down. The bar is not well marked, but on a second pass he catches sight of Gus, Remy, and another artist from the gallery heading in, so he finds a place to park the car nearby and hustles back through the rain.

As soon as he walks in the door Holland remembers how much he loves bars. He loves everything about them—the dim light, the sparkling glasses, the way all those bottles of booze glow technicolor in front of the mirror behind the bar, smell of spilled whiskey and the tang of beer. He loves the way women talk in bars. He misses the cigarette smoke.

Holland finds Hazzard and company outside on the patio taking up one of the worn wooden picnic tables that had once been brightly colored. Hazzard sits at the center of the group that includes Gus, Remy, two or three other men, and one of the young girls Gus had been talking to at the opening. The rain pounds against the fiberglass covering overhead. Steam rises off the concrete floor.

Hazzard sees Holland right away and motions him over enthusiastically, telling the girl next to him to make room. Holland sits down.

‘Hey, you found us, man! Welcome!’ Hazzard slaps Holland on the back.

Holland smiles appreciatively. ‘What’s everyone drinking?’ he asks, settling in, trying to sound relaxed about it.

‘Tequila, man,’ someone drawls from the far end of the bench. This must be Fritz, Holland thinks. An older man, maybe sixty, but it’s hard to tell. Holland would make him out to be a biker at first glance. Deeply tanned, with sharp, dark eyes, a large, nicotine-stained moustache, he keeps his long, gray hair in

a braided ponytail running half-way down his back. He wears a sleeveless, white T-shirt and black leather vest showing off the tattoos that cover his entire upper body.

‘And Cerveza,’ says one of the girls waving a bottle in the air. Everyone has a beer.

Holland looks at the table littered with empty shot glasses, the bowls of salt and lime slices.

‘I don't know much about tequila,’ he says. ‘All I know is that it gets you high.’

‘You don't need to know much, my friend,’ Hazzard says. ‘You have us.’

Holland tells Hazzard he can only stay for an hour. He has kids at home, a sitter, and has to be at work in the morning. Hazzard laughs at this and calls Holland a pussy for having to pay a sitter to look after his children. Hazzard's wife is at home with his two kids, which is as it should be. He will see her later, he says.

‘We have a sitter,’ Remy says, looking at Gus.

‘Yeah, your sister.’

‘My sister is a good sitter. You like my sister.’

## Chapter Seven

### Samantha

### April

# 2014

SAMANTHA DRIVES UP to Boulder in the late afternoon traffic. Denver has grown. Everything has grown. Rush hour on Highway 36 is packed, bumper to bumper. She remembers when she was an undergraduate, not so long ago, the road took you through open farmland. When you drove from Denver to Boulder, it really felt like you were going somewhere, like you actually took a trip. Now it's just development after development—ugly, monochromatic, city sprawl following you everywhere.

Sam is on her way to the University of Colorado for a class called *God and Politics*. The professor is Rachel Hargrove, a highly respected, feminist author of several books on contemporary culture and social justice. Sam loves the course with its lectures on such varied topics as matricide, climate change, torture, and sado-masochism—exactly the kind of stuff she can really sink her teeth into. Samantha is never happier than when she is sitting in a classroom with a crowd of like-minded graduate students listening to a brilliant lecture. It is a rejuvenating tonic for her which she needs every day more and more.

In many ways, Samantha is living the life she had always imagined for herself. Ever since freshman year in college she has wanted to be an art teacher. Now that's what she does, teaching art to elementary school children in the Denver Public Schools. During the school year, she maintains a challenging daily routine. Her alarm goes off at five, time enough for her to run through her yoga routine and put something sensible in her stomach before showering, dressing for work, and making it out the door by six-thirty. She always likes to get to school a half-hour early to set up her classroom for the day. It works out for her because Holland doesn't have to be at work until nine, so he takes care of getting the boys up and off to school.

Secure teaching positions like Samantha's are hard to come by. Four-year graduates with humanities degrees in Fine Art and English are a dime a dozen. She had been smart navigating through college. With double minors in Education and Public Policy from the University of Kansas, Samantha has a leg up on the job market. The security she enjoys belonging to the teachers union, combined with Holland's excellent position at St. Anne's, has provided them with the opportunity to raise a family. Samantha knows she should feel lucky about the way her life has turned out.

And yet, Samantha is restless. She recognizes her familiar discontent. Nothing new. It has been an on-again, off-again companion her entire life. Even as a young girl, growing up in a small city in Nebraska, in a stable home with two loving parents, Sam struggled against the confines of normalcy.

Puberty hit Samantha like a wrecking ball. Her dysphoria exploded overnight. With the suddenly sharpened insight of a young adult, she saw the world with fresh eyes and crystal-clear vision. Adults were deeply flawed, teachers slow and stupid. Disappointment haunted her everywhere she went. Boys were an ignorant joke. High school was a waste.

Samantha is nothing if not resourceful. It didn't take long for Sam to make peace with her escalated hostility. She soon decided that this new-found level of disdain was a sharp tool. There were definite practical advantages in keeping people at arm's length. She forged a distinct, recognizable identity, presenting it to the world in an aggressive, goth look with outrageous fashion accessories. There was power in this new identity. She knew the unadorned truth of being a young woman in an unequal, patriarchal system. Before she got half way through high school, she had embraced her anger and alienation as an asset, a motivator, an intimate friend.

At Thomas Jefferson High in Kearney, Nebraska, Samantha had been bored and irritable. She needed an outlet. Her junior year she single-handedly took over the school newspaper, *The T.J. Good Times*, and started printing editorials about the sorry state of the nation. She railed against racism, sexism, elitism, and inequality of any kind. She read voraciously, everything she could find in print and on the internet and wrote articles about climate change and environmental injustice. She drew political cartoons. She recruited other students to write candid stories about high school social life. The paper picked up in popularity, and within half a year, she tripled the print run.

The young principal of T.J. High at the time was Martin Balastro, a left-leaning educator from Lincoln who prided himself on being awake to the vast socio-political challenges of turn of the century America. It was no secret that Mr. Balastro looked approvingly on the efforts of this energetic, entrepreneurial, young student exercising her First Amendment rights. It didn't hurt that Samantha had become very attractive in a dangerous sort of way.

As the T.J. Times circulation grew, and more copies were left lying around, parents started noticing the large print headlines the likes of *Tribal Lands Trampled in Nebraska Pipeline Debacle* and *City Council Fiddles While Climate Burns*. It was most likely one of Sam's illustrations in the paper that finally crossed the line. Her drawing depicted a kingly figure in royal finery urinating on a very recognizable rendition of the Mona Lisa. As two women look on, one says to the other, *That takes misogyny to a whole new level!* This was Samantha's fatal error. She committed an unspeakable sin in the eyes of the local patriarchy. It caused a scandal.

Pressure built. In January of Sam's senior year, Principal Balastro lost an unprecedented no-confidence vote by the Thomas Jefferson High School faculty. Balastro was removed by the District and the T.J. Good Times was shut down indefinitely. By that time, Sam could care less about what happened. She had long since moved on.

That is her pattern, moving on. It's in her nature. She knows this about herself. It is something that she and Holland shared together at first, an irritated impatience with the way things are, a strong desire to strike out beyond the mediocrity they saw all around them and an inner belief that the laziness of others is holding them back.

*What has happened to that girl?*



Sam's class usually runs to eight but tonight Professor Hargrove has been delayed coming in from the airport and the lecture went long, so it is a quarter to nine by the time Sam gets to Nance's house on Maple Street.

Nance opens the door with a flourish and gives Sam a warm kiss on the lips.

In the kitchen, Nance pours the wine. 'How was class? Brilliant as usual?'

'Yes. Delicious, as usual,' Sam says, raising her glass. Nance moves around, absentmindedly neatening, picking things up, putting things away. Sam settles onto one of those retro chrome and red vinyl stools that used to be found in diners and soda shops.

'What did she talk about tonight?'

'Oh, my God. She was kind of all over the map. She hit on a lot of material. It was intense. Most of it was related to femicide.'

'I don't know that word.'

'Men killing women out of just plain hatred. From burning witches to infanticide to honor killings, bride burnings, dowry death...that sort of thing. You get the picture.'

'Oh, that old stuff.'

'She spent the whole last hour on pornography—prostitution, trafficking, pedifilia, snuff films.'

Nance comes to rest on the far side of the kitchen island by the sink, leaning forward on her elbows, giving Sam her full attention.

'Oh, Christ, Sam, I thought this class was about God.'

'It is. Hargrove has a strong feminist slant. It's called God and Politics, but the politics part is all about social and cultural inequality and how the world's religions use God to justify violence toward different outsider groups, which usually means the patriarchy versus the rest of us,' Sam explains.

'Well, I might enjoy the porn part. I like porn,' Nance grins.

'Not this porn you don't.'

'You mean the snuff stuff?'

'Yeah. It's really horrific.'

'Did you actually watch some?'

'No. Well, yes. A bit. Just the beginning of one, to get the idea. It's really unwatchable. How there are people in the world, 99.999% men, who get off on this shit is beyond me. The thing is, it's not just limited to one or even a few cultures. The snuff stuff is universal. You can find evidence of it everywhere. These films are distributed globally.'

'I don't know, babe.' Nance stands and starts fussing around again. 'I just don't want to think about that stuff. I don't want to upload any of that imagery into my frontal cortex. Anyway, we're talking about sociopathic killers, right?'

'Yeah, the people who make them, maybe. But not necessarily the people who watch them.'

'How is this about God and politics? What about the porn part? Get back to that.' Nance laughs, sipping wine.

'That's ugly too, Nance. I mean, it's such a slippery slope with porn, right?'

'Everybody looks at porn at some point,' Nance says. 'It's everywhere. It's hard to get your head around it. Even sort of normal stuff that is not porn starts to look like porn, you know? Some people love porn, makes their world go round. A lot of it is just fine.'

'Well, in my experience, there isn't a lot of what I would call egalitarian porn. Most porn relies on some kind of power imbalance. When you get into religion, throughout history, trying to impose social-sexual behavior in the name of some god's law, you are going to see an underground backlash. It's an inverse action. The more repression, the more the demand for a release of some kind.'

'You can't keep a good libido down.'

'I'm really not against porn, some porn, anyway, for responsible adult usage, but that's just not how it plays out in the world. I have two boys, right? They've been looking at all this fucking porn ever since the older one learned how to move around the internet. How are they going to learn about actual human relationships and sexuality?'

'Don't ask me, babe. One of the many, many reasons I'm single. And speaking of single, you're coming with me to a little party tonight.'

'Huh? No, I have to get back. Holland's out, I have a sitter, I have work in the morning. It's Thursday.'



'No, no. You're coming with me to this one. I need a wing girl. It's already started, more of a casual cocktail soiree. I won't keep you out too late. I just need to connect with this guy who'll be there. You're young and strong. You'll be fine for tomorrow.'

'It's already nine-thirty.'

You'll be fine. Push comes to shove you can stay here and drive in early. Come on, it'll do you a lot of good. Like the old days. You need this.'

'I can't. I'm not dressed.'

'Sure you can. I have plenty of stuff in my closet that will fit you. Come on!' Nance leads the way. 'Let's go try on some clothes.'

Nance believes that whenever she goes to a party she should aim her outfit either a little high or a little low, a little underdressed or a little overdressed, whatever the occasion. Tonight Nance is on the prowl. She wants an upgrade, a notch or two above what she knows people will be wearing for an evening Boulder party.

'This will be fun.' Nance rifles through the hangers in the back of her closet. 'Let's look for something for you first and then I'll find something I can wear to go with.'

Sam is naturally thin, with ash blonde hair and eyes the color of aquamarine. She has the muscular back and slim hips of a swimmer. Nance pulls out a light-colored paisley dress in turquoise and teal on white.

'Here,' Nance says, holding up the dress in front of Sam. 'Let's see what this looks like.'

'Cool. I like the pattern,' Sam says. 'Very fun. Almost summer-y.'

'I never wear it. I bought it in San Diego two years ago thinking it would be perfect for a cocktail party on a boat that I ended up not going to. Try it on. I think I have a belt that will sex it up a bit.'

Nance dives back into her closet and emerges with a four-inch wide white, vinyl belt with a white buckle.

Sam checks herself in the full-length mirror. 'This is good.' She turns to the side and looks at her feet. 'Wait a second. I think I have just the thing in my car for this. Hold on.'

Samantha runs out to the driveway and returns holding a pair of white, patent leather, three inch heels.

'I keep a few extra pairs in a bag just in case. These are perfect,' she says, slipping them on.

Nance smiles in agreement. 'Nice. Now for me.'

Nance is an American blonde, sharp, blue-eyed and fresh, tall and lean with the kind of broad shoulders designers love to hang clothes on. Of the two, Nance has a more muscular body owing in large part to her love of outdoor activities, hiking, biking everywhere she goes in Colorado, and tennis. When

it comes to what colors to wear, Nance favors darker blues and greens, sometimes black in the evening, and never yellow, orange, or anything close to purple.

Nance goes to her dresser and pulls out a black leather skirt with an oversized zipper in the back. She tries a couple of different tops, finally settling on a silk blouse with large navy blue polka dots on white.

'I like it,' says Sam. 'We look like good and evil.'

'Right,' says Nance. 'Let's get going.'

On the way, Nance fills Sam in.

'This is actually kind of a late birthday party, is my understanding. Most of the people that will be here tonight are connected to Naropa in some way. There'll be a lot of drinking. The birthday boy is a guy named Roger who I like. He's a little young, maybe. Not exactly age-appropriate.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-eight.'

'Yeah, that's a little young, but still within the margin of error,' Sam laughs. 'We don't have any presents.'

'I'm thinking maybe I'll give him me,' Nance says. 'What do you think about that idea?'

'I don't know. I'll have to look at him first.'

When they get to the party, Nance makes her entrance and Sam follows, taking her usual position alongside. Nance has been in Boulder for years and knows everyone there. Sam has been married and living the life of a mother, wife and graduate student. She knows no one. As they move through the crowd, Nance stops every few feet to say hello to someone new and chat a bit. Samantha stands quietly by her side doing her best to find an interest in the conversation. They come upon a woman named Harriet who is also studying religion and politics at CU. Sam finally has someone to talk to. Nance leaves the two of them trading notes and continues on her way in search of Roger.

After a while with Harriet, Sam moves off to find the alcohol. She locates a table with an assortment of sake bottles set out in a long trough of heated water—the drink of choice for the Naropa set. There are markers so everyone can tag their own cup for further use. What the hell. Sam knocks back two shots. She is pouring a third when Nance appears at her side.

'Watch the sake, sweetheart. It'll sneak up on you.'

'I hope so. I could use a little distraction,' says Sam. 'Did you find Roger?'

'Yes.'

'And how did you find him?'

'Married.'

'Married? I thought you said he was twenty-eight?'

'I know. He is. Way too young to get tied up. Such a waste.'

They turn to face the party as they talk.

'Did you meet the wife?'

'Yeah. That's the thing. The fucker, he's a big old flirt. He has me going, right? For a good fifteen minutes. We're talking up a storm about summers on the beach and water sports and I'm thinking maybe an invitation of some kind is in the works, you know, long term, short term, I don't care, when this little bitch comes sauntering over, puts her arm around him, and introduces herself as Kit, Roger's new wife.'

'Ohhh. Sorry kid. I guess he hasn't gotten the memo.'

'Right.'

'So what's next?' asks Sam.

'Well, I'm looking at these two over there.'

Nance nods in the direction of two boys standing together on the other corner of the room. When Sam turns to check them out they take notice and look back, unabashed. They are both beautiful looking young men.

'What?' says Sam, with a light laugh. 'They look seventeen.'

'So? I'm not looking for a long-term committed relationship. Are you?'

'You sure they're legal? This could be their parents house and they're just up from the basement video games to sneak some booze.'

'Honestly, I don't care. Let's talk to them.' Nance smiles at the boys and sashays across the room. Sam follows.

'Hi guys,' says Nance, pulling up in front of the taller of the two. 'I'm Nance and this is my friend, Sam. Who are you?'

'I'm Nick,' says the first boy.

'I'm Arlo,' says the second.

'Alright! Nick and Arlo. And can I ask you both something? Sam and I have a little bet going. How old are you guys?'

The boys are enjoying this encounter. They look at each other and smile, knowingly.

'Nineteen,' Nick says.

'Nineteen. So why aren't you two off at college someplace?' Nance asks.

'I'm taking a gap year,' says Arlo.

'And I'm at Colorado College in the Springs,' says Nick.

The boys are cocky, self-confident. Prep schools and money. Definitely money.

Nance chats up the boys about college—what courses they are taking, do they live in a dorm, did they grow up in Boulder? They did. Samantha excuses herself to find the restroom. She is feeling a little bit dizzy from the effects of the sake and wants to take a break, sit down, and maybe get some cold water on her face.

After a few moments of peace in the loo, Sam pinches her cheeks, reapplies her lipstick, and opens the door to leave. Nick stands in the doorway, startling her.

'Hi, Sam,' he says, lightly. 'Fancy meeting you here.' Nick is calm. He wears an expression of extreme confidence. He looks Samantha up and down with dark, hungry eyes.

'Oh. Hi Nick!...um...let me just get out of your way.'

'No need,' says Nick. 'I'd love to join you.' He places his hands on each of Sam's shoulders and moves her backwards into the bathroom. Before she knows it, Nick has shut and locked the door. He reaches down, arms crossed, and pulls off his shirt in one easy motion.

'I think you have the wrong idea, Nick,' says Sam.

'I don't think so,' as he presses his chest up against hers. 'I saw how you were looking at me. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone.' Nick reaches around Samantha and palms her ass.

That's enough for Sam. With a quick jerk she lifts her knee and catches Nick hard right between the legs. He buckles forward and collapses sideways to the floor, wedged between the toilet and the wall.

'Sorry, Nicky,' Sam says, stepping over him. Maybe another time. You should work on your approach.'

Samantha finds Nance still talking with Arlo and pulls her aside.

'Oh, shit,' says Nance, disappointed. 'I was just getting going here.'

Nance gives Arlo a peck on the cheek and tells him she hopes to see him around. The women saunter off.

'I'm calling the sitter and turning off the phone,' says Samantha sliding into the car. 'I'll crash here tonight and leave early. Let's find something on Netflix.'

Chapter Eight  
Yellow Corvette  
April  
2014

WHEN HOLLAND GOES over the events of that night at Fort Greene in his mind, he has to admit

that he should have known what would happen. There is no way he was going to join up with a group of wall writers at a hipster bar downtown and not end up drinking something. At the time, it seemed completely natural. Finishing off three healthy shots of Patron and two Coronas in the course of an hour and fifteen minutes with Hazzard and company should not have been much of a surprise. That's how Holland is built. If some is good, more is better. Once he gets started, he drinks like a drain. So, it is no surprise that when Holland finally steps out of Fort Greene into the chilly night air, he realizes he doesn't know where he parked his car.

*Which car window was I looking out of when I saw the others walking in?*

It was the passenger side, he remembers. That tells him that he was driving away from the highway. His car is probably on a side street to his right. How many blocks down, he's not sure. After several wrong turns, Holland eventually finds his car but can't find his keys. They're not in his trouser pocket.

*Fuck!*

In a sudden flash of panic, he frantically pats himself down until he locates them in the left-hand side pocket of his sports jacket—a rush of relief, and just in time. The rain returns, hard and cold. Holland fumbles with the door, finds the ignition and then, in a moment of drunken sense, he stops himself to get his bearings and calm himself down. Careful. He sure as hell doesn't want a D.U.I. Chill out.

Once he's out on the road, driving fast up Seventeenth Avenue, all caution is tossed to the wind. Holland comes up on a yellow Chevy Corvette, Classic model, pristine, glistening wet in the rain. The vanity plate that reads '2HOT4U'. Holland starts talking to himself.

*What is the fucking deal with fucking vanity plates? Seriously...seriously? Here's a question. How vain do you have to be to want a vanity plate? Jesus Christ, who are these people? What is their deal? Are they really so insecure that they need to use their car to remind them how unique and clever and special they are?*

At the next light, Holland pulls up beside the Chevy and looks over at the driver. She is not young, maybe fifty-ish, a heavysset woman from the looks of it, with an unhealthy pink complexion and a bad, orange dye-job. She seems to be looking at her phone.

It's a long light. The woman looks up, looks around, and sees Holland staring at her with an arrogant smirk on his face.

'What?' she mouths, with an unmistakable sarcasm.

Holland sits there, grinning.

'WHAT?' she mouths again, holding up her palms.

*'Are you really too hot for me?'* Holland asks out loud, pointing to himself, exaggerating his expression, hoping she can read his lips.

Her jaw drops in angry disbelief. She lowers her window.

*'What's your fucking problem, asshole?'* she shouts over the pouring rain.

*'Oh, right, I'm the asshole.'* Holland points to himself again, over-enunciating like a monkey. He points at her. *'You're the idiot, with the stupid vanity plate, but I'm the asshole here. Right.'*

*'What did you say to me?'* she points at her ear. *'I can't hear you.'* she says louder, challenging him. She is starting to get wet.

*Oh, fuck it.*

He presses the button and opens up his passenger window wide.

*'I said, are you really TOO HOT FOR ME?'*

*'What the fuck?'*

*'Your plate. Your vanity plate.'* Holland is yelling out the window, jabbing at the rear of her car. *'It says, '2 HOT 4 U'. I'm just asking, are you really...do you honestly think you are 'TOO HOT FOR ME?'* Holland makes air-quotes.

The woman's expression goes cold with silent fury. Holland grins like a clown. The light changes. Neither car moves. Somebody behind them honks once, then twice, longer. As Holland looks on, a smirking fool, without losing eye contact the woman carefully reaches down between her legs and holds up a handgun.

*SHIT!*

Holland hits the gas. His car shoots out across the intersection. *BANG!* His front left tire car slams into a pothole hidden by moving water at the next corner. The steering wheel twists out of his hands, the car bounces up, swerves onto the curb, smashes through two large traffic cones, and slams sideways into a light post with a horrible crunch. The engine stops dead.

*RUN!*

Holland can't get out! His door is jammed against the post! Terrified, he turns to his right just in time to see the woman in the yellow Corvette roll slowly by, giving him the finger with both hands.

*'FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE!'* she yells through the rain. *'FUCK YOU!'*

Holland watches the Corvette pull slowly away.

*Oh Christ!* She's gone! Holland has to get away as fast as he can. If the cops come he will fail the breathalyzer test and go to jail.

He turns around and peers through the rear window. No one is stopping, yet. Other cars slowly nose around him. Holland tries the ignition. The car starts. Thank God. He waits until the light changes again, puts the car in reverse, backs out into the street, and takes off.

Fifteen minutes later, Holland pulls up in front of his house stone cold sober. He stops the car and sits staring straight ahead, waiting for his hands to stop shaking. He'd bought a pack of cigarettes at the bar but he must have left them there. His door still won't open so he climbs over the console and gets out on the passenger side, then walks around the front of the car to inspect the damage. The left headlight is smashed and hanging by wires. There is a deep five-foot scrape from the fender to the door panel.

*What the fuck am I going to tell Samantha?*

Holland looks up and down the street—her car isn't there. Good. She isn't home yet. Hopefully, the boys are asleep. Inside the house, Holland pays the babysitter and does his best to ignore her anxious questions. She tells him that Sam called earlier to say she was crashing in Boulder for the night and will be home early. Holland walks her the four blocks to her house without either of them saying a word.

Back home again, Holland takes a good long look at himself in the bathroom mirror. He has a big black and blue lump on his forehead where his head hit the door and the beginnings of a really nice shiner.

Four Advil and two tumblers of water. Holland knows he can call in sick to work, tell them he had an accident, but he is still going to have to get the boys up and out to school. He worries about what they will say.

*Where the fuck is Sam, anyway?*



Chapter Nine  
How Was Your Night?  
April  
2014

SAMANTHA LEAVES BOULDER at 5 AM the next morning, groggy, with a queasy stomach and a splitting headache that the coffee she's been slamming can't touch. With luck she will make it home and in the door before the boys come downstairs for breakfast. Sam rehearses a speech in her mind about how there is nothing wrong with Mom choosing to stay the night at a friend's house instead of driving home tired and late. Merging into the commuter traffic on Highway 36, she flashes back to the night before.

*What the hell was that all about? Fucking Nance. Who were those boys? They were just boys!*

No time for a shower and now she feels dirty. And pissed off. The gritty reality of a good hangover can bring clarity—pretense takes too much energy. Samantha feels her irritable discontent swell in her gut with no place to go. She is sitting on a powder keg. She knows the feeling. The question is, Why? Where is this coming from? Her family? Her life? She is tailgating.

*Back it up. Take a deep breath.*

What about Holland? Does she love her husband? Did she ever? Of course she does. She loves him. She loves him as a well-worn companion, as the reasonably responsible father of her children, even as the irascible, anti-social, frustrated writer who struggles with his demons of doubt and inadequacy. She is just not in love with him anymore. That is the truth. She loves her husband, she is just not sure she likes him very much. It isn't really his fault. He has played his role. He has become the person he has become. Holland is exactly the man she married, plus fifteen years or so. Why should she be unhappy? Things are good, aren't they?

*Why this constant craving?*

Her mind is dull, tired of thinking, of planning how to act and sound when she tells Holland where she was and why she didn't come home. Does she even care if she is convincing? Maybe he won't ask. He often doesn't.

Back in Denver, Sam slows to take the turn off of Twenty-third and heads up Hudson the last two blocks to the house. Technically, the speed limit in the neighborhood is twenty, although usually people drive half that speed. Most of the side streets are narrow, with cars parked all the way up and down both sides. As she nears their house, driving along on automatic, Sam is startled when a man straddling his bike by the side of the road suddenly raises his arm.

'HEY! SLOW DOWN!' he shouts angrily.

Unconsciously, Sam waves and smiles as she goes by.

Samantha parks down the street and grabs her Starbucks and her bag. Just make it into the house and wing it from there. It will all play out fine. As she gets out of the car, the bicycle man is coming up fast, calling her out.

*'What the hell was that, lady? You were going like 40!'*

Sam has too much on her mind to be pulled into an argument on the street in front of her house at six o'clock in the morning.

'I don't think I was going *that* fast,' she says, balancing her coffee cup. She tries to manage a smile.

'You were *definitely!* Come on! There are all kinds of kids living on this street!' he yells. He is out of control.

Sam holds her ground. It might have been the hangover talking.

'I know,' she says flatly. 'I am raising two of them.' She smiles and takes a step towards him. She looks him in the eye. 'Please don't get up in my face,' she says firmly.

The man is shaking with rage, turning red. It's like staring down a rabid dog. For an instant she thinks he might hit her.

She is not backing down. He doesn't know what to do. With a growl, he slaps Sam's coffee out of her hand and sends the cup skittering across the road.

'Really?' Sam says, shaking her head.

'Yes, *really*. Fucking asshole,' he sputters, as he turns and bikes away.

Sam stands in the street for a moment. What was all about? Now there is a man who lives down the street who hates her. Can she live with that?

While Samantha is dealing with the irate cyclist, Holland is dealing with the morning routine.

'Let's go, guys! Dressed and downstairs in five!' Holland yells up the stairs on his way down to the basement.

As Holland is rummaging through the dryer looking for a pair of socks for Tank that don't have any holes in the toes, Samantha quietly comes in the front door. She is so discombobulated that she walked right by Holland's car on the street without seeing anything out of the ordinary. She heads into the kitchen, pours herself a cup of coffee and sits down at her laptop to look at her mail and check out the morning news. Holland heads upstairs with two pairs of socks and a couple of clean T-shirts. He has done a poor job of covering up his injuries with some flesh-colored pancake makeup he found in one of Sam's drawers in the bathroom. At the top of the stairs he runs into the boys, wide-eyed and staring.

'Dad, what happened?' Henry sounds frightened and angry at the same time.

'Dad! What's that stuff on your face?' Tank asks.

'Nothing to worry about. I had a little fender bender last night. No big deal.'

'A *car accident?*' Tank asks.

'Why weren't you looking where you were going?' Henry asks.

'Because I'm just not as smart as you are, Henry.' Holland snaps. 'It was the other guy's fault. I'll be fine.'

'You look terrible,' Tank says.

'It's just a black eye, Tank. It happens. There are a lot of blood vessels in the face so it looks much worse than it is.' Holland is hoping that is all he is going to have to say. 'Get dressed you two and come downstairs to eat.'

Samantha looks up when Holland comes into the kitchen.

'Jesus, Holland, what happened to you?'

'Oh! When did you get in?'

'I've been here for a while. What about your face?'

'A little accident. Didn't you notice the car?'

'No! Why? What happened? Where's the car? Is it here?'

Holland's head throbs.

*Really irritating that Sam is more concerned about the car than about him.*

'Yeah, you walked right by it.'

Holland does his best to play it down, wishing the whole mess would just go away. 'It'll be fine. It runs, but the driver side door is damaged and one of the headlights is gone.'

'Oh, fuck, Holland,' says Sam, getting up. 'How did it happen? Let me see.' She marches outside to take a look for herself. The boys have been listening in from the foot of the stairs and follow her out. Great. Holland decides to stay put. He refills his coffee cup.

'Jeez, Dad, that's not just a little fender bender,' says Tank, coming back into the house. 'That's a full-on smash.'

'No, it's not. It looks worse than it is. Newer cars are made to give on the slightest impact, you know that.'

The boys say nothing more as Samantha comes into the kitchen.

'Jesus, Holland, what happened?'

'Can we...can we talk about this after everybody gets off to school?'

'That's it? That's all you're going to tell us?' says Henry.

Holland sighs. 'There was that huge rainstorm last night, remember? Basically, I got run off the road. This guy came over into my lane and I had to swerve to avoid hitting him and hit a pothole instead. The car jumped the curb and grazed a lamp post. That's it.'

'And?'

'And, the guy took off and I was left in the pouring rain in the middle of an intersection with a very bad headache. Look, this is what insurance is for. We'll get it fixed. Can we please move on?'

'The other guy took off? Holland, did you file an accident report with the police?' Sam asks insistently.

'Yes, I called them,' Holland lies. 'It was a deluge. I have twenty-four hours, they told me.'

'And the insurance?'

'I'll call them this morning...Look, I'll take care of it. Let's just get on with our day, OK?'

'Right.' Samantha turns her attention to Tank and Henry.

'Let's you all be getting off to school, all right?'

The boys kiss Samantha goodbye and head out the back door to get their bikes for school. 'Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad,' Tank says.

The boys are gone and Holland and Samantha circle each other in the kitchen.

'So,' Holland finally says. 'How was *your* night?'

# Chapter Ten

Alice

May

2014

ALICE DICKERSON LIGHTS a cigarette and swears out loud, furious with herself.

'Shit! Fuck me! God damn it, Sylvester, I know better than that! I fucked it up, didn't I?'

She exhales blue smoke through her nose and slams down the palette knife she has been using to scrap out paint. Sylvester lounges on the back of the sofa, gazing lazily out the window at a starling perched on an empty branch. Alice's two chocolate Labs, Bosco and Toby, snooze together in the sunlight by the French doors.

Alice wears a paint-smearred smock over a worn, black Grand Funk Railroad T-shirt and cut-offs. She is small, about five foot six, and weighs no more than a hundred and twenty pounds, dripping wet. She has her shoulder length, strawberry-blond hair tied in a rough ponytail, but as usual, the front bits won't stay put. Stray strands frame her face. Once she starts painting, she can't retie her hair unless she takes off her gloves, and once she starts painting, a little loose hair is the least of her concerns.

Alice has been working on this one picture for most of the afternoon. She has been able to push aside the vision of Hank Matthiessen staring up at her stone-cold dead from the basement floor of the Pearson's Bight Post Office for some extended periods of time, but sooner or later Hank's baffled expression makes its way back into her mind's eye. That damnable Hank, looking back up at her, is burned into her brain. Even the discordant strains of Thelonius Monk that punctuate the studio can't block out the sound of Hank's head smacking against the brass newel post as his body drops down the stairwell.

Three times over the course of the afternoon, Alice had thought her painting was definitely finished, but twice she had overruled her better judgment and gone back into it, fussing around to fix some small imperfection, some transition that just wasn't working, some hesitant, self-conscious brushstroke. Now it is just past four, and she knows she has lost any semblance of the fresh and fluid painting it had once been hours earlier, and that pisses her off.

'I always think I can make it better, and then I fuck it up, don't I, Sylvester? Fuck me,' she says, looking over at the cat. 'Fuck ...me... runnin'!'

Monday. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since Alice watched in disbelief as Hank Matthiessen pitched down the stairs. Jim Cranston, the town coroner, later concluded that the cause of death had been blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. The fatal blow actually occurred after Hank slipped off the ladder and before his body hit the basement floor below. Deputy Oren Pike's theory postulated that Alice knocked Hank on the head and then threw his body down the stairwell. She staged

the entire thing, including the shattered skylight and the splintered ladder, according to Pike's hypothesis. Frank Silva, the Chief of Police, snuffed that out with one quick, stern glance at his junior officer.

Within minutes after Alice called 911, all of Pearson Bight's emergency vehicles arrived in full force. The two police cars, both fire engines—the pumper and the hook-and-ladder—and the emergency response ambulance parked haphazardly in a loose semi-circle around the Post Office front door.

An hour or so later, Alice found herself standing with Jim in the drizzling rain on the stone steps of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old building. They watched the paramedics wheel Hank, zippered into his white plastic cocoon, out the door and down the steps to the waiting ambulance. Jim had been three years behind Alice in school.

'You know the expression, 'Dead before he hit the ground?'' Jim asked. 'Well, he was gone as soon as he hit his head, like you told me. That's what killed him, I'm sure. It was over in a matter of seconds.'

'Thank you, Jim,' Alice nodded. She had been only half-listening. She could still see the look of utter bewilderment on Hank's face, his body splayed out below her on the concrete, the pool of blood spreading out around him.

*So much blood. How are we ever going to get rid of that?*

Alice scanned the small crowd of townsfolk milling about in front of the Post Office—the five cops, the half a dozen firemen, the group of gawkers alerted by the sirens. She knew everyone by name; they were all year-rounders.

Shelley Matthiessen stood motionless at the back end of the ambulance, arms crossed, with a look of a person who has just discovered a sink full of dirty pots and pans left by someone else for her to clean up. Alice had rung Shelley immediately after calling 911 and told her that Hank had fallen and was hurt and that she'd better come.

'Oh. Crap,' was all Shelley had said before hanging up.

Clippy Williams, Fire Chief, pulled Alice aside.

'We'll be sending in a cleanup crew as soon as the police are done, probably be here later tonight,' he told her. 'That's part of our job'.

'OK,' said Alice. 'Good.'

Frank asked if she could leave a set of keys with him.

'We can lock up. You won't have to stick around. We may need to get back in in the morning. I'm afraid you may not be able to get in until later, maybe noon abouts.'

'That's fine, Frank. I'm sure the town will forgive me.'



'For sure, Alice.'

She would have to do the work for Sunday and Monday by herself—sorting, filling the P.O. boxes and organizing the mail bundles and packages for Leon to deliver the next day. She thought about calling Maddie and asking her to come in early Tuesday morning, but decided against it. Maddie is barely twenty-three and Alice knows that Hank's death will be hard on her.

Alice turns and looks out over the houses across Church Street at the shallow draft boats swinging on their moorings in the inner harbor. She squints past the drawbridge at the center of town to where she can just catch a glimpse of the open water through the early summer leaves. Beyond the small indentation in the coast that gives Pearson's Bight its name stretches the larger bay that opens into the North Atlantic.

Foggy and cold for the end of May, just the kind of day Alice loves for jaunting around town in her slicker and sea boots. She revels in the warm, blacks and grays of the slick, wet rocks along the coast and the patterns of seaweed twining across the beach.

'I need a fresh cup of coffee, Sylvester. And a walk.'

Mostly, she needs to get away from the painting.

'I can't look at this mess anymore,' she tells the cat.

Alice drops her half-smoked cigarette into the blue Yuban can on the floor and heads downstairs followed by the dogs. That is the rule of the house. No smoking on the first floor. She only allows smoking in the studio and outside on the decks.

Washing her hands at the kitchen sink, Alice gazes out at the cattails and fresh, green marsh grass on the edge of Mill Pond right out the back door. The sun hangs like a fuzzy, orange tennis ball in the steely sky. Darkening and dank, the day is ending just as she likes it. Alice shakes her head and smiles. A dismal day after a dismal death. Totally appropriate.

She may as well get a head-start on the Tuesday mail. The best thing would be to head for the Post Office now and make her coffee there. Or, she might stop in at the Blue Lobster Bakery and Cafe first for a cappuccino to go. There are sure to be people there at five-thirty on a soggy Monday afternoon. Alice doesn't know whether she wants to talk to anyone or not. She will make up her mind when she gets closer. She isn't really up to fielding a lot of questions.

Bosco and Toby are ready to go. Alice grabs a warm sweater—a black, cable knit crew neck. At the door, she pulls on her bright, blue boots, her yellow slicker, and a dark-blue watch-cap. One last glance in the hallway mirror alerts her to a smudge of ochre paint on the side of her nose. As she rubs the paint off with her thumb, she catches herself looking at the thin, laugh lines at the corners of her pale, green eyes. Not bad looking for a gal of fifty-four. Her complexion is rosy and she still has the

beautiful, clear, white skin her mother prized so much when Alice was a little girl. She's managed to keep the weight off. She looks good.

'Good-bye, Sylvester!' Alice calls upstairs. 'I'll be back in a few hours. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!'

Alice lets the dogs go first and then shuts the shiny, black door behind her. She stands on the stoop for a moment, sizing up the afternoon. Alice follows Bosco and Toby across Church Street and takes the path between two houses down to the beach that circles the inner harbor. She heads off on her usual route, around to the drawbridge at the town center. On her way home, she can walk back again by the path that skirts the water on the other side.

As far as Alice is concerned, there are few things in life as fine as walking on a wet, sandy beach at any time of the year. Her red-soled boots make deep impressions in the crumbly, brown-sugar sand as she strides down past the high water line to the edge where the gentle waves foam the shore, washing in and out, leaving behind semi-circular sheets of glassy water. The tide is out. Kelly-green seaweed and inky-black periwinkles cover the glistening rocks and sides of the old stone wharves. Watchful shorebirds perch on worm-eaten pilings under the overcast sky.

The small Pearson's Bight inner harbor is roughly the shape of an egg. A person can walk the entire distance around it in half an hour. Alice's house is situated on the fat end of the egg—the south-western end—and at the other end, to the north-east, is the single, narrow channel that connects the inner harbor to the main anchorage of Pearson's Bight. Directly behind Alice's house, there is a marsh that leads into the brackish waters of Mill Pond.

The Township of Pearson's Bight occupies approximately six square miles, running just under three miles along the edge of the bay and, more or less, two miles in from the shore at any given point. The oldest parts of town are clustered in a circle around the inner harbor, with the stone and brick commercial buildings situated primarily to the north, while the southern side of the harbor's edge is occupied by some of the larger private homes.

The drawbridge on Main Street spans the channel entry that cuts through the center of the oldest part of town. On one end of this bridge the Post Office sits with its back to the outer harbor. The Pearson's Bight Post Office was originally built in the eighteen-forties, and it was never set up the way a modern post office would have been. There is no real kitchen or anything you might call a break room. A third of the main floor is taken up by the mailbox area where townspeople often gather to chat and exchange vital, local information. There are two worn, oak writing tables and a bulletin board, of course. A small counter opens to the back room crowded with wheeled bins full of boxes of all sorts and sizes and overflowing canvas bags propped up against each other in every available spot, all part and parcel of

the hustle and bustle of receiving, sorting, bundling, and delivering the mail. Hank used the cramped room at the very rear of the building for his office, just adjacent to a tiny bathroom, a utility sink, and the broom closet.

In 1906, during a flurry of civic improvement made possible by the steady influx of well-heeled seasonal residents, Pearson's Bight grew from a small fishing village into a popular summer destination for the mooring of pleasure yachts. Here, the well-to-do escaped the sweltering cities to grow their roses, play tennis and croquet, and cultivate the deep tans of the idle rich. The humble, careworn Post Office from before the Civil War just would not do. Money was easily found for an upgrade that would reflect the tastes of the recent arrivals. The brand-new, brass newel post, affixed to the bannister at the first floor landing, added a touch of grandeur to the old building, infinitely more appropriate to the refined sensibilities of the Pearson's Bight nouveau riche.

Before Alice climbs the salt-worn stairs that run up from the beach to the service road behind the bakery, she flicks her cigarette into the rose-hips. Maybe she should change her plan and slip into the Post Office through the back door. The last thing she wants is to listen to the local townsfolk mindlessly yammer on about Hank's shocking death and how much he will be missed and asking her ad nauseum if she is OK.

Alice is halfway up the stairs before she sees her nemesis, the Reverend Charles Fish, waiting patiently at the top under a massive black umbrella, smiling beneficently down at her. His two perfectly coiffed Standard Poodles, Cicero and Aquinas, sit nervously at his side. Pussy dogs for a pussy man.

*Shit*, Alice hisses under her breath. *Did he catch me tossing my butt into the bushes?*

Reverend Fish prefers to be known as Chuck, which is probably Alice's absolute, least favorite name in the English language. Reminds her of vomit. Plus, it rhymes fuck. And suck. Bosco and Toby don't like him much, either.

'So glad to run into you, Alice!' booms Chuck Fish, extending a dry, papery hand as she reaches the top of the stairs. He speaks in the deep, heartfelt tones of someone who cares deeply. His religiosity makes Alice's stomach clench. Cicero and Aquinas back themselves up deferentially, allowing Bosco and Toby to trot around and sniff their behinds.

'Yes. Hi, Chuck. Hi, Cicero. Hi, Aquinas.' Alice would much prefer to talk to the dogs.

'How *are* you doing, Alice?' Chuck intones in that concerned voice people use when someone has died. 'How are you holding up?'

'I'm fine, Chuck, thanks for asking.'

'Of course! I am so very sorry to hear about Hank. It must be a great shock to you, I'm sure.' Reverend Fish puts his hand on her shoulder and leans forward.

*Dear God, please don't try to hug me.*

His watery, blue eyes seek out her own from about a foot away. The flowery stench of too much lavender aftershave assaults her nostrils. He pauses meaningfully for Alice to respond.

'I'm really fine, Chuck, thank you.' Alice says brusquely. 'Just heading over to the P.O. to get a head start on tomorrow. I wasn't really able to get in to do much this morning.'

'Certainly. Understandable.'

Alice reaches down to scratch Bosco's head.

'And what do you hear from your son, Holland, and those wonderful grandchildren of yours?' Chuck cranes his neck, looking to open a conversation.

'They're just fine, thanks. In fact, the three of them are driving out for a few weeks. They should be getting in on Thursday.'

'Oh, how nice for you!...Well, and that means they can be here for Hank's service on Saturday.'

*Why in the world would they go to that?*

'Yes, I suppose it does.' There is another awkward pause. Chuck releases Alice's shoulder and straightens up.

'Well, I guess I'll let you go, Alice. Be sure to let me know if there is anything I can do to help you. You certainly know where to find me.'

*That I do.*

'Thank you, Chuck. I'll be sure to do that,' Alice says, mustering a smile. 'Be careful if you're going down to the beach. The steps are treacherous.'

Maybe she was spooked by Chuck Fish—now she wants to get off the street as quickly as she can. Molly Quinn's Blue Lobster Bakery and Cafe is perfectly situated directly across the street from the Post Office. Alice skirts behind the building and crosses the alley. She makes it to the Post Office back door without anyone seeing her and lets herself in.

First thing, coffee. Alice hangs up her coat by the back door and heads for the open stairs that lead to the small apartment on the second floor. Suddenly, the flashback of Hank's skull hitting that brass post ricochets in Alice's brain like heavy croquet mallets striking brightly colored wooden balls.

Chapter Eleven  
Stories  
2014

HOLLAND HAS A theory about road trips. His theory states that you should always head out after dark, preferably later in the evening, especially when going from west to east. Trying to get a leg up on the drive by leaving early in the morning is a mistake. Holland's reasoning is that if you plan for an early start you never get off on time. You always start late. Then you feel lazy. You are behind the eight ball, you have to hurry to catch up, which you can never do. It ruins the trip. This is particularly true when traveling with a wife and two kids, as Holland usually is.

By leaving in the dark you can drive for miles and miles through the cool night air with the windows down if you want. At dawn, just when you are most in need of a boost, the sun comes up and floods the world with hope. You have already traveled a long distance. You have accomplished something tangible. You're not lazy after all! You can push on for another hundred miles before pulling over into a nice, clean rest area and crashing on the grass for a few hours before finding a place to have a hearty, roadside breakfast.

The long drive from Denver to Pearson's Bight with two young boys in the car involves a lot of listening to books on tape. It's important to get the selection right. Henry and Tank can be harsh critics. The measure of successful material is how many miles it can burn. Terry Pratchett is good. The Harry Potter Books work well. Holland likes Narnia, and there are others—Bartimeus, Artemis Fowl, the Golden Compass.

Crossing into western Nebraska around three AM, Henry and Tank are curled up asleep in the back, and Holland has been listening to George Carlin since Sterling. Holland loves the really good comedians—Pryor, Chappell, Rivers, Izzard—urban poets with a sense of humor and purpose. How do they do it? It's not enough to be hilarious. The top performers have to be intelligent, topical, thought-provoking, emotionally and psychologically engaging, all of it. How do these top-flight standup comedians show up in front of a full house at Wembley Stadium and just talk, alone on the stage—funny, original, completely at ease—for over an hour without getting thrown out on their asses? A novelist works alone, no live audience, no immediate face-to-face feedback. Everything is done at a distance. They don't present what they do within any strict confines of time and space. Where's the high-wire risk in that? How can the life of a fiction writer stack up against what it means to be a stand-up, with the amount of work that goes into coming up with new material—writing it, honing it and polishing it, night after night, in front of audiences that may turn on you in an instant? It's in the writing but it's also in the telling. Standup comedians are the real artists, the real story tellers, Holland's true heroes.

At five A.M. Mountain Daylight Time the boys are still passed out with their earbuds in. It is seven on the East Coast, so Holland decides to see if Jasper is up for a chat. Jasper Sharpe is Holland's

oldest and closest friend, going back to the second grade, growing up together in Pearson's Bight. They greet one another on the phone in the usual way.

Jasper answers.

'Holland.'

'Jasper.'

'It's early. Where are you?'

'Coming up on Kearney, Nebraska.'

'Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. How's the drive been?'

'Fine. Clear roads so far except for one massive downpour outside Ogallala. Amazing light show to the north, but it only lasted fifteen minutes.'

'How are the boys doing?'

'Great. Mostly sleeping, so far.'

'How's Sam?'

'She's fine. She's not with us at the moment. She'll be flying in early next week. How's Khaki?'

These are obligatory questions. Jasper and Samantha never hit it off very well, and Holland doesn't really care how Khaki is, never has, and they both know it.

'When are you getting in?' Jasper asks.

'Either really late Thursday or sometime Friday. It depends on how many nights we stay in motels.'

'Let's plan dinner when Sam gets in. It'll be great to see you all. You should bring Alice.'

'You're on. Hey, random question.' Holland says. 'Do you remember me telling you the story about the time I got arrested for pulling that toilet down on my head and spent the night in jail?'

'Which time? There have been so many,' Jasper laughs.

'Only one time with a toilet, asshole. I'm talking about the time in the North End with that girl.'

'Vaguely. Why?' Jasper asks. 'Is this going to be a long conversation? Because I'll need more coffee.'

'I've been trying to remember exactly what happened that night. I thought I told you the story back then, at the time. Didn't I tell you the story?'

'Maybe,' Jasper laughs. 'You tell a lot of stories, Holland. What about a toilet?'

'Not the toilet so much. The tank. I pulled the tank, the big porcelain water tank on the wall above the toilet—you know, old toilets?—down on my head with the chain and knocked myself out cold. Is there a fancier name for that thing?'

'I think it's just called a tank.'

'Not something French? Or German? You'd think there would be a French word for it, or German maybe.

Jasper went to boarding school in Switzerland so he is good with languages.

'I'm not sure,' Jasper says.

'OK, tank. I pulled the tank down off the wall onto my head.'

'How'd you manage that, again?'

'I don't know. I was blackout drunk.'

'OK, speaking of blackout drunk, I was on my way to find the Advil. Can I call you back in a few?'

'Sure. Call me back.'

Holland drains the last of the coffee he brought in his Thermos from home. There will be a Starbucks in Kearney but he'll have to drive into town to find it. He wonders if it is worth taking the time. Otherwise, it will mean drinking Seven Eleven coffee which is always a letdown.

Twenty minutes later Jasper calls back and Holland picks up.

'Jasper.'

'Holland.'

'Got your Advil?'

'Got my Advil, got my coffee, I'm on the deck, and clearly you are bored. Where were we?'

'I told you I pulled the tank off the wall in a blackout drunk and knocked myself out cold.'

'Right. That was ridiculous. You should have sued.'

'How could I? I had no idea what happened. I *still* have no idea what actually happened. That's what I'm trying to figure out.'

'Doesn't matter. You had all the evidence you needed that it was their faulty toilet. You could have gotten rich off a drunken piss.'

Holland can just see Jasper grinning.

'I never thought of it that way,' Holland says.

Jasper isn't much help. All Jasper can tell him about that night is what Holland has already told him himself, a story filtered through Holland-brain. They say good-bye.

What Holland really wants to know about is how he ended up in a bathroom above an Italian restaurant with the daughter of the owner in the first place. The boys are still dozing. Holland decides to call Darci.

Darci and Holland met in their twenties one summer while working at a clam shack in Provincetown. Darci's real name is Dorothy. Holland immediately fell for Darci the moment he met her, but Darci is gay and Holland was blind. It quickly became something of an issue. Darci is kindhearted and



couldn't bear to break the news to him herself, so the other kids working at the restaurant that summer drew straws to decide who would be the one to tell him the truth. Michelle lost the draw. She had been very gentle about the whole thing. Holland was deeply disappointed but soon recovered. After that Darci and Holland became best friends and great drinking buddies.

It's still early on the east coast, but Darci picks up. After a minute or two of chit-chat, Holland tells her why he called.

'Remember the night you and I went out drinking and I put you in a cab and ended up in jail? I'm trying to get the story straight.'

'Um, yeah, sure. That was kind of a dick move, as I remember.'

'Right. I guess it was. Anyway, do you remember where we were going that night? What we had planned?'

'I think we were just bar hopping. You called me because your *other* girlfriend...'

'Sam.'

'Yeah, right, Sam.'

Darci knows exactly who Sam is.

'I think Sam was out of town and you wanted to go out drinking. My guess is we had a vague plan to hit some bars in the city and then head over later to Rosie's for the jazz. We were walking over to someplace—Dixon's maybe?—through Haymarket and you, out of the blue, just ditched me.'

'What did I say to you?'

'You didn't say anything. You flagged down a cab, opened the door as if you were being really classy by letting me in first, shut the door after I got in, handed the driver a fifty, and walked off. Made me feel kinda shitty, as I remember.'

Darci is laughing. Darci always sounds amused. She has a particular way of pronouncing words, rolling out sentences, that can be disarming and makes everything seem light and funny, even when talking about serious things like a miniature betrayal of friendship.

'I remember thinking, What the fuck?' Darci says. 'I bet you thought you were being funny. I was really hurt, actually.'

'Yeah. I guess it was a shitty thing to do.' Holland says. 'Kind of an ass-holian, I think, now.'

At the time he didn't think it was so shitty at all. He was drunk. He thought it was funny. No excuse, but there it is. Talking to her now, on the phone, Holland sees in his mind's eye the baffled expression on Darci's face through the taxi window. It hurts him to realize how he must have hurt her. In those days, Holland would have told himself that he was living out some romantic fantasy from an old

black and white movie, kind of a James Cagney move. Plus, he would have figured that since he paid for the cab, he was being gallant. They were close. They would laugh about it later on.

'I guess I never asked you, what was that all about, anyway?' Darci asks.

'Um, well, I was drunk, and I guess I wanted to go out and find some girl to party with and figured you would be in the way.'

Darci laughs. 'You're an idiot. We were friends. We *are* friends. You don't do that kind of thing to a friend. Anyway, we could have gone out looking for girls together. I'm a great wingman.'

'Yeah. Bad decision.'

'Listen, I'm getting ready for work, gotta scoot,' she says.

'Yeah, you're right. That was really shitty of me. I'm sorry about that.'

'Well, we survived. Didn't Cheryl bail you out?'

'Yeah, Cheryl.'

'Ask Cheryl, why don'cha?'

Before they say their goodbyes, Holland promises to call more often and to look her up next time he's in New York.

In the back of the car, the boys are restless. They need a bathroom and they need to eat. Nebraska is behind them, they have crossed into Iowa. Time to make a breakfast stop and fuel up. After that, they are back on the road for another two hours of driving before Holland decides he has had enough and needs a real break. They pull over just short of Des Moines and Holland stretches out for a long nap in the car while Henry and Tank sit in the grass playing Uno and listening on their iPods.

An hour later Holland is awake with a stiff neck and dripping wet. The heat and humidity are suffocating, so they get back on the road in the air conditioned car. The first full day's drive is hot, but uneventful. Holland pushes himself to get through Chicago and then past Gary, Indiana, before they finally stop for the night. Holland springs for a Best Western with a decent pool.

*I drove my car all through the night.*

*We are headed for old Pearson's Bight.*

*I was feeling alone.*

*Got some friends on the phone.*

*Have a story I want to get right.*

The next day Holland is determined to get through Indiana, on to Ohio, and as far into Pennsylvania as he can. He thinks about stopping in at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland but he

decides to save that for another trip. The boys are too young anyway. They wouldn't get it. Who is Jimi Hendrix to Henry? At Youngstown they stop at a little diner just off the highway that Holland and Sam discovered by accident years before. The place is a 1980's throwback that reminds him of his years cooking in small restaurants.

A trip to the men's room brings Holland back to thinking again about his night with the broken toilet. His conversations with Jasper and Darci were not very satisfactory. Leaving the boys in a booth with their banana splits, Holland steps outside to stretch his legs and call Cheryl.

Holland loves Cheryl. He also loves her partner, Jake. Cheryl is in the restaurant business. At one time or another, Sam and Darci and Holland all worked for Cheryl. Cheryl gave Holland a job when hardly anyone else would. Cheryl is surprised to hear from Holland out of the blue. She tells him she is sitting on the beach watching the terns skim across the surf. Holland asks her the same question he'd asked Jasper and Darci.

All Cheryl remembers is that Holland had called her at six in the morning and begged her to post his bail. She was the only person he knew who had access to any real money.

'What were the charges?' she asks.

'Drunk and Disorderly and Malicious Destruction of Private Property.'

'Right. I think it was a thousand dollars,' she says. 'It was a lot, then, but I got it back.'

'Did I tell you anything then about what happened?'

'What do you mean?'

'What happened. You know, how I ended up in jail.'

'Only that you were drunk and damaged a bathroom. Something about the toilet, I think. You were pretty embarrassed. Jake thought it was hilarious.'

This isn't going anywhere. Holland changes the subject.

'How is Jake?' he asks. 'How's the restaurant business?'

'Jake is Jake. We sold the restaurant. Retired.'

The first restaurant Cheryl had owned was a cheap-chic little place over at Inman Square with a bar and only seven tables. She called it The Blue Whale with her typical dry humor. Jake worked the bar. Later she upscaled to a fancier place on Beacon Hill, which she called Another Place. Holland had been washing dishes for over a year at the Whale when he started bugging Cheryl about letting him wait tables where he could make more money. The problem for Cheryl was that Holland was too good at what he did. Anybody in the restaurant business will tell you that a bad dishwasher can bring the whole operation to a grinding halt but a good dishwasher is pure gold.

Holland always showed up for work on time, never drunk or hungover. He was fast and thorough, he was happy to peel the onions when it was slow, and most importantly, he always put the clean pots and pans and utensils back in the same place exactly where they belonged. Holly, who ran the kitchen, could always find whatever she needed without having to search around.

After months of begging, Cheryl finally agreed to let Holland try out a night shift on the floor. It did not go well. Holland simply could not take orders of any kind from strangers. When the customers at his first table complained that the waiter had insulted them, Cheryl pulled Holland off the floor and tossed him back into the kitchen. That's when Holly took him under her wing.

Holly taught Holland how to make crepes and trim tenderloin, how to brown bones and make stock, how to roast duck in the winter and make cold watermelon soup in the summer. She showed him her own Scallops Tom Leaky recipe and how to marinate bluefish in lime juice and tabasco to make ceviche before finishing it off under the broiler. She taught him how to make a fool-proof hollandaise sauce, saute meats and deglaze the pan with booze, and much, much more.

Those were good times for Holland. Hearing Cheryl's voice on the phone makes him feel nostalgic. He misses Cheryl and Jake and the days they shared. Holland reminds her of his waiting tables debacle.

'You were such an arrogant prick,' she says.

'That's a bit harsh.'

Cheryl laughs.

'No, really, you were a prick!'

To Holland's disappointment, Cheryl is not in the mood to reminisce. There really isn't much more to talk about so they say their goodbyes.

Holland and the boys push on into Pennsylvania and spend the night at a Motel 6 in Danville. The next morning, Holland calls the Suffolk County Courthouse, but when he learns that he has to pay a fee to get a copy of his court record, he lets it go. The paperwork isn't going to tell him what he really wants to know.

Eventually it sinks in that Holland is going to have to call Samantha. He finds a few minutes of privacy after lunch.

'Do you remember the time I got arrested and went to jail for damaging that Italian restaurant in the North End?' he asks her.

'Sure. I remember. Although I wasn't there the night it happened.' Sam is distracted.

'No. You were out of town,' he says.

'Yeah, wasn't that your plan? I was out of town, so you thought, *Wow, what a great time to get stupid drunk.*' Sam sounds put-out.

'Something like that.'

Holland is sure he hears the sound of dishes being washed in the background.

'That was the same week you put your head through a windshield, as I remember.'

Holland had been heading home on Memorial Drive late from a night of heavy drinking with his friend Richard. He missed the last turn at Mass Ave and drove his lime-green Volkswagen Super Beetle up over the concrete divider, breaking the steering mechanism, ripping out most of the front of the underbody, and taking out the rear-view mirror with his forehead. There happened to be a phone booth nearby, but he couldn't find a towing service that was open. Running out of dimes, Holland was so drunk he called the police.

'I've had an accident,' Holland told the dispatcher. 'Just me. No one else.'

A half-hour later two good-old Boston cops showed up. They asked Holland three times if he wanted to go to a hospital, but he declined. Holland talked the cops into giving him a lift home. They could have arrested him but instead they drove him to his door and waited for him to get in.

Holland woke up the next morning with his face stuck to a bloody pillow. He was going to be late to work, so he called Edie to beg off but she told him to get his ass over to Mass General, which he did. There, an obliging young doctor packed his nostrils with some sort of medicinal cocaine and straightened his nose.

'Jesus! I should have thrown you out then and there,' Samantha says. Holland has the distinct feeling that she isn't joking. 'I would have saved myself a lot of heartache later on. How dumb was I?'

Holland winces. Unlike Darci, there is no humor in Sam's voice. She isn't looking for an answer, and he doesn't offer one.

'Right. Well, it's a bit more complex than that, I think.' Holland had forgotten about the windshield.

*Too bad. I liked that car.*

'No shit...Listen, Holland, I don't want to talk about this, it's too depressing. Is there anything else I can help you with? Otherwise, I have things to do.'

Holland hears the slam of a door and the sound of the dryer starting up.

'Nope. Just that. I'm trying to get clear on it.'

'Well, I guess I can't help you then. All I remember is I talked George into taking your case.'

'Yeah, right, George what's-his-name. He didn't do anything for me. He just sent me in with that other lawyer, the woman that worked with him, Marty, Mary, Marcy, or something like that. What was her name?'

'I have no idea. You can ask George, see if she still works with him.' Sam is getting impatient. 'I should have gone back to George,' she mutters to herself.

Holland had completely forgotten that his then future wife had been dating her lawyer friend before hooking up with him.

'I'm not calling fucking George,' Holland tells her.

'Goodbye, Holland.' Samantha says.

Holland wants to say good-bye, but she is already gone.

They had a beautiful life back then, Sam and Holland, almost living at the restaurant, all of them young. Artists, musicians, actors, working hard to make the business go. The only people over thirty were Cheryl and Jake.

Holland had loved his job then. He loved having a place to go where it was warm in the winter. He didn't mind the heat of the kitchen in the summer. He loved the freedom, the flexible schedule, working sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night, working weekends and holidays. He loved the prestige of being a line chef for an upscale restaurant in a tony part of town and being a part of the business, creating dishes and menus. He loved the booze and the cocaine and the waitresses. He loved being a cook. Holland loved Sam, too.

That was when Holland still thought Samantha would be his guardian angel and help him find his saving grace.



Just out of Hartford, Connecticut, Holland pulls into Dunkin' Donuts. Time for an extended break. They find a nearby park and stretch out on the grass. Once again, Holland cannot shake his obsession with getting to the bottom of the broken toilet story. Maybe it is because he is heading back East, where it all started, or maybe it is because, on some level, he is struggling to find some explanation about why his marriage seems so rocky, why he is feeling so disconnected to Sam. Lying in the shade of a large hawthorn tree, Holland keeps going over it, trying to reconstruct what happened.

The hours after leaving Darci in the cab are a blank. The next thing he remembers is opening his eyes to see the black toe of a policeman's boot six inches from his nose. He is soaking wet, on his stomach with his cheek flat against the tile floor. The iron taste of blood coats his tongue and his wrists hurt from being cuffed. How he got there he has no idea. He remembers the cop pulling him to his feet

and that's about it. He doesn't remember the ride to jail. He does remember sharing his cigarettes with a guy in his cell.

The next morning, early, they kicked him loose into the all-too-bright sunlight and Jake drove him home. He went straight to bed and woke up late with a splitting headache and another pillow stuck to his face. Two days after Holland's night in the Suffolk County jail, Samantha came back from her trip to her mother's and Holland had to explain himself. Sam immediately put him in touch with George, her lawyer friend.

George had a nice office downtown. The stodgy mahogany furniture and Early American lithographs of dogs and horses were beyond cliché. Heavy bookcases lined the walls with law books in Ivy League colored bindings—Harvard Red, Yale Blue, and Dartmouth Green. George stood and offered his hand when Holland was ushered into his office—clean-cut, good looking, younger than Holland expected, George wore an expensive, gray, pinstriped suit. He was one of those smart, effortlessly attractive people who Holland instinctively disliked. George grew up following the rules, doing all the right things, never once questioning his calling in life. He cruised through college, graduated Law School and then went out into the world and made something of himself. Holland sat uncomfortably on a hard-backed, black wooden chair with the Penn State seal embossed in gold and stared blankly at an eighteenth century aerial map of Boston while George explained the situation.

'There isn't really that much to it. You're being charged with Drunk and Disorderly—that's the lesser count, and Malicious Destruction of Private Property. That's a felony. More serious. But, it's your first offence. You were out on the town, had too much to drink, boys will be boys, with luck you'll pay a fine and get six months to a year probation. No jail time.'

George paused to study the report. 'Says here it was the twenty-six year old daughter of the restaurant owner, Gabriella, who found you on the floor of the bathroom. Do you remember her? Remember saying anything to her?'

'Not really. No.'

Is there *anything* you remember that might help us out? Anything at all?'

Holland shook his head. 'Nope.'

Everyone at the restaurant where Holland worked knew that he had gotten drunk and spent the night in jail. Now he heard from George that there may have been a girl involved. On the one hand, this is not something he wants Sam to hear. On the other hand, the truth was just too humiliating. He needs a cover story. So Holland quickly developed a parallel approach to telling the tale of how he got knocked cold by a toilet and ended up spending the night at the Suffolk County jail.

One version of the story had Holland innocently looking for the men's room in an Italian restaurant in the North End. Yes, he was drunk, and, yes, he may have pulled a bit too hard on the toilet chain, but beyond that, the episode might be embarrassing but it was still funny.

Then there is the other story Holland started telling himself. In *that* story, he may or may not have been upstairs in the company of the sexy daughter of the restaurant owner. What was he up to? He likes to leave that an open question. Let people think what they may. The truth is he could have just gone up the stairs for a piss in a men's room where she found him splayed out on the floor and someone noticed water coming down through the ceiling. Why should mere facts get in the way of a good story? Who is he to say which version of the tale is the real deal? Does it really matter if Holland tries to capitalize on a humiliating drunken episode to spin a randy tale about a casual sexual encounter? It could be true. These things happen.

It's like Eddie Izzard and the story of Noah and the Ark. If there are stories to tell beyond number, then there are ways beyond number to tell them. Why choose this version over that one? Why this way of telling over that? A great storyteller can never be burdened by facts alone. Memory is only as good as the last time remembered. Who can say what really happened?

When Holland showed up at George's office the morning of his trial, George surprised him with the news that there had been a last minute change of plan. He would be tied up all day, so he was turning the case over to his associate, Mary. George told Holland not to worry. Mary was a fine lawyer.

This did not sit well with Holland. In his typical misogyny, he assumed he was fucked.

*Jesus, here I am, a snot-nosed Scotch-Irish punk going into Suffolk County courthouse up against an Italian restaurant owner who thinks I was upstairs doing God-knows-what with his daughter, drunk on my ass, before I pull a porcelain toilet tank down on my head and do hundreds of dollars of damage to his business. And me with a woman lawyer—that can't be good—and I can't tell her anything that might help me because I don't remember jack-shit about any of it.*

Holland and Mary sat outside the courtroom on long oaken benches while she explained to him what was about to happen. Holland's mind was racing. He didn't track a word of what she was saying. When it was time, they went in, and Holland sat down while Mary went up to the front of the room to chat with the other parties' attorney and wait for the judge. The other lawyer was a woman, too.

*Great.*

Holland could barely sit still in his own skin. Across the center aisle sat a half dozen men in dark suits surrounding one attractive young woman who he didn't recognize. She turned around to look at him over her shoulder. He was sure they were all there to see about him.



The next thing Holland knew, the girl got up and made her way over to sit down next to him. Holland started to sweat. This must be the restaurant owner's daughter! What did she want? An apology? Some sort of explanation? Neither of them said a word. They just sat there, hands folded in their laps, staring straight ahead.

What was there to say? Holland could apologize, but for what? He didn't remember any of it. He just sat there sweating bullets, afraid to say anything at all that might make things worse. After what seemed like an eternity, the young woman quietly got up and walked back to her seat on the other side of the aisle with the men in black suits. Not a word had been spoken between them. Holland was sure something terrible was about to happen. He had never been so scared in his life.

The bailiff called, 'All Rise!' and in came the judge, a tall, pale woman with long, red hair. Now there were *three* women about to decide his fate. Then, a miracle happened. When the judge looked up from her papers at the two attorneys in front of her, she stared at Holland's lawyer and said, 'MARY! I haven't seen you since law school! How are you?'

Holland could not believe it. The judge with the thick Irish accent knew his lawyer! They went to school together! Release! The world cracked open and Holland floated away, free and easy.

In that sudden moment Holland became a believer.

*There is a God, and she drinks whiskey!*

When Holland tells each version of the story, that is the punchline. The truth is, the toilet story is just a sordid little tale that all happened long before Samantha and Holland were married, before Henry and Theodore were born and they all lived together as a family in the house on Hudson Street—before magical Christmases and homemade Halloween costumes, school plays, soccer games, and summers on the beach.

Holland thinks about calling Sam back, but he is sure she won't answer. Anyway, it is already well past one in Denver. So, he texts her.

'Did I ever tell you how scared I was?' he taps out.

*Is she up?*

After a few minutes, Sam replies. 'When?'

'Always,' he writes.

'Always?'

'Always.'

# Chapter Twelve

Hank

June

2014

JUNE IS GREEN and fresh and open for business. Holland, Henry, and Tank arrive at Alice's house in the early-afternoon and are off to the beach immediately. All year long, living in high and dry Denver, Holland craves that first cold plunge into the salty water of the North Atlantic. There is nothing like it after a two-thousand-and-more-mile drive across the country.

There is much catching up to do. After showers and laundry and dinner, the four of them get reacquainted over a game of Settlers of the Catan. Henry, playing white, takes Harbor Master and Longest Road plus an improbable extra three Victory Points to win. Holland is the goat of the game. After the boys turn in, Alice and Holland step out onto the back porch overlooking Mill Pond for a quiet moment and a smoke.

Holland begins the conversation. 'How is the painting going?' This is their standard opening gambit. The answer is always the same.

'It goes,' Alice replies. 'How's the writing?' she counters.

'It goes.' Holland is beat from the drive. 'Are you going to let me see any of the new work this visit?'

'Possibly. Let's see how well you behave.'

A pause while Alice takes a deep drag.

'Actually, I am more interested in showing them to Henry and Theodore. They tend to have a fresh eye. They're not as biased as you are,' she teases. 'By the way, I did read those two pieces you sent me, the one about Oz and the other one about that muralist. Hazzard, is it? Do you call him a muralist? They were both quite good, I thought. Interesting.'

Another pause.

'I love the color green,' Alice muses out of the blue. 'Always have. I think it's my favorite color. That and black.'

Holland already knows this about his mother.

There was never a time that Holland could remember growing up when Alice didn't have a private place to set out her colors and paint pictures. She told him once that it was the only thing that kept her sane through the terrible years of Jack's drinking. Holland credited Alice's artistic influence on his own decision to become a writer. There is no doubt that it also had a lot to do with his pursuit of Sam, with the romance of marrying a painter.

Painting had been the secret, safe place where Alice and Holland could meet during the hard years when Holland's father raged and did all that he could to wreak havoc on the Dickerson household. Alice taught Holland how to prepare his canvas, mix his paints, rinse out his brushes, and keep his palette clean. Most wonderful to Holland was the mysterious language of color names printed on the oily tubes

of paint—Alizarin Crimson, Prussian Blue, Veridian, Cerulean, Rose Madder Lake. The names conjured up worlds far away from the daily threat of emotional turmoil and psychological violence.

*Where is this land called Prussia of which you speak?* they would ask each other and laugh.  
*Where is this Madder Lake?*

Magical words you never heard when in the company of normal adults. Holland would hear them only in the welcome safety of his mother's loving arms.

'Do you know why I love green so much?' Alice would say.

'Because it's the color of your eyes?' Holland always answered.

'Because of the challenge. Green is so hard to work with. It can go nasty so easily and really turn your stomach, like a bad meal.'

Or a bad day with Jack. She taught Holland how to keep his greens from turning rancid.

Alice stubs out her cigarette.

'I have been rediscovering gray,' she announces. 'The thing about gray is that there is so much variety there. All colors are in the gray scale. I never use gray out of the tube, of course. I make my own grays with the complements. You know.'

She taught him how to do that, too.

'Speaking of gray, how is your marriage?' Alice asks pointedly.

'It goes,' Holland answers.

'Uh-huh. That's all you're going to say, isn't it?'

'Yes For now.' Holland stands and moves to the railing. He isn't ready to talk to anyone about his unexplained sense of foreboding that something cataclysmic is about to happen in his life. Except for Jasper. He'll talk to Jasper, not until he sees him in person.

Alice and Samantha have a relationship based on competition and mutual distrust. In spite of that, they can get along quite well. Holland has always thought that his mother and his wife are actually very similar personalities. Both are creative artists. Neither of them gladly suffer fools. They even look a bit alike. Same coloring, same blue-green eyes. Alice thinks Sam is too strident with her political views and doesn't much like knowing that her grandsons are being raised by a radical feminist—Alice's words—who doesn't seem to like the company of men. Alice's feminism is old-school. She just doesn't support the idea of marriage in the first place. Marriage is the primary tool of the patriarchy that keeps women down, dilutes their ability to have agency in the world, keeps them in their place. The only reason either of them got married was because they both got pregnant. For her part, Samantha resents Alice's hold on her husband and hates how much Holland needs his mother's approval.

'What about Hank? Holland asks. 'What can you tell me about that?'

‘Nothing much. He was up on an old ladder fussing with the skylight above the stairwell at the post office. The ladder must have slipped or just gave out. I came in just as he fell. Straight down two flights. He cracked his head on that big newel post on the way. As Jim said, he was dead before he even hit the floor.’



Holland looks around the church with satisfaction—everyone likes a good funeral. Especially in June.

Jasper and Holland disagree on which is the better venue for picking up women, weddings or funerals. Holland maintains that funerals outstrip weddings by far. It is true that weddings offer excellent opportunity for champagne-fueled impulse coupling and the promise of after-church, celebratory sex. But Holland’s experience tells him that the proximity to death brings out the primal instinct the animal need. On top of that, Holland dislikes pastel colors and isn’t fond of cake, so there are two more reasons to prefer funerals. Plus, everyone looks better in black.

For Holland, it’s all about knowing just how and when to capitalize on other people’s grief. This requires experience, tact, and a fair amount of booze. Perhaps it’s the fear of not having enough time left, or perhaps doubt about the afterlife, that works on some deep part of the brain to tickle a ravenous hunger. With proper skill and attention to detail, Holland knows he can bring out the devil.

The gathering for Hank Matthiesson’s service is standing room only. The last time so many people crammed into the small St. Mark’s Episcopal Church was for another funeral back in the late eighties after Alma Barton, the much beloved, much feared Principal of the town’s one elementary school, succumbed to heart failure when Bengie Wheeler chased a feral raccoon into the classroom building’s main heat vent and blew it up with a pair of M-80’s.

Thanks to Alice, Holland and the boys have front row seats. Henry and Tank would just as soon be at the beach, but Alice wants them there, even though they aren’t really dressed properly for such a somber occasion. Holland wasn’t thinking about church services when he packed the boys’ clothes for their summer vacation. Still, as far as Alice is concerned, a funeral is a unique learning experience not to be missed, especially by the young.

Looking around, Holland picks out a number of people in the crowd he has known at one point or another over the years. He recognizes quite a few of the locals from his school days, and he thinks he remembers some of the older members of the congregation who might have been friends of his parents

and watched him grow up at a distance. The idea that other strangers might know things, or think they know things, about him makes Holland anxious. He doesn't like that feeling one bit.

Looking behind him and to his right, Holland catches a glimpse of Patsy Archambeau, a local beauty he had dated briefly in high school. Next to her sits her lover, Jade—her Life Partner, as Samantha would insist. On Patsy's other side sit her three young sons from her previous marriage to Fair Malloy, who Holland had also known in school. Fair sits several rows back looking thoroughly defeated. Of that whole group, only Jade looks to Holland as if she wants to be there.

Holland can't help but wonder about Fair's situation. What is it like for him, seeing his ex-wife sitting there with her girlfriend and his three sons. What do they tell the boys about why they don't live with their father? What do the boys tell themselves? What's it like now for those kids in school in such a small place where everybody knows everybody else's business? How do things like this happen? Does anyone care?

Holland makes up a limerick to pass the time.

*Patsy and Jade make a pair,  
Of lesbian lovers with flair.  
The ex-husband's depression,  
Is lacking aggression,  
The Partner who's there is not Fair.*

Holland thinks that is pretty good, not too bad for off the cuff.

Further back on the same side Holland notices Thad Sawyer, the man most people in Pearson's Bight suspect of vandalizing all the LGBTQ Pride rainbows with black spray paint.

*There once was a bigot named Sawyer,  
Who was known 'round the town as a voyeur.  
It's said that his dick,  
Is not very thick,  
And he likes to boink boys in the foyer.*

Holland likes the second one better than the first, giving himself extra credit for rhyming *voyeur* with *foyer*.

On his left, across the aisle, Holland notices a small cluster of Portuguese families, most of whom, like Holland, can trace their family origins in the region back many generations. He thinks he recognizes a few of the faces of the former boys and girls he had played with in his childhood, even though their parents didn't mix socially.

Holland has had very little personal experience with the Portuguese community. He knows them as the shop owners of Pearson's Bight—the green grocers, the fruit sellers and the bakers. The sole exception is Antonio Tavares, who Holland can pick out seated with his wife Umberta and their five girls, ranging in age from four to fourteen, all of them dressed to the nines in matching deep purple and white mourning dresses. Holland thinks those girls are the prettiest, classiest people in the room.

*Five sisters of noble renown,  
Their beauty the talk of the town.  
They pose in their dresses,  
White shoes and black tresses.  
Each one in their own purple gown.*

Possibly because it is such a beautiful June summer day, or possibly for no good reason at all, there are dogs in the church. Pearson's Bight is known for its black Labradors who come and go as they please. The Labs are simply a fact of village life and seemingly always have been. There are any number of theories as to how this originally came about, why this particular town, and why this particular color and breed. Some tell stories of seventeenth century witches who prized them and bred them as guard dogs against the evils of the spirit world. Others attribute it to a preference of pirates. In any event, they are everywhere and more than merely tolerated—they are almost universally beloved. Walk down any street in town and you will doubtless make the acquaintance of one or more of Pearson's Bight black Labradors. Everyone takes care of all the dogs, regardless of home ownership, and it is not uncommon for a family to claim three or four but only have names for two.

Alice runs against the grain. She has always been partial to her chocolate Labs. All the way back to when Holland was young, Alice had insisted that the Dickerson dogs should never be black but always chocolate brown instead. Over the years Alice has owned several of them. She has had to go beyond the town limits to find the dogs she can love and, as she says, recognize in a crowd. Jack Dickerson never understood why he should have to pay good money for a special Labrador retriever when perfectly good, regular dogs were being given away left and right, but that was Alice and she would not be denied.

Pastor Chuck Fish has never been able to keep the dogs out of church.

*There is a piece of work. How old is Pastor Chuck now? He must be closing in on seventy. He has been running St. Mark's for over thirty five years, ever since I was a boy. Amazingly spry for someone who has seen so much of his cheery good will simply wick away unappreciated by the townsfolk.*

Not that the church-going citizenry of Pearson's Bight are particularly lazy or apathetic. Mostly, they are just dyed-in-the-wool New England Episcopalians who love to argue and are happy to go through the motions on the Holy Days. They show up at Easter and Christmas to baptize, marry, and bury themselves within the dictates of the Church. They drop a few bucks in the plate whenever they find themselves actually in the building itself, but that is about as far as it goes. Why they worship there at Saint Mark's instead of down the street with the small Methodist group or across town with the Baptists or the Congregationalists, most of them couldn't say. This is where they grew up and this is where they know the hymns, and that is that.

Pastor Chuck is renowned for his excruciatingly long services. Even at his advanced age, whatever the occasion, a Christening or an internment, through Easter, Christmas, Maundy Thursday and Lent, Pastor Chuck pulls out all the stops and soldiers on, oblivious to the lack of fervor that surrounds him. Holland has always found the Pastor's voice eerily disturbing. Chuck Fish speaks with the artificial religiosity of a man attempting to channel some bygone churchliness from the Middle Ages. The Pastor holds on tight to the thinnest reed of hope that no matter how irrelevant his words may sound to his heathen flock, the timbre of his delivery will somehow overcome the congregation's stupor and, ultimately, save a few lost souls.

Also, Pastor Fish is an Ecclesiastical clothes horse. He has always been big on pomp and ceremony. He sees his services as excessively dressy affairs. When Holland looks at Pastor Chuck, decked out in his version of Papal splendor, he sees someone more akin to a flamboyant drag queen than a man of the cloth, more appropriate to Mardi Gras or San Francisco's Castro District than a small church in New England. It is as if he has emptied out his entire closet of every piece of finery he has, piling on cotton and silk brocade vestments one after the other to the point at which, surely, he must collapse from the strain of carrying it all around.

*Where does he find all that stuff? The shepherd's crook, the big hat—aren't you supposed to be a Bishop or something before you get to play dress-up like that? The old man has been shrinking for decades. How is he even standing, let alone leading the processional, with all that truck weighing him down? Those robes and crosses and shrouds must be heavy, yet there he is, week after week, standing straight and tall, his very posture a testament to the depth and conviction of his faith. God Bless him. No one else will.*



Holland sits in his pew between Alice and Henry, ruminating about Chuck, when suddenly Patty Gleason, the music director, shifts gears and comes down hard on the church's ancient pipe organ. Patty is accompanied by young Heather Spriggs on flute.

*Jesus. Who doesn't hate a flute?*

With a fumbling of hymnals, a banging of knees and scuffling of shoes, all rise for the first hymn, *Silent Night*, an odd choice for a funeral, especially in summer. Shelley Matthiesson picked it. She had been in her cups the afternoon Pastor Fish stopped by to plan the service. It was an unpleasant conversation for Chuck. Much to his distress, Shelley made clear that her thirty year marriage to Hank had been a bitter disappointment and she expressed her callous indifference to the entire religious proceeding as well. Hank wasn't worth it, in her mind. A complete waste of time and money was how she put it. When it came time to choose the music, Shelley told Chuck that she wanted Christmas carols for the service. It was a malicious bit of spite and most unusual. Chuck Fish was hard against it, but Shelley held firm. She told him that she thought something Christmas-y wouldn't be as depressing as the usual funeral hymns. Plus, everyone would know the words, she said. She was determined. In the end, Chuck had to give in.

Patty Gleason pounds out the introduction, Heather tootles along, and Chuck Fish lifts his tremulous voice—an octave too high, almost falsetto—from the back of the church, leading the flock with heartfelt sincerity if not authority. The congregation turns to face the rear, eyes on the crucifix as the acolytes process solemnly down the aisle.

*Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright!*

Pastor Chuck reaches the nave and the faithful dutifully begin the second verse.

*Silent Night, Holy Night, Shepherds quake, at the sight!*

A sudden, sharp yelp, loud and high, pierces the air. Pastor Chuck stops dead in his tracks, aghast, staring straight ahead at no—one—knows—what. The congregation turns as one to see two dogs stuck fast together beyond the altar rail, spinning in a circle, growling and nipping at each other, Alice Dickerson's brown Lab Bosco glued butt-to-business-end with Jimmy Finnegan's black Lab, Spot. Around and around they go, angrily yelping and snapping over their shoulders. No one moves. The fellowship looks on, some in horror, some with glee, mesmerized by the sight. Henry and Tank stare, mouths agape. Parents cover their children's eyes. A stifled laugh, then another, and then Fair Malloy breaks the silence.

*Oh—my—Gawd.*

The whole church might stand there gawking until the dogs turn to butter but for a sudden lurch to the left that knocks the blue and white Chinese urn off the small mahogany table, crashing Hank Matthiesson's earthly remains onto the terracotta floor. The explosion showers the first row of pews with shards of porcelain and human remains.

With that the spell is broken. Shelley Matthiesson takes the Lord's name in vain and screams a number of obscenities she later regrets. Alice, caught between pride of ownership and indignation, shouts '*Bosco!*' at the top of her lungs. Jimmy Finnegan moves fast for a man close to seventy to pull the dogs apart, calling out to his bitch, '*Come, Spot! Come!*'

☆ ☆ ☆

'That was hilarious.' Holland is looking down at Jasper from the top of the church steps. 'Let's hit the bar.'

'But you're not drinking,' Jasper says.

'I know, but you are. Come on. I'm paying. I could use something to eat.'

In spite of the hullabaloo, Alice is off to the reception at the Parrish House, but the snickering boys want to get to the beach, so they walk home.

Jasper leaves Khaki chattering happily with a few of her friends and the two men start walking down the street toward the Sand Bar, out on the end of the town pier.

'Why, exactly, are you not drinking, again?' Jasper needles Holland.

'Because...you know...'

'Oh. Right.'

*There once were two guys from the Bight,*

*Whose friendship was solid and tight.*

*They walked to the bar.*

*It wasn't too far.*

*They laughed in the afternoon light.*

'By the way, I've been meaning to ask, where'd you get that fucking jacket, 1973?' Holland laughs.

'It was my dad's,' Jasper says, defensively.

'You need to get a new fucking jacket.'

'Khaki says it looks smart on me.'

'Well, then, you need to get a new fucking wife.'

'Why?' Jasper says, turning to the side. 'Does she make my ass look fat?'

Saturday afternoon in June is not the best time for Jasper and Holland to play their idiot bar game, 'What's Her Favorite Position?' Fortunately, there isn't much to work with. Only a few people are hanging out at the Sand Bar. Holland can see Jasper's mind wandering.

Holland thinks if he gets a little down and dirty, he can tempt Jasper to play along and have some fun. That is usually how it goes. Jasper holds the high ground while Holland trawls the bottom until Jasper finally gives up and dives in with him. It has been that way going on thirty years.

Jasper takes a sip of his drink and watches Holland watch two women at the end of the bar.

Holland leans back.

'I'm going to say they like to swing,' Holland says.

Jasper glances back at the women. He turns back.

'Sorry, man, I'm not into it today. I can't get those two fucking dogs stuck together out of my occipital lobe.' He slaps his hand to his forehead. 'That's going to be with me for life.'

'OK, fuck it. Fine.' Holland takes a gulp of his iced tea. 'Be that way. Just don't talk about your fucking perfect marriage.'

'Whoa! Easy boy. What's gotten into you?' Jasper asks.

'Sorry man. I just can't take any happy talk about marital bliss right now. Not feelin' it. There's a lot going on with Sam.'

Jasper has known Holland long enough to know not to push him. He looks out the window over Holland's shoulder at the bay, sparkling blue with whitecaps in the midday sun. Holland will talk about it when he is ready and not before.

They sit quietly for a moment until Holland breaks the silence.

'Here's the thing,' he says. 'It's about the lies we tell ourselves. How can two people live together, side by side, raise children together, share the same life together, and then, after ten years, tell two completely different stories about what happened? What the fuck is that?'

# Chapter Thirteen

## Slipknots

2014

JASPER AND HOLLAND work on a bouillabaisse for dinner. Jasper has his own special recipe that he has honed from years of trial and error which involves a variety of shellfish and certain vegetables not

usually found in the traditional dish. Jasper has Holland slicing leeks while he shucks oysters, all the while calmly working on a ruby-colored Campari and soda he has made in a large, twenty-four-ounce glass measuring cup. Jasper has a special way of freezing limes to chill the Campari without using ice so when working in the kitchen on a hot summer's late-afternoon his drink won't get watered down. Genius.

Jasper asks Holland about Samantha.

'She called the day after we got in to say hello to the boys and tell me she isn't coming out.'

Holland said.

'Just like that?'

'Just like that. She said she cancelled her plane ticket, finagled a refund, and that was it.'

'She got a refund? I didn't think they would do that. Did she give you a reason?' Jasper asked.

'Not really. She just said she has too much on her plate with her job and with school. She didn't realize how much work she was going to have to do this summer and now that we're all gone and the house is her own, she is really loving the peace and quiet and wants to get a lot done.'

'Huh. well, those are a lot of reasons. That's a disappointment for me. I was hoping to see her.'

Jasper says.

'Yeah. And, it really sucks for the boys. That's what has me going. She should be here with her family. Now the boys are worried something is wrong. Especially Tank. I had to tell them the other night and he hasn't slept well since.'

Holland never mastered the art of shucking oysters. Clams, sure, but not oysters. Oysters require a special touch. All Holland ever seemed to do was slice up his hands with shards of splintered oyster shell. But Jasper has the knack for it and can easily hold down a conversation while casually prying open each shell in turn, running the knife expertly around the inside edge to free the body of the oyster without losing any of the salty oyster liquor. He pauses to squeeze lemon juice on his most recent shuck and hands it over to Holland.

'Can you come back later in the summer? Sometime in August?'

'No, man. That's the thing. This is it, right? This is our summer vacation. She should be here,'

Done slicing, Holland wipes his hands on his apron and fills a metal bowl with ice. Jasper steps back from the sink so Holland can get to the faucet. He runs cold water over the leeks and sets it on the counter.

Jasper palms another oyster, sets the knife against the membrane between the two halves of the shell, and squeezes his fist. The oyster knife slides in and Jasper expertly pries the two shell halves apart.

Holland leans back against the counter.

'I crashed the car.' he says.

'What?'

'I crashed the car. This bitch pulled a gun on me and I panicked and ran into a phone pole.'

'No shit! A gun?'

'Yeah. The thing is, I was drunk. Givin' her shit about her license plate.'

'Wait. You were giving some stranger shit for their license plate? How does that happen.'

'It's a long stupid story. Not the point, really. The point is, I was drunk.'

Oh, right. I thought you aren't drinking. Did you get a DUI?'

'I'm not, but I did that night. No D.U.I. I was out with these wall writer artists and got carried away. I left the scene. It was a little fucked up.'

'Hey, you can start slicing the bread,' Jasper says.

Alice walks into the kitchen.

'Khaki and I want to know what we can do to get this show on the road,' she says. 'Otherwise we're going to just keep drinking.'

'I would say, just keep drinking,' says Holland. 'It's going to be a while. You might want to watch a movie.'

Alice has always suspected that Khaki looks at her in much the same way that she looks at Holland, that is to say, as a bad influence on Jasper. But unlike Holland, Alice doesn't take Khaki all that seriously. She finds Khaki's prepster slant on the world amusing, which means she can enjoy Khaki's company.

Jasper turns to face Holland, gesturing with the oyster knife.

'Don't be giving them ideas. The next thing you know they'll run off to town and we'll be left alone eating at ten.'

'OK, then, Alice says over her shoulder. 'You know where to find us. We'll be at the bar.'

'How are the boys doing?' Holland calls after her. .

'They're in the basement playing video games. I guess they're alright. Khaki has them set up with Cokes and whatnot. They seem content.'

*'Only one Coke, please.'* Holland has to yell. Alice is long gone. *'I don't want them up all night again. Tank isn't sleeping well as it is.'*

*'Roger that.!' Alice answers in kind from the veranda.*

☆ ☆ ☆

Holland sits at the table on the far corner of Alice's back porch with his laptop in front of him, watching the sky lighten to the east over the big white oak on the far side of Mill Pond. As the shadows on the narrow beach fall back under the trees, Holland can make out the circular wooden swing hanging out over the water's edge at the small clearing framed by beach grass and fat cattails. Along the far shore, the water is glassy smooth, reflecting a mirror image like a Rorschach inkblot on its side. To his left a pair of black cormorants pop out of the water, first one, then another, and glide across the pond.

He sat down to write, but his growing anger with Sam keeps crowding out his thoughts.

*What the fuck is going on with her? We live in the digital age. She can do anything anywhere. How can she think that staying home to work instead of joining her family for their traditional two week vacation in Pearson's Bight is OK?*

Holland remembers that Sam told him she was done with her required class time at CU until school starts up next fall. Her back-to-school obligations for her teaching job won't begin until the last week in August. So why is it that she needs to be back in Denver at all? What could be more important to her than spending this precious time with her boys in the one place on earth where everyone has been happiest? The best family photographs have been taken here, on the beach, playing in the water, and messing around in boats.

Through all of their years together, married, raising their two boys, the idea that Sam might know somebody else outside of their family whom she would rather spend time with has never occurred to Holland before. But now he wonders if he has missed something. Holland is not ready to jump to the conclusion that his wife is having an affair. Not yet, anyway. For now he simply prefers to remain angry and mystified as to why Sam could behave so thoughtlessly.

Back to his writing projects. They are, in rough descending order of importance: the extended interview with Hazzard—which is a paying job; the short story called *Lust*—which he has been working on for the last three months; and his ever present novel, *Happiness*—which has been an ongoing project now for almost five years and has no end in sight.

Hazzard has approved the initial first draft of his bio piece and Holland has promised him a finished version by September 1st at the latest. Holland is excited about the prospect of having it published, even if only through social media. He would like to get it done and off his desk so he can get paid, but now that he is back in Pearson's Bight on vacation his heart's not in it. The short story is all but finished. Holland plans to submit it to a contest for new writers, also in September. He has time yet to let it cook a bit more before he goes back and ties it all up. That leaves his ongoing wrestling match with *Happiness*, and Alvin and Cathy Beal.

Holland stares at the cursor on his screen. What happens next to Alvin? Alvin has always been an angrier, harsher, less sympathetic version of how Holland sees himself. Recently, however, Holland has begun to notice that he and Alvin share more in common than he might like to admit. Increasingly, Holland's own behavior, his own anger and resentment and fear, has begun to resemble that of Alvin's, and he is not sure he likes what he is seeing. Holland has begun to wonder if the character of Alvin might be trying to tell him something about his own life and his marriage to Sam.

Alice moves about behind him in the kitchen. His alone time has come to an abrupt end. Irritation that he has squandered the quiet early morning hour obsessing about his wife instead of writing his novel tightens his neck and shoulders. Alvin Beal is an unhappy man who blames the world and everything in it for his inability to find true happiness. Holland created him that way. Now, Holland catches himself blaming Samantha and Alice for distracting him, just like Alvin would. Is Alvin Beal turning into some sort of weird projection? Are he and Alvin Beal one and the same?

Holland's thoughts are interrupted by the scrape of the sliding screen door and the metal clank of Alice collecting the dog's food bowls. He doesn't turn to look. Again, there is movement in the kitchen, and a moment later, he hears her return to the porch and set down the dog's food. Bosco and Toby eagerly slide and snuffle around. Holland senses Alice standing in the doorway looking at him before she turns back into the kitchen and slides the screen door shut behind her.

Relief that his mother did not try to make conversation, but no surprise. He is proud of Alice. She thinks like an artist. She understands and respects his need to sit undisturbed. He knows that she will spend the next two weeks of their visit running interference for him with Henry and Tank. She will offer him time and mental space to collect his thoughts on his own terms. To Holland, this is the greatest of gifts, and does not go unnoticed.

For all their similarities, this is the primary place where Alice and Sam differ. Tuning into Holland's personal rhythms is something Sam has become increasingly disinterested in. It wasn't always that way. Back before they were married, before children, living their cheap-chic lifestyle, when Sam was going to be an artist herself, they would know how to stay out of one another's way when the creative juices were flowing. But then came Henry, and then Tank, and they poured themselves wholeheartedly into becoming the best parents they could be. Their time was no longer their own—it belonged to the small beings who depended on them for everything.

The boys are older now. Henry is fourteen, and Tank is eleven. They can dress and feed themselves and tour the world online. When the boys were young, everything that came out of their mouths was familiar because everything they knew came from either Holland or Samantha. And then one day all that changed. As if overnight, Henry, and soon afterwards, Tank, started saying things that



startled Holland. New ideas, fresh ways of thinking that hadn't come from his own mind and experience. Holland remembers his thinking then.

*This is it. It's happening so much sooner than I thought it would, but here they go, launching themselves out into the world beyond my knowing. They move forward, and my world will pass away. The faintest flicker of mortality, the beginning of the end.*

That was when Holland renewed his commitment to honor his lifelong ambition and reinvest himself in his dream of becoming a writer. Not just a teacher of high school English, who occasionally writes small bits and pieces that might get reprinted and hung on a gallery wall, but a real writer, a published author who earns his money from plying his trade.

Did Sam have a similar experience? Did she hear the wider world coming from her children's mouths and suddenly see her own short future? Did she find herself looking at her life beyond her years as a mother? She must have, Holland thinks. How could she not? And if that happened, what effect did it have on her thinking about her own life going forward? They would have talked about it years before, but now everything has changed. They don't share their feelings, dreams and aspirations like they used to. It is not something that either of them ever talk about anymore.

If Samantha is going to turn away from her family, then Holland is going to find a way to reinvigorate his focus on finishing his novel. He directs his mind back to the problem of Alvin Beal and his ongoing pursuit of happiness. After years of neglect and countless false starts, Holland finally thinks he has a workable understanding of how he wants Alvin to behave.

A book about a married man or woman becoming dissatisfied with their marriage, having an affair, getting caught, getting thrown out and divorced, and then growing to become a better person because of their terrible mistake is a cliché.

*Boring.*

More interesting to Holland is the idea that Alvin Beal lives a double life and likes it that way. Alvin is unwilling to give up either half. It threatens to tear him apart. He is becoming a monster. He begins to realize that if he is going to be able to continue to enjoy the benefits of a reasonably happy marriage and also the fruits of a sexually charged extramarital affair he is going to have to do something to become easier to get along with. Alvin decides he is going to have to become nicer.

Sol has encouraged Holland to find a way for Alvin to reach a catharsis and come through his crisis a changed man. Mindful of what Sol has said about the way the story is progressing, Holland has tried to soften his prose and to come up with different ways Alvin can make the turn to becoming a kinder man and more self-aware. Alvin comes to a crisis when the effort to hold together his double life threatens to destroy him and blow up in his face.

*Alvin hasn't had a good night's sleep in a year. His eyes hurt. His brain feels numb. Reading anything is agony, he can barely keep up on his email. He has watched all the streaming media he can watch—it all looks the same. Even the pornography he used to enjoy doesn't interest him. He has had to dial up the weirdness to the point that now it just disgusts him. He has lost the ability to distract himself. All he wants is to rest.*

*Bored, restless and discontent, Alvin is left to think long and hard about all the damage he is doing to himself and his family. He wonders how his children will remember him. Will they understand anything of who their father is, his fears and aspirations, or what drives him? Will they even care? How much of what he has done will they hold on to, and never forget long after he is gone? How much will they be able to let go by the board, and find forgiveness for him in their hearts?*

Good. Holland is beginning to address the concerns Sol raises about the book. Alvin starts to gain just a little insight into how his own selfish and self-centered search for happiness is causing so much unhappiness for his wife, his children, and ultimately, for himself. Holland decides that the best way for Alvin to discover more about his own moral values is to reminisce. He pulls from his own experience with the birth of Henry.

*Alvin remembers when Ozzie was born, his heart molted. As he looked down at her under the heat lamp in her tiny pink blanket, he saw the spitting image of his beloved grandmother's face looking back. He realized that he had always been convinced that any threat to his own fragile emotional core would come from the outside, so he had put exhaustive energy into building up his shields. Like a briny blue crab, he had left his soft underbelly unprotected. It had never occurred to him that a heart can be cracked open from the inside-out.*

Pretty damn good writing. Holland is pleased.

*Alvin taught his daughter to tie her shoes, but now all she wears are slip-ons. In the intimate tunnel vision of early parenthood, Alvin thought that the shoe-tying lesson was about slipknots and safety. He sat on the hardwood floor in the morning sunlight with my brand new daughter, who still smelled of breakfast and the bathroom, loving her more than I ever felt possible.*

*Now it turns out that, for Ozzie, the ability to tie her own shoes is not a life requirement, so he guessed the lessons were really more about working with failure, which is something he is well*

*acquainted with. Shoe-tying expertise may become unnecessary as we age and fashions change, but failure is a constant.*

*In the end, as he thinks about it, Ozzie never really cared about whether her shoes were tied or not. Maybe the lesson was also about setting up a way that Alvin's daughter could express her independence from her dad in a gentle, healthy way.*

This is as far as Holland has gotten with his story about happiness, for now.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Finnegan

2014

WHAT ARE YOUR top five favorite sandwiches?' Finn asks Tank.

'Sandwiches?' Tank has to speak up over the rumble of the engine.

'Yeah, sandwiches. Think about it. Can you name your five top favorites?'

'Why?'

'Oh, it's a thing that I do.' Finn ran his finger under his moustache, first one side and then the other.

'Sandwiches, huh?'

'Yeah, sandwiches.'

It is one of those spectacular, hot summer days. Massive cumulus clouds hover high to the east in an azure blue sky. Standing at the wheel of his purple 1947 Beal's Island lobster boat, Jimmy Finnegan pilots easily around the sandbar and out into the outer harbor. No one else would have a boat that color. Finnegan stands six foot two with a long, yellow, graying ponytail snaking down his back to his belt. He wears a bushy handlebar mustache and has never weighed more than a hundred-and-sixty pounds his entire seventy years. His eyes are as blue as the sky and creased with laugh lines from a lifetime of raising hell.

Henry and Tank stand on either side of Finn, hoping he will let them take the wheel. Violet and Alice lounge on the foredeck. Finn and Vee are taking Alice and the boys out on the boat for an afternoon at Copper Cove. The three adults have known each other since childhood, but the sandwich thing is new to Violet and Alice.

'Why sandwiches, especially?' Henry asks. The boys are proud to be out on Jimmy Finnegan's boat, cruising through the harbor on such a beautiful day.

'I have a theory about sandwiches. I call it my Sandwich Theory,' Finnegan says. 'The Sandwich Theory states that if you know someone's top five sandwiches, you know a lot about who they are and what they're all about. And maybe it tells you something about yourself.'

'How does that work, exactly?' Alice calls back through the open windscreen, humoring Finn for the sake of the boys.

'Well, you can't really understand how the theory works until you actually do it.' Finn shouts back at Alice. 'It's like Zen. It's like knowing the taste of an orange. The only way you can know what an orange tastes like is by eating it.' Typical Finn bullshit, thinks Alice. Vee feigns interest.

'Wow. What is Zen?' asks Tank.

'It's a religion, Tank,' says Henry. 'Mom talks about it all the time.'

'It's a lot more than a religion, and a lot less, I would have to say,' says Finn.

'That's a great topic to bring up with your mother when you tell her about your day out on the water in Jimmy Finnegan's lobster boat,' Alice calls back to Tank.

'Sandwiches are like people,' Finn continues. 'There are an amazing number of sandwiches, you know, all sizes and shapes, all colors, all different. Sandwiches are cool that way.'

'Right,' says Henry. 'I get that.'

'OK, well, I like peanut butter and banana. Does that count?' Tank asks. Tank is suddenly aware that maybe peanut butter and banana is a Little Boy sandwich.

'Sure, but you can do better than that, Tank, I bet.' Finn says. 'Is peanut butter and banana really going to be in your top five?'

Steering with his hip, piloting skillfully through the outer anchorage, Finn reaches down and pulls three Gansetts out of the cooler, pops one for himself and hands two up to the ladies on the foredeck.

Alice gazes out at the passing boats in the harbor.

'Are the boys drinking yet?' Finn asks her.

'Good heavens, I hope not,' says Alice. 'Are you, boys?' she asks quickly.

'Um, no,' says Henry, glancing down at his younger brother.

'Sometimes Dad lets us have a sip,' says Tank, somewhat sheepishly.

'Well, I think we should leave that to your Dad, then,' she says.

'OK, Alice, what sandwich would you like to have with your beer right this minute?' asks Finn, turning the subject back to sandwiches.

'Hmmm...'

'I wouldn't want a sandwich right now if I'm going swimming,' Vee says with a small smile.

'Sure, OK, but we're not going swimming right away.'

'OK. Well, Finn.' Vee rolls over onto her elbows and looks Finn in the eye from her perch on the foredeck. 'First, I gotta' know what exactly you mean by sandwich. I mean, are we talking cold cuts only or are we including hot stuff too? What about a hamburger or a cheeseburger? Is a hamburger a sandwich? A hot dog comes with two pieces of bread. I like a nice hot hot dog just as much as the next girl. Is a hot dog a sandwich? What about a sub?'

Finn wonders briefly about the hot dog.

'A sub is definitely a sandwich. I don't call a hot dog a sandwich, but, sure, cold cuts, hot stuff, sandwiches with fruit, yeah, and don't forget the salad sandwiches—tuna salad, egg salad, chicken salad...crab salad.'

'Chicken salad is disgusting. And crab salad is just too weird for a sandwich,' says Tank.

'I usually allow hamburgers into the equation, as a hot sandwich, but it doesn't make my top five,' says Finn.

'*What?* No hamburger?' Vee exclaims. Finn laughs. He likes looking at Violet up close.

'No, not really. That's just the thing about hamburgers. Everybody loves the hamburger, but unless you're talking about serving it overlooking the anchorage at Jost Van Dyke, it isn't gonna make my top five. That would be a fat, flame-broiled patty of prime beef on a Kaiser roll with vine-ripened tomato, exotic garden lettuce, sharp cheddar cheese, homemade mayonnaise and French mustard. This is what makes it such a challenge. There's so much out there, sandwich-wise.'

'Jost Van Dyke?' Henry asks, shocked. He realizes he may have heard a dirty joke in front of his grandmother and turns red in the face. The grown-ups ignore him.

They pass a beautifully maintained, older wooden ketch coming in under power. Everybody waves. The classic British racing green hull shines and the brightwork glistens.

'So pretty!' Alice says.

Finn taps up the throttle as they pass out of the anchorage and head for the jetty at the mouth of the harbor. 'So, like I said, there's hot sandwiches, that's one sub-set, and then you got the exotics, like the Giro.'

'So, what about it? Finn asks Tank, again.

'What about what?' asks Tank, looking absentmindedly across the water at two young girls sunning themselves on the fantail of a large yacht.

'Sandwiches, Tank!' says Henry. 'Your favorite sandwiches. Can you name five, any five, to start?'

'How about you? You start.' says Tank.

'OK, one of my top five has to be the basic grilled cheese with fresh garden tomatoes on white bread. Buttery, brown, beautiful. Plus, that's good for a vegetarian, right?' Finnegan looks back at Vee.

'Totally forgot about the grilled cheese,' Vee says. 'Yeah, sure, vegetarian. Cheddar or Swiss?'

'Cheddar, Vermont, sharp.'

'Right.'

'You gotta have garden ripe tomatoes, warm right off the vine. The kind of tomatoes you have to drink instead of eat, you know? You know what I mean? Salt and pepper, and a sprig of fresh basil.'

Finn pushes up their speed a bit as they clear the anchorage and enter the channel. Henry and Tank like how Finn controls the boat, making the engine rev higher.

Finn is talking again. 'Anyway, there's your basic, everyday American lunch type sandwich, you know, ham and cheese, turkey on rye. Then there's a special subset I call 'kid sandwiches', you know, like your peanut butter and banana, peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and apple, peanut butter and bacon, that sorta thing. Right, boys?'

'Peanut butter and bacon?' says Tank.

'Yeah, peanut butter and bacon, all the time. Especially good for the munchies. Peanut butter and apple and bacon, too, but that's something of a cross-over sandwich.'

Tank smirks at the mention of the munchies. Henry cringes and glances at Alice.

When they reach the jetty at the entry to the harbor, Finn swings the boat to the southwest and throttles her up to a comfortable cruising speed of about seventeen knots. The water is clear and blue and flat in the bay. It is a spectacular day to be out running around free in a boat.

'So you still haven't given me a sandwich other than the peanut butter and banana. I think you're holding out,' Finn says to Tank. 'I can't believe that's it for you.'

'I've been thinking, I've been thinking.' Tank says. 'My dad makes a really great Reuben—corned beef, swiss cheese, sauerkraut, his own special red sauce, grilled perfect. I think that one would make my list.'

Finn is smiling broadly. 'Far out, that is *nice!* Now you're talking. What's the bread? Gotta get the bread right.'

'Pumpernickel, of course! Is there any other way?'

'Nope, that's how it's done, all right.'

'OK, well, since you didn't ask, I'll tell you about my top of the list most favorite sandwich of all time.' Finn says. 'First of all, adding to it's ranking for specialness, you have to remember this sandwich is seasonal. There's only one time of the year when this sandwich comes along, and that's right after Thanksgiving because you need white turkey breast sliced off the bird with just a little of the crackly skin along with it.'

'Turkey?'

'Yep, turkey. You bet. Day after Thanksgiving turkey breast on sourdough with cranberry sauce, mayonnaise, butter lettuce, and lots of salt and pepper. I don't put mashed potatoes in my turkey sandwich, or mess around with gravy. Some people do, but that makes it a whole different sandwich, in my book...and, very important, the cranberry sauce has to be homemade, just cranberries, oranges and sugar, nice and tart, not too sweet. That is critical.'

'That's the one, huh?' says Alice.

'Yep, that's the one. My all-time favorite. I grew up with my dad making those every year.'

'Wow. So what have we learned about you, now?' Alice asks, arching an eyebrow, feeling clever. 'Something deep, having to do with turkey?' Vee rolls her eyes, smiling at the way Alice teases her man.

'I don't know. You tell me.' Finn says.

'Well, what do you think it says about *yourself*?'

'I think what I want you to take away from all this is that I am a complex, interesting guy with a refined palette and discriminating taste.'

'HA!' laughs Vee.



As they come around the bluff at Copper Cove, Finn cuts back on the throttle, lowering the bow so he can start looking for the rocks he knows are there as he makes his way carefully toward the beach.

When they are about a hundred feet off, Finn moves aft and unties the large Danforth. After checking the line and setting up the chain, he tosses it over the starboard quarter and lets it pay out, as he brings the nose of the boat gently aground on the sandy beach. Vee, on the bow, releases the plow anchor and jumps off to carry it ahead across the beach and drop it in the sand fifty feet up. Satisfied that all is set, Finn tightens up on the stern anchor and makes it fast.

The beach is deserted. It's a weekday. There is no one else in the cove.

As soon as the boat is settled down, Finn cuts the engine, and suddenly all that can be heard is the cries of seagulls hovering over the rocks.



'It is so beautiful here,' Alice says, finally. 'And quiet.'

'I know,' says Vee, back on the boat. 'It is.'

Finn fishes out a swim ladder from a cubby below, sets it over the side, and motions to the boys.

'Shirts off! Let's you two get this cooler up on the beach and into the shade. There's soda in it for you.' Finn bribes.

As soon as the boys are off the boat, Finn disappears into the cabin and emerges holding an ornate brass pipe and a small ball of tin foil. Vee looks at Alice, who just shrugs and smiles.

Using his sailing knife, Finn expertly slices off a shard of the dark brown cube and fills the bowl with hashish.

He produces a safety match from his breast pocket, ignites it on the rough back side of the ship's wheel, pauses for the sulfur to die down, and takes a massive hit off the pipe. The hash flames up.

'Ladies?' he says, holding his breath and offering the pipe up between the two of them. Finn exhales a plume of perfumed smoke.

Vee accepts the pipe from Finn and takes a moderate toke, then hands it to Alice, who does the same.

'Again?' Finn asks with a mischievous grin.

'Sure. Why not?' says Vee.

Once he is satisfied that Alice and Vee are properly high, Finn tucks away his pipe and paraphernalia and makes his way to the beach. He walks up across the sand and sits down on the edge of the beach grass. Tossing away a rock behind him, he lies out on his back, shuts his eyes, and conks out.

Vee and Alice take a dip and then splay themselves out on blankets to take in the day. They chat idly about Hank Mattiessen's funeral and Alice's new paintings. Vee tells Alice about life with Finn. At one point, Vee asks Alice about Holland.

'How is Holland doing? I bet you like having those handsome boys around for a while.'

'Aren't they though? Yes, they're great boys. Very smart, too,' Alice says.

'I'll say.'

'I think Holland's just OK,' Alice goes on. 'He's writing, which is good. Some publishing opportunities, I guess. Sounds like there may be some interest in his children's book finally after all these years.'

'And?'

'I don't get the feeling that his marriage is doing so well.'

'How so?'

'Well, he doesn't talk much about it, but clearly he's not happy. He was very disappointed in Sam for not coming out this year. It seems like maybe they are growing apart. They have different lives, different friends, different ambitions. Last time I saw them together I got the impression they just don't like each other's company. Plus, she's just getting very distant from all of us, even the boys.'

'Sam?'

'Yeah.'

'Could it just be normal marriage fatigue?'

'I don't know. Could be. But I think it's more. Somethings up.'



Close to an hour later Finn rouses himself and stands up. There is a sudden chill in the air. The sun is behind the clouds and the wind has switched, coming up now from the southwest.

'Come on, ladies,' Finn calls, trying not to sound alarmist. 'We should be heading out.'

'Huh?' Vee turns over and sits up to look out at the darkening water. 'Oh. Right.'

Finn calls to the boys down the beach and tells them it is time to go. The tide has come in since they landed, and the *Scoundrel* is floating free now, riding the new waves, and tugging at the anchor. They all swim back to the boat. Finn climbs aboard and wraps a towel around his waist. While Vee collects the bow line, Finn starts up the engine and lets it idle, gurgling in the backwash.

When everyone is safely on board, Finn backs carefully away from the beach while Vee brings in the stern anchor. Water slaps up the transom. The wind is rising. Finn sees that the barometer is dropping like a stone.

Finn maneuvers the boat out of the cove and, once he knows he is safely beyond any rocks, he punches her up to cruising speed. They are heading north-easterly, pounding along with a following sea.

Trying to look normal sitting in the deck chairs, Alice and Vee are quickly drenched in salty spray, Henry and Tank crowd next to Finn at the wheel, holding on tight to whatever they can.

After a while, Vee starts looking more closely at a large, dark cloud formation directly behind them, coming up the coast.

'Finn, what do you think of that?' she says, pointing aft.

Finn turns around to look.

'Hmm. OK.' he says.

'It's getting closer pretty fast. What are we, a couple of miles from the harbor?'

'Less, I'd guess. Here, take the wheel.'

Finn hands Vee the wheel and braces himself to stand amidships looking back at the storm clouds. They are coming up fast.

'Shit, that must be moving over forty miles an hour,' Finn mutters.

'Could be more, Finn.'

'Right. OK, You might want to pull on your slickers if you brought them.'

Finn stands amidships, transfixed, gazing up at the growing thunder clouds gaining on them at speed. Colors fill his brain from far above—rainbows of purples and magentas, deep reds and blues, glowing orange around the edges. He sees a giant fist in the air that seems to breathe and pulse, tumbling out, expanding rapidly before his eyes. Lightning cracks across the horizon under the storm, the roll and clap of distant thunder like kettle drums and high-hat cymbals. Sheets of rain streak down under the massive thunderhead like tendrils of a monster Portugues o'War bearing down on them, ready to eat them alive. Finn is rooted to the deck. The sheer scale of this mushrooming downpour overwhelms him. He thinks this might be the most beautiful thing he has ever seen in his entire life.

The strangled sounds of crying gulls catch Finn's attention, and he looks around to see that the water has flattened out, eerily, glassy smooth. In a dream state, Finn watches an unnatural mixture of seabirds stream by, frantic to get away from the storm.

*How odd a sight to see.*

A lightning crack snaps him out of his reverie. They are going to get hit and hit hard in less than a minute. Finn turns and takes back the wheel from Vee, who has been struck stone-cold herself, watching the storm approach over her shoulder.

'Lifejackets, everyone!' Finn yells over the approaching roar. 'They're hanging down below! Alice, grab five. Come on boys, get on your jackets! Everybody clip on! Henry! Tank! Get up here next to me. and find something to hold on to!'

Suddenly, with the force of a freight train, a fifty-mile-an-hour wall of wind slams into the boat, and everything happens at once. The deckchairs fly, crashing on their heads. The gale grabs the stern and spins the boat around, catches her abeam, lifts the hull up out of the water and rocks her over at forty-five degrees. Finn wrestles with the wheel, as she heels and the water on the starboard side comes right up to the gunwale. Alice is hit by a chair, loses her grip on the cabin side and tumbles down, landing hard below on the wheelhouse wall. There is blood.

Against the force of the howling wind, the weight of the hull slowly sets the boat aright. The bow points downwind again, and Finn regains the wheel. Rain floods the air, falling fast, a blinding mist rising up off the surface. Visibility ends. Water rises in the cockpit, pouring down into the bilge. Finn hears the pumps come on.

*Can they handle the load?*

Finn looks around. 'Everybody safe?' Finn sees Alice on the floor.

"Alice! Vee, check on Alice. Alice, you alright?" asks Finn.

The boat rocks fiercely. Alice staggers to her knees, one hand on her bloodied head.

'WHERE'S TANK!' she screams. Tank is gone.

'OVER HERE!' Henry shouts, pointing over the port side.

Alice and Vee leap to the gunwale. Tank is over the side, lifeless, hanging on by his safety harness wrapped around the standpipe, his body banging against the side of the boat.

Tank is the only one who followed Finn's orders and clipped on to something just before the wind hit.

Henry helps Alice and Vee haul Tank up and back aboard as the *Scoundrel* pitches violently in the waves. It was all Finn can do to keep her bow pointing down.

Alice and Vee lay Tank down on the moving deck. His body is limp and he is white as a ghost. His eyes are open but disconnected and his shoulder is twisted forward at a bad angle.

'VEE, TAKE THE WHEEL!' Finn shouts over the wind. 'Keep the bow down!

Finn braces himself and kneels down next to Tank's head. Cradling the back of his skull with one hand, Finn first sticks his finger into Tank's throat to be sure his tongue is where it should be, and then tips back his head. Holding Tank's nose, Finn begins mouth to mouth resuscitation. Alice watches, unable to breathe.

Tank starts to spit up and Finn rolls him on his side. He gasps and cries out as his lungs empty a pint of salt water. Alice collapses back onto the cabin house stifling sobs.

'Henry, a blanket, down below on the bunk!' Finn shouts.

Finn wraps Tank in the heavy blanket Henry finds and hands him off to Alice.

'Here, hold him close. You have to keep him awake. Keep that arm close to his body and make sure he doesn't bang his head again. We need to get him in ASAP.'

Finn stands and takes back the wheel from Vee.

'Everybody get up here and stay close. This is going to be a wild ride.'

Everyone is in shock. One minute they are gazing at the most beautiful, breathtaking sight imaginable, and the next instant they are battered and thrown around by gale force winds, running for their lives.

Finn has to bring the boat into the harbor entrance at a tight angle. At the head of the channel, he makes a sharp right turn around the stanchion at the end of the jetty, taking the wind hard on the beam. He tries to head the boat up to windward just enough to get above the first buoy.

'Hold on!'

At exactly the wrong moment, a massive gust of wind hits *Scoundrel* broadside, tipping the hull up and carrying the bow down onto the black buoy. It all happens so fast. She hits the steel can with a loud crack, shudders violently, and the air is filled with the terrible sound of metal on wood scraping down the side as she passes by.

'Shit!' yells Finn. 'Fuck me!'

Finn manages to bring the boat back into the channel, making the second buoy, and then making the third. Now they are streaking straight through the outer anchorage toward the inner harbor, with a thirty mile an hour storm hard on their tail. Finn tries to throttle back but the wind on his stern is carrying him too fast. He can feel the wheel getting light and worries he might lose steerage.

Vee opens the cabin door and goes below.

'Finn, there's a crack in a seam, I can see where she's stove in! We're taking on water!' Vee yells up.

'How much water?'

'Significant,' says Vee.

'Fuck me. Fuck me runnin',' grumbles Finn under his breath, and grips the wheel.

'Get on the horn, Vee. Call the harbormaster, tell them who we are, where we are, and that we need an EMT right away.' In the middle of so much emergency Finn is finding his footing.

Finn can hardly see where he is going. He runs through his options. First, he's taking on water. Without being able to inspect the damage, he has no way of knowing if it might be bad enough to just sink them straight to the bottom. He is flying downwind through the crowded anchorage. To get to his mooring he will have to maneuver around any number of other boats, which is very difficult and very dangerous. If he makes it that far, he still has to run past the mooring and then head up into the wind to slow the boat down, which would be a very iffy thing even if he could get her around. The wind might just as easily catch the bow again and run him into something hard. Going for the mooring is not a good plan, he decides. There is only one other alternative.

'OK everybody, here we go. As soon as we get around the sandbar, I'm heading for the beach.' Finn yells over the noise of the engine and the pounding rain.

'The beach?' Alice asks, wideyed. She is sitting on the floor of the cockpit, her back to the starboard side, cradling Tank in her arms.

'Yep. I'm going to beach her. We're taking on too much water to risk trying to put her on the mooring and we'll be smashed to bits if I try to land on the dock.'

'Seriously?' yells 'Alice .

'Yes, seriously' Finn answers calmly.

Finn turns left and runs along the bar heading right at a piece of sandy beach.

'Get ready!'

Finn throws the engine into reverse and braces himself.

Engine roaring, *Scoundrel* hits the sand and grinds to a halt ten feet up the beach, settling over on her starboard side. Finnegan stands at the wheel in utter disbelief. He looks around. The deck chairs are gone, but everything else seems to be just where it is supposed to be.

'Vee, get back on the radio and tell them where to find us.'



When Finn runs the boat up on the beach, Alice is sitting on the floor cradling Tank to her body. They are thrown forward and banged up against the housing in the cockpit next to Henry. Finn and Vee were also against the housing on the other side. Tank had not looked good. Pale and whimpering in Alice's arms, she was terrified something else could still happen to him. What was going on with his shoulder?

The emergency crews were quick to the scene. The EMTs came on board and attended to Tank while two other responders squatted next to Alice and Henry, checking on them. Finnegan and Vee seemed unharmed, just a little black and blue from the impact. It had taken them a while to get hold of Holland. He wasn't picking up the phone, so Frank Silva had sent a deputy to the house, at which point Holland decided to go straight to the hospital.

Later, as Alice sat on the sand wrapped in blankets with Henry's head in her lap, Patricia Cox had come over and knelt down in front of her. She took Alice's hand between her palms.

'Alice, honey, are you alright? What happened?' she asked.

'Yes, we're fine. Now. But we weren't for a while there, were we, Henry?'

Henry nodded, staring straight ahead vacantly

'It was something, all right,' Alice said, managing a small smile. 'Wasn't it, Henry?' Alice gently stroked Henry's wet hair.

'Hi, Henry. Are you OK? How are you feeling?' Patricia looked closely at Henry.

'OK, I guess.' Henry nodded again.

'Alice, are you really OK? How are you feeling? Tell me what happened,' said Patricia. 'I talked just a minute to Finn. You were on the boat. Where, exactly? Just the three of you with Finn and Vee, not Holland? Where was Holland?'

'No, Holland stayed home, he had work to do. It was just the three of us out on the boat with Vee and Finn for a little picnic up at Copper Cove. The weather turned on the way back and we got hit by a massive storm. Really, I've never seen anything like it. Gotta be global warming. Gigantic thunderhead. Must have been blowing forty knots or more.'

'Right. I got that. Then what happened?'

'We got heeled over when the wind hit us like a freight train, I mean, really hit us. We all got thrown around and Tank went over the side.' Alice paused and looked down at her knee to collect herself.

'Over the side? Was he strapped on? Or, what?'

'Yes, miraculously, he had gotten himself clipped on just before it hit, otherwise I can't bear to think what might have happened.'

'Oh, Jesus, that must have been terrifying!'

'Yes. Terrifying.'

Patricia waited for Alice to continue.

'Well, we got him back in the boat. Finn did mouth to mouth. He was amazing. And we made a run for it. We got pushed onto the three buoy as we came into the harbor, cracked the hull, so Finn had to run us up on the sand.'

'Oh, my God. It's a miracle you guys are OK. I saw that storm! It shook the whole house, just for, like, twenty minutes, and then it passed. So much rain, though.'

'Yeah, it was something. Pretty scary, huh Henry?' Alice said to the boy. 'That Finnegan was really something, wasn't he, Henry? Wow,' she said to Pat. 'He saved us. Seriously.'

'Well, good, OK, I'm so glad you're safe now. Did you get a chance to call Samantha? She must be worried sick. Do you want me to call her for you?'

'I haven't had a chance to call her. I'm sure Holland has. But, yes, call her, please do. Tell her you saw us and that we're just fine. Tell her that,' Alice says.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Shipbuilding

### July

### 2014

SAMANTHA LOOKS ACROSS the foot of the bed at the dahlias on the dresser and marvels that they are still fresh. What has it been, four days? Outside the window, the high-pitched whine of leaf blowers clearing away grass clippings fills the space between her and her next thought. She remembers how much Holland would rage at that sound.

‘Get a fucking rake!’ he’d yell. It never failed to irritate her when he did that.

Sam turns and looks at the slender back of the young man fast asleep next to her. Her family will be back in less than a week. She is not looking forward to the end of her time alone.

Samantha reaches out and gently curls a lock of her partner’s thick blond hair at the nape of his neck around her finger, holding it there, looking at the color, rubbing the strands between her finger and her thumb. Slowly, she traces her hand across his shoulder and down the curve of his back where the sheet covers his buttocks, then up and over and down his leg as far as she can reach without moving



herself.

*This is a beautiful thing. All of it. A beautiful, beautiful thing.*

'Come on, Nicky.' she slaps him gently on the ass. 'Time to get up.'

Sam sits on the edge of the bed and wiggles her toes. Funny things, toes. Slowly touching the floor, first toe, second toe, ball to arch to heel, every point of contact a new sensation. She stands, naked, feeling the floor beneath her feet and smiling at nothing in particular.

On with her robe, through the door, she grabs her hair and tosses it over her shoulder. Down the stairs, weightless, dazzled by the warmth of the sun streaming through the windows in the kitchen. Has she ever been in that room, that house, before? She feels it in her skin, the world afresh.

Samantha can't stop smiling. Everything is a wonder. She runs water for the kettle and sees it sparkle. Coffee beans, dark, rich, earthy, against a lightness in her body. The grinder whirrs.

From somewhere in the front hall her phone chimes. She has messages. Three calls from Holland, one from Nance. A call and a text from Patricia in Pearson's Bight. She'll take the last one first.

'What the fuck? Jesus darling, how are you? Are you alright? I left a message on your vm. Call me!' Samantha reads.

What is this? She finds Patricia's message on her voice mail.

'Samantha, baby, are you OK? Jesus, what a scene! Jimmy Finnegan's boat run up on the beach and all the fire trucks and EMTs. I'm just calling to see if you are all right. Call me right away! I want to know what you hear from the hospital.'

Samantha's heart turns cold.

'Call me!' Holland texted.

Frantically, she finds Holland's voice mail.

'Hi Sam, please call me. There's been an accident with Tank. I need to talk to you.'

'Hi Sam, I really need to talk to you. Please call me! It's important.'

'Sam, I need you to pick up your fucking phone! Call me for chrissake!'

*What the fuck?*

Samantha calls Patricia.

'Oh, Sam! Great! Finally! How are you? Are you OK? What do you hear from the hospital? How is Tank?' Patricia says.

'Pat, hi. Listen, what's going on? I don't know what you're talking about. I just heard my messages.'

'Oh, baby, you don't know? Holland didn't call you?'

'I had the ringer off'

'Oh. Well. Shit. SHIT! OK, well, I talked to Alice just briefly, what I know I got from her. She was pretty shaken up. She had a nasty gash on her forehead. I guess she and the boys were out on Jimmy Finnegan's boat this afternoon, got caught up in this massive thunderstorm, and got into trouble on the bay. He had to beach the boat. She didn't tell me much more except that Tank had gotten hurt somehow.'

'What?'

'I heard the fire trucks from the house and when I got down to the beach they had Tank tied down on a stretcher and were putting him in the ambulance. Henry was there. He looked pretty shaken up too but Alice said he'll be fine.'

'Fuck! And Holland? What about Holland?'

'Holland wasn't there, babe.'

'WHAT?' Samantha sits down at the kitchen table and then stands up again.

'No, Holland wasn't there.' Patricia says. 'It was just Alice and the boys. And Violet and Finnegan.'

'Fuck! FUCK! Oh, SHIT! OK, I'm calling Holland. I gotta go. I'll call you back.'

'Yes, call me back and let me know what you find out.'

'OK, bye, Pat. Thanks. Thanks for calling me.'

'Yeah, call me back, OK?'

'Yes.'

Samantha finds her emergency cigarettes and lights one on the stove, holding her hair away from the flame. The sink is her ashtray. With the phone to her ear and a hand on her head, she calls Holland. What the fuck? Where the fuck is he? What was he thinking, letting Alice go out with the boys on a boat, for chrissake?

'Sam,' Holland answers. 'Where have you been? Why haven't you answered your phone? You make me crazy when you do this!'

'S I had the ringer off, Holland. Just needed some rest. Where are you? What the fuck is going on? I just got off the phone with Patricia. What's going on with Tank? Is he OK?'

'Tank is OK. We had a little scare, with the amount of water he took in. He hit his head pretty good. He's going to take some healing but he'll be fine. I'm at the hospital with Henry. They're going to keep both of the boys overnight, for observation. Probably Tank will stay an extra day, just as a precaution.'

'What the fuck, Holland! What happened? What do you mean, he hit his head? And where were you? Were you with them, with the boys?'

'Tank broke his collarbone, Sam, and, no, I wasn't with them, my mom was. I was home, writing.'

Samantha feels her anger rise up in her gut. She's getting loud.

'Oh, *COME ON!* Hit his head? Broke his collarbone? What happened?

'Please, Sam, it was an accident, a freak storm, we're all just fine. Calm down and I'll tell you what I know.'

'Oh, Jesus! What you know? Jesus, you weren't even there! OK, tell me what you know!'

Samantha doesn't hear Nick enter the kitchen behind her.

'Coffee?' he asks. His voice cracks. 'And water.'

Samantha's heart stops. She spins around and clutches the phone to her chest.

Nick stands in the doorway in his boxer shorts. His hair is in his eyes and there is a red crease across his chest where he had wrapped his arm around himself in his sleep. His sheepish smile disappears when he sees Samantha's face.

'Shit!' she says.

'What's up?' he asks, nervously.

Sam turns her back on him and speaks carefully into the phone, struggling to stay calm.

'Holland, Jesus, hold on, someone is banging at the door. Just hold on a second.'

She carefully mutes the phone and turns back to Nick.

'Nicky, I can't have you here right now'' she says. 'Please, I am so sorry, but something has come up. A family emergency. Please get dressed and let yourself out, OK?'

'Um, OK, but what about coffee?''

'Sorry, Nick, I can't do that right now, really, you'll have to get some down the street. I'm so sorry. Get dressed, let yourself out. Quietly, please. No more talking.' she gestures with the phone. 'OK?'

Nick nods.

'OK.' He heads back upstairs and Sam gets back to Holland.

Running her hand through her hair, she takes a big drag.

'Are you smoking?' Holland asks.

'Fuck, Holland! Just tell me what happened.'

Holland tells Sam that Alice had taken Henry and Tank on a picnic outing with Jimmy Finnegan and his girlfriend, Vee, on Jimmy's boat. He explains that Jimmy's is a big boat, a lobster boat, very safe, and that Finnegan is very responsible and experienced on the water.

'Jesus, Holland, Jimmy Finnegan? Isn't he that old hippie lobsterman? Are you serious?'

'He's very stable, Sam. he's an old friend of my mom's, been around forever. Very experienced. Really.'

Holland goes on to tell how they had gotten caught in a freak storm, very violent, and if it hadn't

been for Finnegan, it could have been much worse. They all had their jackets on, and were clipped in, and at one point Tank went over the side.

'WHAT?'

'I know, I know, but they fished him out right away.'

Holland told her they were able to get him back in the boat but not before he had taken in quite a bit of water. Finnegan did mouth to mouth and brought him around. He must have hit his shoulder when he went over.

'Was he in a lot of pain?'

'I'm sure, yes, some pain, but I understand he may have been in shock. The EMTs shot him up right away when they got there. Not a lot of tissue damage. He'll just need to be in a sling for a few months is all.'

'How *much* muscle damage, Holland?' Sam demands.

'It's going to be fine, Sam. He's young, he'll bounce right back.'

Sam paces the floor. She takes a minute to breathe.

'OK, Holland, this is a lot for me to digest. I just can't believe you let the boys go out on the water with your mother and you not there to keep an eye on them. Jesus. Can I talk to them?'

'No, they're out now, sedated.'

'Even Henry?'

'The doctors want them both to rest and then they'll check on them in the morning. They may want to do another CAT scan on Tank. I'm sure they'll let Henry go home. They've got them bunked in together. I'm going to stay here tonight with them. He's fine.'

'I guess I should ask, how's Alice? Pat saw her and said she had a gash on her head.'

'Yeah, a pretty nasty cut. Got hit with a flying deck chair, apparently. But she's fine too, just shaken up a bit, you know.'

'Well, yeah, I think she *should* be shaken up.'

'Samantha, she didn't do anything wrong. It was a freak accident. She and Finn handled it,' Holland says. There is a pause.

'Sam, I have to ask, how is it you pick up Patricia's calls but not mine?'

'It just worked out that way, Holland. I'm sorry, I had the ringer off, is all, I needed to sleep. I just happened to see her message first.'

'Right. OK. Well...um...is there anything else you want to know? I'll call you in the morning with an update and I'm sure you'll be able to talk to the boys then.'

'OK, fine...do I need to come out?'

‘Not unless you want to, Sam,’ Holland says, his voice betraying irritation. ‘I know the boys are missing you.’

‘Alright, well, let me think about it. Call me in the morning, OK?’

‘Sure, will do.’

There is an empty pause in the conversation.

‘OK, well, I love you, and don’t worry, we have it all under control here.’ Holland says.

‘OK, Holland,’ Samantha says. ‘Love you too.’ She hangs up.



Two days later, Alice lies on the couch and adjusts the ice pack on her forehead. It’s raining. Sylvester is curled at her feet and the dogs lie protectively beside her on the floor. She is still shaken by what happened on the water. Samantha was furious with Holland. Even if Alice hadn’t heard them fighting on the phone—what, three times now?—you couldn’t miss her rage. Had she been wrong to take the boys out on the boat without their dad? She didn’t think so. Still, Alice can’t shake the feeling that somehow she is to blame for Tank’s shoulder and Holland’s argument with Sam.

The dogs hear the car pull in before she does and turn their heads.

Holland and the boys bang through the front door, dripping wet. They have just come back from dropping over three-hundred dollars at Walmart on two massive LEGO pirate ship models. They also did some of the week’s shopping for the special snacks the boys like that Alice won’t buy them even though the Food Buoy, where she shops, stocks their favorite hot buffalo-wing chips.

Henry puts their packages on the dining room table and the boys sit down to examine their prizes. Tank is careful with his shoulder, wrapped to his torso.

‘Do we really have to drive all the way home, Dad?’ Tank says, whining just a bit. ‘Can’t you drive and Henry and I take a plane?’

Tank’s voice sounds a little slow to Alice’s practiced ear.

*Maybe he’s on something for the pain.*

‘No can do, buddy. Way too much dinero for the aeroplano, if you get my drift.’ Holland calls from the kitchen.

‘Dad, that’s really bad!’ Henry shouts back. ‘Can you bring me some scissors?’

‘Really bad, Dad,’ Tank agrees.

‘Really bad. Don’t do that again, OK?’ Henry repeats.

‘Okey-dokey, smokey.’

'Don't do that either,' says Tank.

Alice sits up and looks at the boys as they work to open their boxes.

'Looks like you two found something to do. What did you get?'

'LEGO,' says Henry, not looking up.

'Pirate ships,' says Tank.

'Yeah, really cool, big sets. Dad went all in,' says Henry.

'They're actually a present from Gama, boys, so thank her, OK?' Holland calls from the kitchen.

'Who's hungry?'

'Thank you, Gama,' both boys say in unison.

'You're most welcome, boys.' And then, 'Holland! Can you please put some coffee on?'

'Sure. Do you want anything to eat? Want some lunch? We have all sorts of stuff now.'

'Thank you, I'll wait. You all go ahead,' Alice says. 'Some hot coffee would be just the thing.'

Would you make a fresh pot?'

When Holland has gotten the boys squared away with food and their project for the day, he asks again.

'Are you sure I can't get you anything?'

'I'm sure, sweetheart. Are the boys settled in?' Alice cranes her neck to see into the dining room.

'Oh yeah, this should keep them busy for at least, I don't know, another hour maybe? Tops. Right guys?'

'No, Dad.' Henry is focussed on reading the directions while Tank sorts LEGO pieces into neat little piles. 'These are big. And hard. This is going to take a while,' he says.

'Good. OK. Holland, bring some of that coffee upstairs, why don't you?'

Upstairs in the studio, Alice sits on the old sofa with her coffee and lights a cigarette. Holland stands, looking at one of Alice's new paintings on the easel. The picture is layered with subtle tones of warm and cool gray woven together with strands of dark indigo-blacks and umbers.'

'This is beautiful, Mom. Really, these few new gray paintings you've shown me are strong.'

'Thank you, Holland. I appreciate your saying that. It means something, coming from you, even if I am your mother.'

'No, I mean it. You know I would never lie to you, right?' Holland says with a grin.

'Well, I don't know about that. But, listen, Holland, what are your plans? Are you going back to Denver or what? Because you know you can stay here.'

'Well, I don't know. What are you saying? I thought we would all head back as soon as Tank feels a little better and the doctors tell us we can go.'

‘Well, here’s the thing, Holland. There’s plenty of room here. It’s just me, you know. I love having the boys, and they have so much fun when they’re out here. And what’s going on with Samantha? Why isn’t she here? Doesn’t she want to come out too?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know what’s going on with her, mom. She tells me she’s starting a new course or something with a lot of writing, I don’t know. But we’re fine. We had a long talk about her coming out after the accident. She just may not make it this year.’

Alice knows well that Holland is lying to her. Things are not fine with Samantha, at least as far as Alice can see. He does it so easily, lying. Always has. It hurts her, though, when she sees him lying to himself.

‘Well, here’s the thing. What I am seeing is that you are actually doing some writing, and this is a good thing, in my book. I like knowing that you are up and out at your little station on the porch every morning, and I’d like to help that continue. Like I say, the boys love it here. Why don’t you stay longer? Stay the whole summer! Stay until they have to be back in school. When is that, some time after Labor Day?’

‘August twenty-eighth, actually, this year.. Can you believe that?’

‘Well, OK, if you want, stay until then. We can put them on a plane. I’ll spring for it. Then you can drive back on your own. When do you need to be back?’

‘Actually, I don’t. I let them know I would be taking a sabbatical this fall.’

‘You can do that?’

‘Yeah, well, not really, but I did it anyway. I let them know in March. I have it coming, I have some seniority. I didn’t tell anyone, I’m not sure why. There is a possibility I may be able to use a house in Maine this fall to work on my novel.’

‘Really! Where in Maine?’

‘Chokeberry Bluff. It’s a small island just north of Penobscot.’

‘Oh! I’ve never heard of that one, but great! That’s great! So you could actually stay here longer, then! But what about Sam? Won’t that be a lot for her to handle alone?’

‘Well, first of all, she doesn’t know yet, and second, I think letting her pick up the slack now would be fine. I’ve earned it, this is part of my timing on this. She’s finished with her degree, and I carried a bigger load for the last three years, so maybe it’s time for her to step up and let me have some me-time.’

‘OK. I approve of that! When were you planning to tell her?’

‘Uh, well, soon now, I guess. I talked to Sol yesterday—he’s the one with the house—and he said he would be able to let me know by next week if it can actually work out.’

'And then you'll talk to Sam?'

'Yeah, I guess that would be the...yes.'

'Well this is very exciting!'



# Chapter Sixteen

## Permission

July

2014

Alvin Beal and Holland Dickerson are both coming back to life. The morning started for Holland at five when he carried his coffee out to his regular station at the far end of the porch to write and watch the sun come up over the pond. This has been his routine since he and the boys arrived in Pearson's Bight. Alice insisted that Henry and Tank leave him alone, undisturbed, for the whole morning, and for the last two weeks or more he has been taking full advantage of his privacy.

Holland has been working off and on for almost six years on the novel about Alvin and his wife Cathy. All he really knew when he started out was that he wanted to write a story about the pursuit of Happiness. Beyond that, his thinking was vague. He knew what Alvin looked like, and could see him clearly in his mind's eye. He now knows something about how he thinks, but he's not at all sure about how Alvin feels.

Holland's original premise was that as time moved forward in the book, Alvin would either be found out or confess to his wife Cathy his affair with Jean, also married with a family. At that point, Holland assumed Cathy would then transform Alvin's life into a living hell. She would turn her back on him, poison the children's minds, and eventually he would move out. Meanwhile, Jean would grow tired of the hiding and running around and call off the affair. She would go back to her husband and family and devote her time and energy to domestic bliss. Alvin, isolated and alone, shunned by his family, is on his own. Alvin's single-minded pursuit of Happiness brings him exactly to the opposite of what he is looking for.

For Sol Ellis, the key to success in the adult fiction market for a novel like Holland's is Redemption. An overwhelming majority of his readers will be women, Sol tells Holland, and women want to believe that good men who behave badly and are properly punished for their transgressions can be redeemed.

'Redemption, that's what people want to read about.' Sol had said. 'Women want to believe they can change men, improve them. People want to believe that they can be better than who they think they are. Has your man Alvin learned nothing at all? Has he grown? Is he a better man? These are the questions you should be asking.'

Sitting on Alice's porch, Holland has decided that the reason he hasn't gotten anywhere with his novel is that his initial idea bores him. He has known this on some level all along, but he failed to act on his intuition, and the writing just ran out of gas. Since arriving back at Pearson's Bight, Holland has come up with a new approach that has got him excited. He has reimagined who Alvin is and how he would behave. Now he is writing tirelessly.

What if, Holland asks, Alvin is not overcome with guilt and remorse?

What if he doesn't confess to his wife?

What if Alvin is a serial bigamist who likes it that way?

Holland isn't sure whether there even is such a thing as a serial bigamist, but he figures that if there is such a thing, and if it is a rare condition, then so much the better. Holland will create a man who desperately needs to live a double life. This man also believes that to follow the true path to Happiness, he must regularly refresh his marriage. To accomplish this, Alvin has to kill his wife.

Holland is reenergized. The only problem is that he has no idea how to write a murder. Holland has never been a true crime buff, doesn't read a lot of mysteries. All he knows about murder is gleaned from a lifetime of television shows, movies, and the occasional story in the paper.

Holland asks Jasper if he has any ideas.

'If you wanted to get rid of Khaki, how would you do it?'

The two of them have had a day sailing out in the bay on *Tern*, Jasper's dark blue Morris 28. The wind has been dropping steadily all afternoon, and they are limping slowly back to the harbor, hoping to get in before six. Jasper sits up on the cabin with his back against the mast. Holland is at the tiller.

'What do you mean? Like get a divorce?'

'No, I mean, like get rid of her permanently.'

Kill her?'

'Right.'

'What sick shit have you been thinking about now?' Jasper laughs.

'It's for my story. My main character has decided that his wife is the primary obstacle standing between himself and his True Happiness and he wants her gone.'

'Sounds kind of ordinary, doesn't it?' Jasper asks.

'Yeah, except that this guy is what I am calling a serial bigamist. He gets off on having a double life. He likes being married to two people at the same time, but he gets bored and has to change it up regularly,' Holland says. 'How would you do it?'

'I have no idea. I never thought about it.'

'Well, think about it now. Would you kill her in the house and make it look like self defense? Or stage a break-in? Or would you make it look like she committed suicide, like in the garage with the car, or poison her slowly with something in her food, like an Agatha Christie novel? Switch out her antidepressants for something toxic? I think I remember reading some story about a husband slowly poisoning his wife with thallium. Or maybe antifreeze in the Gatorade. Isn't that how it's usually done? What is thallium, anyway?'

'Couldn't tell you, buddy.'

'It could be a car crash. He could run her off the road, but I guess then he'd have to use a stolen car and I have no idea how to write about that.'

Holland thinks for a moment.

'Seriously, just humor me,' Holland asks. 'How would you do it?'

'Me? Personally? I'd probably just hire someone to do it for me,' Jasper says.

'Really? See, that just seems too risky to me. Then there's this other person in the world who knows what happened. How can that be a good thing?'

'I guess you just have to pay the person enough to assure he'll be quiet. I don't know about these things!'

'Well, right, you have the money for that. My guy might be able to scrape together 10K, tops.'

'Yeah. No, I think you're talking fifty to a hundred-thousand for a proper hired hit. Otherwise you're taking your life in your own hands.'

The boat lazily jibes over. Jasper slides under the boom and Holland switches sides.

'What if there's an insurance policy you're going to split? Like, three-hundred-thousand. Then the killer is in on the deal.'

'OK. I'm not sure how much of a difference that makes when it comes to someone ratting you out,' says Jasper.

'I'm liking this idea of murder for hire,' says Holland. 'It could work for me.'

'Right, but, don't these people all end up in jail?'

'Only the ones who get caught. Think about all of the unsolved murders there are in this country.'

'Do you know the statistics?'

'Well, no, but I can imagine, right? I'm writing a novel, after all. I get to make stuff up.'

'You're asking the wrong guy, though, Holland.' Jasper says. 'I mean, look at me. I'm a fucking toff. I goof around in my sailboat all summer pretending that I'm some sort of sea captain hero. You need to talk to someone closer to the street. Don't you know anyone like that? Out in Denver?'

'Actually, I might.'



The more Holland thinks about the idea of a murder for hire the more it appeals to him. He needs information. Holland calls Hazzard and gets his voice mail.

'Yo, this is Hazzard of the DDW. Talk to me.'

'Hey, Hazzard, how ya doin, man? Listen, can you give me a call sometime, sort of soon, I have a couple of questions you might be able to help me with. Thanks. You have my number.'

Every time Holland says 'You have my number', he realizes that he sounds like an old man. Of course, he has his number. It's on his phone. But it's an automatic thing for him to say.

Two days later Holland hears back from Hazzard.

'Yo, Holland, what's on, dog?'

'Hey Hazzard, how you doin?'

'I am hearing nothing but good shit coming back at me from that piece you wrote, man. That was beautiful, man, came out beautiful.'

'I'm so glad you're happy. I'm happy you're happy.'

'I am, man, I am. So, what's going on? What can I do for you?'

'OK, so I have a question, right? I'm working on a writing project. It's fiction, and one of the characters wants to hire somebody to kill his wife.'

'Oh.'

'So, I don't know anything about anything like that and I thought you might.'

'I might what?'

'You might know something about hiring someone to kill somebody.'

Several beats of silence on the other end of the phone. Then a burst of laughter from Hazzard.

'*WHAT?*' You thought I would know about something like that? Why, because I'm from the

'hood?'

'Well, yeah, I guess. You're just the best person I know to ask.'

'Shit, man, I don't know shit about that kind of thing. And you should be careful asking questions like that, you could get yourself in some trouble, know what I mean?'

'I'm a writer, just exploring my options, all on the up and up.'

'Still, I hope you're not doin' your research on the internet, leaving a trail.'

'No, no. Nothing like that. That's why I'm asking you. Do you know anyone I might talk to who might know something about the topic? Somebody you trust? It's just research, man, there's nothing nefarious about it.'

'I don't want to talk about this anymore,' says Hazzard. 'I've talked too much already. It's twisting me up a little. You could talk to Fritz.'

'Fritz? From the bar that night? From Fort Greene?'

'Yeah, that guy, Fritz. He might be able to help you.'

'Would he talk to me? Would you give him my number?'

'Yeah, uh, he's a bit hard to get to.'

'I'd really appreciate it.'

'OK, for you, I'll do it. Let me make that happen. I'll give him your number. Let him call you.'

True to his word, a few days later Holland gets a phone call from an unfamiliar number with a New Mexico area code.

'This is Fritz. I hear you want to know about hiring for a disappearance.'

'Well, not a real disappearance. It's for a book I'm writing.'

'Right. What do you want to know?'

# Chapter Seventeen

## The Women

August

2014

NANCE GETS TO Samantha's house just after seven. She has three tickets to see Devotchka at the Mercury Cafe and is taking Samantha and her plus one. She looks like a lion with a mane of shoulder-length dark brown hair, cut just that day. Her flawless tan is set off by a sleeveless white blouse, black leather miniskirt, and three inch heels, black.

It takes a while, but eventually Nick answers the door, shirtless.

'Hi, Nicky. What's shakin'?' Nance says, stepping inside.

'Hi Nance,' Nick says with a big grin. His hair covers half his face.

'You're looking fit.'

'Um, sure.'

'Nance?' Samantha calls down from upstairs.

'There's wine on the counter in the kitchen. I'll be down in a minute. Talk to Nick.'

'OK. Come on, Nicky. Do you drink wine?'

'Sure.'

'Come tell me something interesting about yourself.'

Nick sits at the kitchen counter watching Nance pour them each a glass. She is enjoying giving him a full on profile. She knows how hot she looks.

Nance sits down opposite Nick, leaning back on her stool and watching him watch her cross her legs, very slowly. She acts cocky but she is a little ill at ease with Nick. How do you talk to a nineteen-year old? Answer—you don't.

*I could get on my knees and suck this boy off right now and be done before Samantha gets down stairs.*

Nance leans forward and looks straight into Nick's eyes.

'Nick, before we get into a deep conversation about you, I think you should run upstairs and finish getting dressed.'

'Oh, um, right,' Nick mumbles, suddenly self-aware. He pauses a split second with a look on his face that says, *'You're serious, right?'* Nance understands and gestures with her chin out the door. Nick jumps off his stool and heads back upstairs. Nick and Samantha cross each other in the hallway.

'I'm going to go put on some clothes,' he says.

'Nicky, go take a shower.' She gives him a quick kiss on the lips. 'You need one. You know where the towels are. Please put whatever you use in the hamper when you're done.'

'OK,' Nick says, and goes.

Nance watches, amused, from her perch in the kitchen.

Samantha sits at the bar, and pours herself a fresh glass. She is radiant.

'Having fun?' Nance asks.

'So much fun.'

They both laugh out loud.

'I have to tell you I thought seriously about going down on him before you came downstairs.'

'Maybe you should have. He's got fucking energy to burn.'

'Good?'

'Like a volcano.'

'Please don't tell me that.'

'You asked. Hey, by the way, Nick told me that his pal Arlo should be there tonight. You could try for him. We could do a four-way.'

'Hmmm...'

Samantha pulls out a cigarette from her purse and offers one to Nance.

'Smoking, are we?' Nance asks.

'Pretty much have to.'

Nance laughs. Sam lights them up.

'So what are you hearing from the husband?' Nance asks.

'Fuck-all. And listen to this. Can you believe this? He just told me this morning. Holland is taking a sabbatical this fall! He's going to be away until after Thanksgiving! Fuck!'

'What?'

'He's leaving me here alone to deal with the kids. Fuck! I am so angry.'

'How is he able to do this? Where is he going to be?'

'He says he wants to fly the boys back—on their own, right?—and then he's going to stay with his mother. Jesus.'

'Wow...and what's he going to do? Write?'

'Yes. Actually, apparently he has some friend, Sol somebody, who is giving him a house in Maine for the fall. Can you believe this?'

'So what did you tell him?'

'I said go. Go for it. Knock yourself out.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. I don't want to be the bad guy. And, I really don't want him around. I am just about done with him. He's a pretty good dad. I just don't want to be living in the same house with him. Is that so bad?'

'I don't think so. No, not really, in your case. What about the boys? Can you handle them alone?'

'We'll be fine. They seem to be having the time of their lives without me, though. Alice spoils them.'

'How's Tank doing?'

'Great, I hear. Still in a sling. I talk to them pretty much every other day. I have to call them, otherwise Holland has an uncanny way of timing his calls just as I'm getting off.'

They hear Nick coming down the stairs and finish off their wine. Nance pulls out a vape pen and fires it up. She takes a pull and hands it to Samantha. Samantha takes hers and turns to Nick..

'Nicky? Do you want some of this?'



When they get to the Merc, Nick spots Arlo in line and they go over to stand together with him. Arlo introduces them to his date for the night, Shane. Nance figures Shane to be about sixteen. It's an all-ages show.



Samantha recognizes the woman several people ahead of them and before she can turn away she hears a voice call out, 'Sam? Samantha?'

It's Mickie. She is standing with a man covered in tattoos who looks vaguely familiar to Sam. Suddenly, Mickie is not sure she should have spoken. The two women look at each other warily. Neither one makes a move, until Samantha says, as upbeat as she can manage,

'Hi, Mickie! How great to see you! How are you doing?'

'I'm great. I'm always great!' Mickie laughs. 'And you? Doing well? How's Holland and the boys?'

'Oh, they're fine. Just fine.'

There is an awkward pause as the two women size up the situation.

Mickie finally turns to introduce the man she is with.

'Sam, this is my friend Hazzard. Hazzard is a street artist based here in Denver.' Mickie pauses as a light comes on in her head.

'Actually, you've met!' Mickie is excited. 'Sam, Hazzard is the artist who did that mural with the kids last year at school! Hazzard knows Holland!'

Mickie turns to Hazzard.

'Hazzard, you know Sam because you know Sam's husband, Holland! The writer, Holland Dickerson? How great is this!'

'Right, right. Right!' Hazzard holds out his hand. 'Holland, the writer, sure. Very cool. And you're his wife? Very cool. Great to meet you. Again, I guess.'

Sam shakes his hand. 'Yes, great to see you, again,' she says.

There is another pause as everyone tries to get their head around what is happening. Nick and Arlo are frozen. Shane just smiles away in blissful ignorance. .

Sam turns half way around and says, 'And these are my friends. Mickie, meet Nance, Nick, Arlo, and, um, Shane.'

Hazzard sees exactly what is going on right away.

'You know, I talked to your husband just about a week ago. Yeah.' Hazzard says.

'Really?' says Samantha.

'Yeah. He was asking me something about killing someone, actually. For a book, he said, not for real!' Hazzard laughs. 'No, no, no, not for real.'

'Killing someone? Really?'

'Uh-huh. I think I owe him a call, actually. I'll be sure to tell him I saw you,' Hazzard says.

'Yes, you'll have to do that,' says Mickie.



Patricia has Samantha on the phone.

'I'm just checking in with you, Sam. How are you doing, really?'

'I'm good. Great, in some ways.'

'How's that boy of yours working out? What's his name, Nick? Is he still around?'

'Yes, Nick. He's still around. We're having some fun together.'

'I bet you are.'

Patricia Cox grew up in the small New Hampshire hamlet of Tamworth, just outside Conway. She moved to Pearson's Bight in 1993 with her then husband, Paul, a musician, and stayed after the divorce. Pat runs a local store, the Blue Lobster Bowl and Gift Shoppe, that specializes in artistic blown glass ornaments and tableware. She also throws in the occasional Tarot reading for a price—free to her special friends.

Patricia met and befriended Sam soon after the young Dickerson family started bringing their kids back to visit in the summer. Samantha was wary of Patricia at first, but their relationship has only grown. Unlike Holland, who grew up in Pearson's Bight and knows many of the locals well, Sam never felt truly embraced by the community. She was a Midwesterner, a Nebraskan, and New Englanders can be frosty to outsiders. Pat was different. She had been an outsider too, once, and recognized the young mother's need for a friend. Samantha eventually came to trust Patricia and to rely on the older woman's camaraderie as she navigated the petty, social waters of Pearson's Bight. This was particularly true in the case of Samantha's relationship with her mother-in-law, Alice, who Pat also knows well.

'So how is this fling of yours affecting your feelings about your husband?' Pat gets right to the point.

*How does this fling affect my feelings about my husband?*

It seems to Samantha that all her life no one has ever taken the time to ask her about her feelings, not even Nance, her best friend. Certainly not Nance. They've talked about this, Patricia and Samantha. Both women can commiserate as middle children from large families who feel that they got lost in the mix.

'I think it is giving me a kind of permission to admit to my feeling of just, I don't know, feelings of separation. I just don't feel I have to run in and help him out like I always have in the past.'

'Yes, I can understand that. But this is not new, right? You've had this feeling of separation before.'

'Yes, but this feels more complete, somehow. Like I can feel it in my body and not just think

about it in my mind.'

'Yes.'

'Actually, he is going to be away for the next three months on sabbatical. He managed to tell me this just last week.'

'Really? So you'll get a taste of what real separation feels like, then.'

'Yeah, I'm kind of dreading it and kind of excited at the same time.'

'Worried about taking care of the boys, or...?'

'Not really. They're pretty independent now. More worried that I might do something rash, you know, something I will regret.'

'Well, I'd say you're already doing that,' Pat laughs.

Yeah, I guess I am, aren't I?'

'Pat, let me ask you, do you see my boys around town at all?'

'Actually, Alice brought them in just the other day to look at T-shirts. So handsome, your boys! They look so much like their father, only with your eyes and coloring. It's quite a combination.'

'Yes, we make good looking babies, that much is true. How did Tank seem? The littler one.'

'I know Tank! Tank is very capable. He seems to be coming around just fine from that awful ordeal. We found him a sweatshirt big enough to get over his sling.'

'A sweatshirt? Does it say anything? Your T-shirts are always so much better than the usual tourist garbage,' Samantha laughs.

'I think he picked the one that just has a blue lobster on the back. Nothing at all on the front. Kind of looks like a tattoo.'

'What color?'

'Kind of a nice blue-green, as I remember. Brings out his eyes.'

'Oh, good. I'm glad he found something he likes and bought it from you. That makes me feel better.'

Samantha has always been able to talk to Patricia about Alice. She trusts that whatever she says, won't go any further.

'It's Alice that I think about most, actually. I kind of hate that, but she always has been able to get a little under my skin. I just think she knows more than she lets on. That's one of the reasons I didn't want to come out this year. I just know she would see everything. I think she can read minds. She scares me.'

'She can,' Patricia says. 'She *can* read minds. Alice is very intuitive. It comes from growing up in an alcoholic family. Children become hyper-sensitive to the signals they pick up from the grown-ups

around them. It's kind of a matter of psychic life or death.'

'Yeah, I would be afraid she might see that I've been playing around. I can't sit down at the breakfast table with that. *Especially* with the boys around.'

'I don't think you have to fear Alice. I've told you before, the Alice I know is a very cool customer. She doesn't get in the middle of things. She prefers to watch from a distance. She's an observer. Also a trait of kids who grow up in abusive homes.'

'I just can't handle the idea that there is someone out in the world who doesn't like me or does not approve of something I'm doing.'

'Well, sister, you're going to have to get over that in a hurry if you want to move forward with the trajectory you're on now.'

'I suppose.'

'Listen, I have to go,' Patricia continues. 'But before I do. I want you to pick a number between one and seventy-eight. Go on, don't think about it too much.'

'Okay, how about the Buddhist lucky number eight?'

'Eight. Good call. Strength. The first Card of Transformation. Number eight is about exercising your options. It's also about having the willpower to abandon some bad habits. You can use the power of this card to move you into a place of increased self-assurance. It's also the card that represents the power of the feminine over the masculine. Strangely, it was flipped with the major card Justice, number eleven...how does that strike you, today?'

'I like that. I like that a lot.'



Patricia and Alice have coffee together about once a month at the Blue Lobster Bakery. Patricia befriended Alice when she first moved to Pearson's Bight and began looking around for suitable real estate to start her new retail business. Talking to the woman who helped run the post office, who knew all the comings and goings in town, seemed to Pat like a good plan. They have been fast friends ever since.

Patricia is a half-generation younger than Alice. There is something about Patricia that puts Alice at ease in a way she rarely feels with other people. She is a good listener and a reliable sounding board. Alice has something of a blind spot for Patricia. Although she knows that Pat is a close friend of Samantha's, she sometimes forgets herself and says things she later regrets.

They have to talk at first about the day on the boat with Finnegan and the boys.

'That must have been terrible for you. I can't imagine, being alone like that, responsible for those boys when the parents aren't there. Right? How does that work?'

'Its true. I guess it's part of being a guardian who's not the actual parent. You're always on your toes, hyper-vigilant. I find myself thinking how horrible it would be if something ever happened to them on my watch.'

'Right. And it did.'

'I know. I really am having to work on not feeling guilty about any of it. It was such a freaky thing. That storm, I have never seen anything like it in all my life living on the water. It just slammed us silly.'

'Well, how can any of that be your fault?'

'I don't know. From what I overhear with their phone calls, Samantha seems to think I should never have had the boys out on the boat without their dad in the first place. She sure was furious that first couple of days.

'It was such a beautiful day, too! And we were all so happy to be out there and then, bang!'

Alice stops herself before she mentions to Patricia that the grownups had all gotten quite high on the boat.

'It sounds to me, from what I've heard, that it could have been much, much worse than it was.'

'Truly. First of all, Tank was clipped into his safety harness, so that was a blessing. Without that, he would have been lost. Then it was Henry who found him quickly and helped get him back on the boat. And Finn, really, no doubt, saved his life. I think he saved all our lives, actually. We could have broached, gone aground coming in, there's no end to what could have happened. And then hitting that buoy, and taking on water like we were, I mean, beaching that boat was genius. He pulled it off. No one got seriously hurt.'

'Except you. You and Tank. That nasty cut and a couple of months in a shoulder harness is not exactly nothing.'

'Yes, but mine was from getting hit by a deck chair in the wind. That had nothing to do with grounding the boat. He was steady-on the whole way. I would trust that guy now with my life...well, I guess I already have.'

There's a break while Charlotte pours them a refill.

Patricia changes the subject.

'How are you liking having Holland and the boys with you for so long this summer?'

'Oh, it's been great, really great. It's been a win—win—win all around. The boys are having the time of their lives, and Samantha, who I suspect needs it, is getting an extended respite from living with three men. Holland has actually been able to carve out some time to do serious writing, which is always

a good thing.'

'That all sounds great, and you get to play grandma. Are you getting any painting done in all of this?'

'No, not at all, but I don't mind because having me around to help entertain those two boys helps a lot, I think.'

'And you're not losing your mind?'

'No. In fact, just the opposite. I feel very connected to those boys. I get so much out of being around them. And with Holland, I'm just so glad to see him so focused on his writing. You know, soon they'll be gone and I'll have a long winter to paint to my heart's desire.'

'Don't you find it odd that Holland can work so much better here, with you, having the boys full time, on vacation, and not at home where he has an office and a routine, and a school that gets them out of the house?'

'Not really. Honestly, I just don't think Samantha has ever been able to really support him in his life. Maybe that is just the result of having a marriage and a family to raise. But there's always been something about her that tells me she just can't get totally on board with his dream of becoming a successful author. It's always bothered me about her, actually.'

'Really. That doesn't seem right, somehow.'

'Well, all I know is that Holland is finally taking charge and doing something on his own to support himself with his writing. He's been working on this one project for, gosh, six years? Apparently, he has been getting some encouragement from a publisher friend. He's letting him have his Maine house this fall to go and be alone and just write. Holland arranged a sabbatical from St. Anne's. So Sam's day-to-day interaction won't be an issue for a while at least.'

'How's that going to play out, do you think?'

'I'm not sure. There's something going on in their marriage that Holland isn't talking about. He may not even know himself. I mean, he can be so clueless about what is happening right in front of his face.'

'You know, I've never gotten the feeling that Samantha doesn't want to be supportive of Holland's career. I just think she has aspirations of her own, even if she doesn't know exactly what they are. There's always going to be a natural tension in a marriage like that, especially with kids.'

'Maybe. Maybe you're right, I hope you are. As much as I like having Holland and the boys all to myself, I kind of wish she had come out, at least for a short stay, so I could get a chance to observe them together. Then I might have a better idea of what's going on. He is my son, after all. I want him to have what's best for him.'

'Hmm. OK, well, it's that time again, I think. You know the drill. Pick a number from one to 78. Don't think about it, just give me what pops into your head.'

'Oh, well, after all that with Hank, I have to go with unlucky thirteen.'

'Death. Not necessarily unlucky in the way we might think of it. Death is all about a change that is complete, final. That would cover a sudden death like with Hank, because your whole life at the post office was turned upside down. But, I would consider the possibility that there may be far more to come in the way of a dramatic shift.'



Alice and Violet sit on Vee's old wooden back porch in cut-offs and T's. From there they can look out over the rooftops and stately trees of Pearson's Bight to the sparkling bay on the horizon.

They had been hand addressing and stuffing envelopes all morning—the invitations to Violet and Finnegan's wedding. Alice was able to get Henry and Tank to help them out earlier but they had gotten bored and started horsing around, so Alice relented and let them go off to the beach. There didn't seem to be much more to do then, but now after running around town doing errands all afternoon, the two women are worn out.

'Let's get outside,' Alice says. 'I need a smoke.'

'Good. I'm getting a beer. Want one?'

'Sure.'

Vee goes inside and comes back out a few minutes later with two beers and a box of wooden matches. She pulls out half a joint.

'Here, help me finish this off,' she says, and strikes a match. They sit in peace, passing the spliff back and forth until Vee stubs out the roach and puts it into the match box. It is all very quiet up on Vee's porch above the distant bustle of the town. After several minutes, Alice breaks the silence.

'You would think this would be easy—just invite the whole town, take out an ad in the paper—but it's not. How many of these do we still need to get out?'

'Only about a hundred left. And, of course, he doesn't have mailing addresses for half of the people he wants to invite.'

'Well, you know what we're going to do with these invites? Let's save on some postage. We'll mail the out of town ones we have addresses for, and I will take these four stacks over to the post office myself and personally put one into each mailbox. I'm not really supposed to do that, but that way all of Pearson's Bight will be invited, and the PostMaster General will be none the wiser.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

'OK, so what else do we need to do for the party?' Alice asks, moving it right along.

'The invites are really the last thing. The food is done. Finn has lined up three oil drum grills and a team of guys who will run them. Same for the bar. He says he's also got the booze under control—we'll have to just see what that actually means. I'm not going there. There's no tableware, no linen, nothing like that, everything is paper and it's already been delivered. It's all over in one of the sheds at the boat dock. The cake is at the bakery, and the food is all coming from Homard Bleu. They will bring everything the morning of. What else is there?'

'Ice? Some sort of containers?'

'With the booze and bar guys.'

'OK. What did you finally decide about the fireworks?'

'Oh, definitely Yes on fireworks. Finn is not backing down on that. Clippy has given him a permit for a one time event, and Frank Silva will be there, of course. No doubt he'll probably have somebody else there just to keep an eye on things.'

'Great idea. That sounds like a plan.'

More time passes without either woman speaking.

'More importantly, how are you doing?' Alice asks. 'Are you at all excited?'

'I am, actually. I'm getting more and more into it. You know, this is something I have thought about for a long time. I think I have finally just given up fighting it. Now we're at the place where we can look at each other and say, 'Yes, you are the one. You have always been my one and only one'''

'Think about it. You've known me my whole life. Finn and I have been dancing around this for what seems like forever. Since we were teen-agers, really, we have been in love with each other and just somehow never were able to put the pieces together. You remember. There was all that time when we all used to hang out together, the four of us, you, me, Jack, Finn. Why did you and Jack get married and me and Finn never end up together?'

'Well, for one, I got pregnant and you didn't.'

'Well, yeah, there is that.'

They grow still again.

'What about Chuck Fish?' Alice asks. 'Is the christening and all that all under control?'

'That's another piece that I am leaving entirely up to Finn. I know that he gave Chuck a script and then Chuck came back with revisions, and they've been going back and forth. I can only imagine how that will turn out.'

Vee grows pensive.



'We have talked about it, Finn and me. Just the other day, in fact. We talked about how both of us always had these questions and excuses and false starts, all these reasons we told ourselves that we couldn't or shouldn't try to make a go of it, and in the end we both agree that there is only one reason it hasn't happened until now.'

'Which is?'

'We're both chicken-shit.' Vee bursts out laughing. Alice joins in. They look at each other and laugh harder. Watching each other bent over, laughing so hard their eyes water, they can't stop. And then, in an instant, Alice watches Vee's laughter turn to tears, and she starts to cry. Alice reaches around her friend and holds her to her body while Vee sobs in her arms.

'It's OK, baby. It's OK.'

'It's just that, it's just that, we *aren't* stupid, Finn and me. I'm not really chicken-shit. You know what it is? I just never before thought I could allow myself to be happy. I've run away from happiness my whole life.'

# Chapter Eighteen

## Residue

### August

### 2014

EVEN THOUGH HE plans to murder his wife, Alvin is worried about how he will be remembered by his children.

*Will they understand anything of who their father is, his fears and aspirations, or what drives him? Will they even care? How much of what he has done will they hold on to, and never forget long after he is gone? How much will they be able to let go by the board, and find forgiveness for him in their hearts?*

Clearly, Holland and Alvin have a lot in common. How much damage can a good man do and still be remembered as good? Can Alvin be a hero and a murderer? The questions that Alvin asks are the same questions that Holland has been asking himself. What is your legacy to be?

Some antiques are precious, but most of what is handed down from parent to child will only hold its value of association with a lost loved one for a few generations before fading, mouse-eaten in an attic or rotted in a basement, and ultimately tossed in the trash.

Children are tasked with the unholy job of sorting through the flotsam and jetsam of their parents' lives after they die, deciding what to keep and what to throw away. As painful as this can be, divvying up the physical objects is the easy part. Sorting through the emotional, psychological, and spiritual baggage will always be the harder task.

*What do we hold on to, and what do we let go by the board?*

Holland has been thinking of his life as a voyage. As a ship passing through water causes a disturbance in the field, she leaves behind in her wake an echo of a series of indistinguishable moments in time. Throughout the voyage, events spring up out of infinite space, creating tangible and intangible experiences that seem real and true to us living in the world of causes and conditions. The events of our lives are fireworks that leave a residue sticking to us as memories, like beach tar on a sneaker, some of which can be useful, some of which are not.

# Chapter Nineteen

## The Men

### August

### 2014

'TANK! WAKE UP! Tank!' Henry shakes his brother's good shoulder, being careful not to put any weight on his chest.

'Tank, time to get up. Come on!'

Tank opens one eye and looks at Henry, then up at his own hair in his face, and then back to Henry. He opens the other eye and squints.

'What time is it?' his voice cracks.

'SHHH! Keep it down. It's after two. Come on, let's go. Now!'

'Really? Do I still have to?' Tank is still half asleep. He rolls over on his side and curls up into a ball.

'TANK!' Henry hisses under his breath. 'Come *ON!*'

'I don't want to.'

'Tank! You said you would do this. We're doing it together, right? I have the stuff. It's time to go!'

'I'm tired. I'm going back to sleep. Leave me alone.' Tank pulls his sheet up over his head.

'Oh, come on. *Really?* It won't be the same without you. *Please!* You promised. Please! Come on, Tank. Let's go!'

'No. I don't think so,' Tank mumbles into his pillow. 'You go ahead. I'm too tired. I'll stay here and

make sure...’ Tanks voice trails off.

‘Oh, come on, Tank. You suck! This sucks, Tank! You said you would do this with me and now you’re bailing like a baby! You suck! You really suck. You know that?’

‘You go. You go on and have a great time,’ Tank says groggily, waving his good arm in the air. ‘Just let me go back to sleep.’

‘Fine! Have it your way! But don’t ever do this again, tell me you’ll do something and then fail on me. Fine! I’ll go by myself, then. You are a terrible brother!’

‘I am not a terrible brother,’ Tank mutters through muffled sheets. ‘I’m a tired brother who wants to go back to sleep.’

‘OK, but you are not playing with my LEGOs tomorrow or any other day for a week! I’m cutting you off for a full week.’ Henry says. ‘AND, I’m not going to help you buy that Pokemon binder you want, either.’

‘Fine, I don’t care. Keep all your stuff. I’m going to sleep now.’

‘TANK! Get *UP!* Come on, we have this all planned out! There’s no moon, it’s not windy, it’s perfect. *P-L-E-A-S-E!*’ Henry shakes Tank’s shoulder again. ‘I made sandwiches and everything. I have Coke too. Come on Tank, let’s go!’

‘What kind of sandwiches?’

‘Fluffernutters, your favorite.’

‘And you have Coke?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘OK, *FINE!*’ Tank throws off his sheets and sits up. He rubs his eye. ‘I’ll come then. But you have to promise you will help me buy the Pokemon binder, the five hundred card one we saw. And I want your Ancient Mew and both of your Tapu Lele cards.’

‘Fine, fine! Get dressed, and keep it down!’

Tank pulls on a pair of shorts and a jersey. They carry their shoes. Henry shoulders his pack and the two of them creep soundlessly down the hall to the short half-flight of stairs that leads to the basement back door. Very slowly and carefully, so as not to make a sound, Henry opens the sliding door and they slip out into the lower part of the lawn under the deck that borders the pond. Two days earlier Henry had loosened the bulb of the outdoor light so it wouldn’t come on. They stand in the dark except for the stripes of yellow light coming through the slats of the porch above them from the bug lamp.

Shutting the door behind him as silently as he opened it, Henry looks around and sees no lights or activity nearby. Everything is quiet but for the sound of crickets. Mosquitoes buzz in their ears and start to land on their arms.

'Shut your eyes,' Henry says. He sprays bug repellent on Tank's face and head, the back of his neck, his arms and legs, front and back. It smells of chemical orange oil. They put on their sneakers.

The pond is flat, there is not a breath of wind. There is the tang of low tide in the warm August air and fireflies flicker on and off around them. Tank jumps at the sound of a splash out on the water.

'Just a fish, Tank. Relax,' whispers Henry.

Turning to their left, bending low to stay out of the light, they make their way quickly past the row of scrub oak that runs along the edge of the pond. Then into and across the next door neighbor's yard, they run down a slight embankment and on to a narrow beach. Moving confidently now in the dark, Henry and Tank keep going along the beach just below the seaweed line where the sand is dark and soft. Another fifty feet brings them to a pull-out line attached to an iron bar driven into the sand. They crouch to catch their breath in the shadow of two boulders and look furtively around. All is quiet.

Tank slaps a mosquito on his cheek. 'Shit. This stuff doesn't work,' he complains.

The nighttime lighting from the house beyond the manicured lawn behind them streams out over the water above their heads, illuminating the old wooden skiff tied up to the line fifteen feet out in the water.

'OK, are you ready?' Henry whispers.

Tank nods. 'Ready.'

Henry unties the rope and eases the boat into the beach and out of the light. The pullout line gently slaps the water, disturbing the surface of the pond. Every sound reverberates, magnified ten-fold..

'Maybe this is a bad idea,' whispers Tank.

'SHHH! Too late!'

The boat's bow bumps the shore.

Tank clambers aboard and sits on the thwart in front. Henry places his backpack on the seat in the rear, unclips the painter from the pullout line, and turns the boat around to point out into the pond. With a shove and a quick hop, Henry jumps up and into the boat as it moves away from the shore.

Floating free, Henry and Tank bring their faces close together and grin like monkeys. Nodding their heads enthusiastically, they low-five each other, slide their palms together, and say, "Yeaahhh!" It's their special brother thing that they do whenever anything works out just right for them.

'Phase One, complete,' whispers Henry.

Henry and Tank sit still, listening. Not a sound, except for the quiet lapping of the water against the sides of the skiff. They take stock.

The boat is a squared off punt, about twelve feet long. It's old, with peeling paint and an inch of water and oil in the bottom. There are two oars of the kind that have circular oarlocks attached, and an

old model Evinrude fifteen horsepower engine. There is a small mushroom anchor and an external red fuel tank sits on the floor in the rear of the boat. A bailer made of an old Clorox bottle and a large, dirty sponge float under the seats.

‘OK. Quiet now. Oars.’

The boys sit on either side of the boat, facing forward, Tank in the front and Henry in the back. They each take an oar and begin to paddle, Tank doing the best he can with one arm. They are headed to the small strip of sandy beach with the oak tree and the circular swing on the far side of the pond. It’s about a hundred yards. When the bow scrapes the pebbles underneath, Henry jumps ashore and pulls the skiff up on the beach, and then helps Tank out of the boat.

Again, they bring their faces close together, grin like monkeys, nod their heads vigorously, and slap each other’s palms.

‘Phase Two, accomplished!’ they say together. ‘Yeaahhhh!’

The boys cross the beach and throw themselves down onto the cool sand deep in the shadows of the huge oak tree. They sit themselves up, facing each other, cross-legged. Henry opens his backpack and looks inside.

“OK! What do we have here?” he says. He starts pulling items out one at a time. The first thing out of the bag is a bottle of red wine.

‘Success!’ Henry exults, holding the bottle up to the night sky.

Then comes two cans of Coke, four sandwiches in ziplock bags, Cheetos and a movie theater size box of Sour Patch Kids.

‘Oh, man!’ Tank says. ‘Breakfast of Champions!’

As Tank looks on, Henry produces a corkscrew and expertly opens the bottle.

Tank is impressed.

Henry holds the bottle out at arms length, as if examining it like a sommelier.

‘Old Mill Pond, 2014. An excellent year! Fruit of the Gods!’ he declares.

‘Here’s to my brother, Tank, on his first Official Brother-to-Brother Drinking Binge Outing!’

Henry takes a long pull on the bottle. Catching his breath, he says, ‘To Tank!’, and takes several swallows more. He hands the wine across the pile of goodies.

‘Now you,’ Henry says.

Tank grins appreciatively and gestures with the bottle.

‘To me!’ He takes his own long drink.

‘Ah HA!’ says Henry, holding up his hands in mock surprise. ‘What do we have here? Do I see... sandwiches?’

He takes the bottle back from Tank for another long drink.

'Let's investigate!' Tank says.

'Wait!' says Henry. He digs into the front pouch of his backpack and pulls out a plastic bag with four cigarettes and a lighter.

'Where did you get those?' Tank asks.

'Gama keeps open packs hidden all over the house. You just have to watch her. One at a time from different packs, she won't miss four.'

Henry lights up a cigarette and holds it up to Tank.

'Want some drags off of mine or do you want your own?'

'No thanks, I don't think so.'

'You have to have one puff. It's an Official Drinking Binge Outing Rule.'

'I don't want to.'

'You have to. Or I take back my Pokemon.'

Tank takes the cigarette from Henry and holds it gingerly with his thumb and his first finger. He takes a short puff and, coughing, hands it back.

It only takes the boys twenty minutes to smoke two cigarettes and finish off the bottle. When it's empty, Henry fills it with water and throws it blindly as far as he can out over the pond. It lands perfectly, with a loud *Gallunk!* sound, and the boys do their monkey grin routine again. They just can't stop laughing. Everything is hilarious. Henry falls on his back twice trying to sit on the circular swing. The rope runs so high up into the tree he can't see the branch it's attached to in the gloom. Tank is on his knees bent over double, laughing so hard he can barely breathe. Henry finally balances up on the swing. Tank runs to push him but Henry sees him coming and jukes out of the way. Tank misses and goes rolling in the sand, grimacing in pain and laughing all the while. Henry gives up on the swing.

'Too darn dangerous!'

They lie on their backs looking up at the stars and make sand angels. Tank's sand angel has only one arm, which makes them laugh so hard, Henry pees his pants.

'Food!' gasps Tank.

The two of them crawl over to the backpack. The first thing Henry does is shake up his Coke and spray Tank up and down. Tank retaliates. There is a food fight and soon their hands and faces are smeared marshmallow and peanut butter. The sand sticks to their hands and faces.

The two of them can barely stand up. Tank tries to and falls down on his knees, twice, the second time tipping over on his bad shoulder and letting out a screech of pain. Henry lands next to him, convulsed in laughter and gasping, 'SHHHH! QUIET!.....SHHHH!...!'



'Come on! Come on!...Come on, time to go!' Henry says, standing unsteadily over Tank. 'Time to go!'

He grabs Tank by his jacket and pulls him to his feet. The two of them, arm in arm, stumble toward the water's edge.

'Where's the boat?!'

'Over there, Tank! Over there!'

The punt has drifted off the beach and is caught in the tall grass twenty feet away from where they left it.

Henry has to splash out to retrieve the skiff and pulls it back to the beach.

'Me first,' Henry says. He steps on the gunwale, the boat almost tips over, and Henry falls backwards into the water.

'SHHHH!' says Tank between gales of laughter.

Henry flops himself into the boat. Tank wades out and Henry hauls him in. They are both soaked.

'Wait, wait, wait, wait!' says Henry. 'The backpack!'

With more stumbling, falling and banging around, Henry retrieves the backpack.

Taking their positions, they man the oars and start paddling back across the pond.

Two thirds of the way home, Henry stops paddling.

'Wait, wait *WAIT!* Gotta have a last smoke.'

'*Henry!...Shut...up!* Tank is laughing at his brother who is rooting through the backpack looking for the cigarettes.

'Not now! Henry! *Henry!* No, not now! We're almost *there!*'

Henry hangs a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and says, 'Gotta.. Gotta do it, Tank. Gotta do it.'

He finds the lighter in his pocket and fires up the smoke.

Henry takes a drag, lowers his arm, and leans back with his elbow on the side of the boat, affecting nonchalance.

'So, Tank, my brother, how are you enjoying your first Brother-to-Brother Official Binge Drinking Outing?'

'Not now, Henry!' Tank says over his shoulder, paddling as best as he can. 'Come on, paddle! We have to put the boat back!'

Tank hears a low *WHOMP!* and turns around to look at Henry.

'SHIT!'

He must have dropped an ash. An oily rag lying on the gas can is a ball of fire.

*'SHIT!'*

As Henry watches in horror, the film of oil and gas on the outside of the can comes alive with blue and yellow flames.

Henry stands up. The boat rocks wildly.

*'Let's go! Tank! In the water!'*

Both boys stand. With one last look at the fire now inching along the inside railing of the rowboat, and a glance at Tank, Henry dives in headfirst. Tank, standing on the other side, does the same, as the boat spins away in flames.

Henry finds Tank in the water and grabs him by the back of his collar. He knows Tank can't swim with one arm. Dragging his brother behind him, Henry swims to the shore now only twenty feet away.

When they stumble out of the water onto the beach, they turn to see the skiff drifting lazily out toward the middle of the pond entirely engulfed in flames. Without a second glance, they turn and run. Up the incline, across the neighbor's lawn, and in through the sliding basement door.

*'Quick! Clothes off! Under the bed for now, I'll figure it out in the morning!'* Henry commands.

Henry strips down and turns to help Tank undress. They jump into bed and arrange themselves as if they are asleep.

*'Oh shit!'* Henry sits up in bed. *'Where's the backpack?'*

Suddenly, a loud BOOM! shakes the house.

*'What was that?'* Tank whispers urgently.

*'It must have been the boat!'*

*'Whoa!'*

*'So much for the backpack.'*

*'Do we go look or pretend we didn't hear it?'* Tank asks. His voice shakes.

*'I don't know!'*

*'Well, we need to decide quick.'*

*'We stink of wine and cigarettes and the pond,'* Henry says. *'I say we fake it.'*

☆ ☆ ☆

*'Where have you two been?'* Holland asks the boys when they finally surface from their basement bedroom. *'Sleeping in? It's after ten.'*

*'Late night playing Pokemon, Dad.'* answers Tank. Holland is in the kitchen for his fourth cup of coffee. He has been up writing since four-thirty.

'Did you hear that explosion last night?' He asks absentmindedly.

'What explosion?' Henry asks.

'There was an explosion?' Tank mimics. 'Where?'

'Out on the pond. I can't believe you didn't hear it. It was loud.'

'What time?' Henry asks.

'Maybe three, three thirty.' Holland is distracted, not looking at the boys. His mind is on Alvin Beal.

'We must have just passed out from playing so hard.'

'Uh-huh. I suppose.'

'What was it?' asks Tank.

'It was hard to tell exactly. When Gama and I got to the porch all we could see was a flattened bottom of a rowboat or something floating in the middle of the pond, burning.'

'Wow. Some kind of accident?' Henry asks.

'Was anybody hurt?' Tank sounds nervous.

Holland leans back against the counter and gazes vaguely out the window at the oak on the other side of the pond.

'The police don't think so. We had a visit this morning from an officer wanting to know if we had seen anything.'

'The police?' Henry repeats.

'The police?' asks Tank, a little too loudly.

'Yeah. They think someone stole it for a little joy ride and then blew it up for some reason. Could have been an accident, or not. Officer Pike told me they found some evidence that makes it look like it was kids.'

'Kids, huh,' says Henry.

'Evidence?' asks Tank.

Holland pushes himself off the counter and walks toward the door to the porch.

'Yeah. Sure glad that's not something we have to worry about.'

# Chapter Twenty

## Atlantic

### August

### 2014

HOLLAND, I HAVE some good news for you.'

It was Sol Ellis on the phone.

'About the house?'

'That too. I have two pieces of good news for you.'

'OK, whaddya got?'

'Do you want the good news first or the good news first?'

'The good news first.'

'OK, well, I talked to my brother, Eli. He had to talk to his wife, Rachel. How it is that she gets a vote on what I want to do with my parents house is a travesty, but there you go. Anyway, the down and dirty of it is that you can have the house from the fifteenth on, as long as you want, take it until the spring. Use it! Write!'

'That's *GREAT* Sol! Great! Thank you so much. The fifteenth of September? Yeah?'

'Yep.'

'Wow, that's amazing, this is so great!'

'Yes, well, good, it's your own little writer's colony. You're a lucky man, Holland Dickerson. And speaking of luck, do you want the other good news? You might like it even better.'

'Sure, lay it on me. What is it?'

'Well, sit down my friend, because *The Atlantic* wants to run that story you sent me, the one about walking the dogs and tossing the dog shit.'

'Wait, WHAT?!! That's not a short story! That's part of my novel!'

'Right. Well, I took the liberty to excerpt it.'

'You sent that out? That was just for you!'

'Well, excuse me, but, *The Atlantic*? I am a publisher, aren't I? I told them I'm your agent. I did a little editing, and sent it into the magazine. And, you're in! They're going to publish you!'

'OK. Well, I guess I forgive you. That's really amazing, Sol. *The Atlantic*? Like *The Atlantic*, the literary magazine, not, like, *An Atlantic*, something from Middlebury College, maybe?'

'That is right, my friend. *The Atlantic*, the very one. April issue.'

'Oh my God, Sol. this is really something. How did this happen?'

'I got a friend of mine who knows one of the staff writers to read it and he liked it, so he passed it on. The editor I talked to likes it a lot, thinks it's very, very funny.'

'Funny? That's what he said?'

'She. Emma Gold. And yes, funny. You weren't trying to be funny? You are very funny. This is a good thing. People need to laugh, especially the liberal elites who read *The Atlantic*. Everybody is so depressed about politics, the environment, gender wars, you name it.'

'I guess.'

'And, they're going to send you a check.'

'Really? How much?'

'Two hundred dollars.'

'Wow. I can buy groceries.'

'Really? With two kids? Not in Connecticut you can't. Where do you shop?'

'Stop & Shop'

'By the way,' Sol goes on, 'Where are you now? Are you in Denver or, what? I need to send you some keys.'

'I'm still here in Pearson's Bight at my mother's. We decided to make it an extended vacation.'

'The boys with you?'

'Yeah, but not Samantha. She stayed home this year, too much work, she needed a break from the men.'

'OK. So are you able to do any writing, there on vacation, or what?'

'Actually, I'm writing a lot. Every day in fact, from about five in the morning to eleven. It's been great.'

'Really? Excellent! That's really great, Holland. I'm glad to hear it. Working on your novel, I hope, right?'

'Yes. *Happiness*.

'Sure. How is Alvin Beal doing these days? Has he learned anything about life yet? Is he going to become a better man?'

'Well, yes and no. He worries about being good. He still wants people to think well of him, but he's a murderer now, so, that could be problematic.'

Dead silence.

'Maybe I shouldn't have said anything,' Holland says, sheepishly. 'It's still early on with this new idea.'

'What exactly is the new idea?'

'I don't know if I should tell you.'

'Tell me or you don't get the house.'

'OK, I am working with the idea of calling Alvin a serial bigamist. It's a new concept I'm developing.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means he leads a double life. He is still looking for happiness, it's just that for him, happiness means constantly refreshing his marriage, which means he has to kill his wife once in a while.'

'Why doesn't he just get a divorce, like the rest of us?'

'Um, well, he gets off on the drama of the killing. It makes him happy. He feels like he's in control of his life that way.'

'Well, this is seriously sick shit, Holland. You are talking about a sociopath. Have you thought this through or are you just writing yourself into a corner? Is this a murder mystery?'

'No, there's no mystery. He just kills them.'

'Oh.' Silence again. 'OK, let me know when you get the keys.'

☆ ☆ ☆

In spite of what he said to Sol, Holland is struggling to solve Alvin Beal's bigamy problem. He does not want to have to rewrite the entire novel from the start, but he needs to work out one or two kinks in his new concept.

Alvin and Cathy are still legally married and have a family together. Holland wonders what to do with Alvin's lover, Jean. Jean and Alvin have no children together and the two women do not know about each other. Holland thinks this new arrangement allows him to refer to Alvin as a bigamist, while still maintaining the sense that his relationship with Jean is not permanent. This is a good solution.

Groggy from having been awakened at three in the morning by the explosion on the pond, Holland decides it is a perfect day to drop by the post office and see how Alice is getting on without Hank. He really should express his gratitude for everything she has done for him and the boys over the past several weeks. A cappuccino and an almond croissant, her favorite, is just the thing. He'll treat her at the Bakery Cafe.

In the summer months, the locals tend to come early to the Blue Lobster Bakery and are gone by eight, leaving the cafe to the seasonal mix of summer residents and tourists. The attitude of the year-rounders about the influx of temporary residents and visitors is complex. For one thing, the rich people who come to Pearson's Bight to play all summer don't patronize the local establishments that are aimed at the tourist trade. The tourists are needed for their seasonal money, but then again, the intrusion into normally peaceful town life is generally disliked. The local feeling is best summed up by the graffiti on the underside of the drawbridge that reappears, freshly painted, every year, written in large letters of neon color, plainly visible to every person standing by the open bridge gawking at the boats passing through.

*Summer People, Summer Not*

Holland and Alice have hit the eleven o'clock seam between breakfast and lunch, but the place is still full and they are lucky to grab an inside window table.

Standing in line to place his order, Holland scans the faces in the crowd, hoping to find someone to say hello to. He is feeling unusually good about himself. He has been working hard every day for several weeks and the writing is strong. And now, Sol's news about *The Atlantic*. For once he has something positive to say about himself. Holland desperately wants someone, anyone, to ask him how he is doing. So, what have you been up to? he imagines somebody saying.

*Well, we've been here on vacation this month, but I'm on sabbatical in the fall so, after the boys go back to school, I'll be heading up to Maine to work on my novel.*

Then he will casually mention that a piece of his is going to be published soon in *The Atlantic*.

Holland sets down two large cappuccinos, Alice's croissant, and a cranberry scone on the table

and sits.

'What inspired this, Holland?' Alice asks.

'I just wanted to see how you are doing at work, now with Hank gone. And I also want to tell you how much I—we all—appreciate what you have been doing for us the last few weeks. I just want to be sure you know that.'

'Well, that's very nice. It's been a treat for me to have the boys for a while longer. They grow so fast.'

A pause as they eat.

'Did I hear you telling the boys that a police officer came to the house this morning?'

'Yeah. Oren Pike. He just wanted to know if I had seen anything last night around the time of the explosion.'

'Did he tell you anything more about it?'

'Well, not much. Whatever it was is completely gone, but the Osgood's skiff was missing this morning.'

'Anything else?'

'Not really. Probably a joy ride gone bad, would be my guess. Just some kids. It doesn't make much sense that a boat like that would detach itself from its line, float out to the middle of the pond, and blow itself up just like that.'

'No, certainly not.'

'Did you hear anything?'

'No, I was fast asleep. The boom woke me up.'

Alice does not have the energy for a conversation about Holland's marriage. That would be the next available topic of conversation, aside from the boys, who they talk about all the time anyway. The lunch rush is just beginning and the cafe is getting noisy, which Alice dislikes. She is a true local, after all, and has a visceral distaste for sitting anywhere crowded with obnoxious summer people. She has to be getting back to work, so she thanks Holland again and leaves him alone at the table.

Holland has not yet given up on the idea of running into someone he knows, so he goes for a refill. He will just hang out and do The New York Times crossword for a while.

Holland's phone rings. It's the number with a New Mexico area code.

He answers with hello.

'Hi, Holland? This is Fritz.'

'Hey Fritz, what's shakin?'' Holland immediately regrets using that phrase.

'I'm just getting back to you about our previous conversation. Is this a good time to talk?'



'Sure,' Holland figures he has nothing else on his plate.

Fritz says something about a married woman that Holland can't make out because of the noise. He puts the phone on speaker and holds it a few inches from his ear.

'Say that again, Fritz. Please.'

'I'm calling about the disappearance. The married woman you mentioned? I ran the numbers and I think I can tell you how to make that happen.'

'It's really not just a disappearance. It's a killing I need to know about.'

'What?'

Holland raises his voice to be heard above the chatter.

'A KILLING.'

'Right. I think it would have to be around ten grand.'

'TEN GRAND FOR A MURDER FOR HIRE?'

'Yeah, it's the going rate for something like that, as long as it stays simple and straightforward. That's really a good deal, man. Some people you might have to pay fifty or more.'

'FIFTY GRAND TO MAKE SOMEONE DISAPPEAR? I NEED IT TO LOOK LIKE AN ACCIDENT.'

'Well, then, that it is definitely going to be more than ten grand. It'll be on the higher end. There's a lot of thinking goes into something like that. A lot of preparation.

'I CAN'T WORK WITH FIFTY GRAND. THAT'S TOO MUCH FOR MY GUY TO COME UP WITH. I'M THINKING MAYBE SHE JUST FALLS OFF A CLIFF, HITS HER HEAD, BREAKS HER NECK. MAKE IT LOOK LIKE SHE SLIPPED, AN ACCIDENT.'

'OK, well, maybe *your guy* is going to have to do it himself. An inside job.'

'RIGHT. AN INSIDE JOB. THAT'S PROBABLY HOW IT'LL BE. OK, WELL, THANKS FRITZ. THAT IS ALL VERY HELPFUL.'

They say goodbye. Holland goes back to the crossword. It never occurs to him that anyone else has been listening in.

There is a voice near Holland's shoulder.

'Mr. Dickerson, do you have a minute to answer a few more questions?' Holland looks up. It's Oren Pike, the police officer from earlier in the day.

'Sure, have a seat, Officer Pike.' Holland is in the habit of being deferential to anyone in uniform.

'Please, call me Oren.'

'OK, Oren, what can I do for you? I'm afraid I don't have much to add. I told you everything I know this morning.'

'I'm sorry if I have been remiss. I wanted to just ask you again if you are sure there wasn't

anyone else in the house who might have seen or heard anything last night.'

'You know, I just talked to my mother, who lives there. It's her house. She was like me, fast asleep, and woke up by the blast. We came out on the porch together, but all we could see in the dark was the burning boat.'

'OK. Right. Anyone else in the house?'

'Yes, my two boys, Henry and Tank, but they were out like a light and slept through the whole thing.'

'How old are your boys, Mr. Dickerson?'

'Fourteen and eleven.'

'I see. And are they good with boats? Comfortable on the water?'

'Yes and no. They've been coming here their whole lives, so they love the water. But they were both in a bad accident just a few weeks ago—you'll remember, you were there! The day Jimmy Finnegan had to run his boat up onto Sandy Beach! Those were my kids on board. The younger one, Tank, broke his clavicle and almost drowned. So, they have to be a little water shy right now. Tank has been out of commission with his arm strapped into a shoulder harness. Why, why do you ask? I am sure they didn't see anything. Like I say, they'd been up late and were dead to the world.'

'Up late? How late...would you say?'

Oh, I don't know. Two-ish, maybe? They didn't get out of bed until ten.'

Officer Pike has been writing with a small pencil in a little black notebook.

'Wait a minute! You don't think my boys had anything to do with this, do you?'

'I'm just gathering facts for now.'

'Well, my boys are way too young to do anything like that. Why do you think they might have been boys?'

'Let me ask you this one more question.' Oren Pike's tone is suddenly more serious.

'Do your boys like Sour Patch Kids?'

'Sour Patch Kids? I don't know. That doesn't sound like something they would want. We don't let them have a lot of commercial candy. Why do you ask?'

'We found an empty box of Sour Patch Kids on the beach on the other side of the pond from the Osgoods. From the looks of it, there might have been some sort of party there. Bits of sandwiches, cigarette butts.'

'Well, if there are cigarette butts then definitely my kids weren't your culprits. They hate smoking. My mother smokes—not everywhere in the house, just in her studio. But they can't stand it.'

'OK, good to know. Thank you, I think that's all I have, for now.'

Holland doesn't like the sound of that. For now?

Oren stands to leave. Holland has one question of his own.

'Oren, did you say sandwiches? What kind of sandwiches?'

'Looked like peanut butter and marshmallow to me. Why do you ask?'

'No reason. It's just the writer in me... I'm a writer, on sabbatical.'

'Well that sounds great for you. Thanks again, Mr. Dickerson.'

'Right. Any time.'



'Holland, I just got off the phone with Pat. What's this I hear about something blowing up on the pond last night?'

Samantha gets straight to the point. She does not sound pleased.

'Well. Hi, Sam. How are you? Great to hear your voice.' Samantha hasn't called to check in with the boys in over a week.

'I'm fine, Holland. Thank you. But I want to know what happened last night.'

'Samantha, the boys are fine. Everybody here is fine, everybody is safe. There was never any danger, so, thanks for your concern, but, we're all good.'

*Samantha has crawled up my nose.*

*It's ugly, but that's how it goes.*

*The boys and I suffer*

*I need to get tougher.*

*I'll just have to stay on my toes.*

Holland is not looking for a fight. He hasn't really missed listening to Samantha getting on his case about the boys. He has been in the zone with his writing and doesn't want anything to disturb that.

'I just don't know what to say to you, Holland. A boat blows up in your backyard and you're telling me everything's just fine? Pat says she talked to Chief Silva, who told her confidentially that they think it was some local boys that were out partying and set the fire. Would these be kids that our kids are hanging out with?'

'No, not a chance. I know who Henry and Tank play with here. They mostly keep to themselves. They haven't really got any local friends. They're usually never here long enough to make any.'

'Well, this year has been different, hasn't it?' Samantha says, dryly.

Holland isn't going to go there...yet.

'Listen, I talked at length today to the officer who seems to be heading up the investigation, and he says it was older kids,' Holland fibs. 'There were cigarette butts all over the place, so it wasn't our boys. They don't smoke, we don't smoke. And anyway, Tank is in a sling. He's not getting up to anything these days, I assure you.'

Samantha has a momentary pang of guilt. She has wondered more than once if somebody in the house has been pilfering smokes from her secret stash.

'I wish I could be as sure of myself as you seem to be, Holland.'

'Well, we're all good here. I actually have some good news, if you're interested.'

'Oh, what is that?'

'I got a call from Sol Ellis today. Turns out he submitted one of my stories to The Atlantic without telling me and it's been accepted. So, I'll be published in The Atlantic Monthly in April.'

Samantha may not be fully engaged with Holland's career. She may be bored and disappointed in her marriage. She may even at times feel real anger toward Holland. But, at this moment, she can't help but be happy for him. She has known him a long time and can appreciate more than anyone what this must mean for him.

'That's really very cool, Holland. I'm happy for you. And proud too. You've worked hard.'

'Thank you, Sam, that means a lot to me.'

There is a pause when neither of them knows what to say next. Holland makes the effort.

'So, how are you doing? Keeping busy, I'm sure. Are you ready for school to start?' Holland asks. 'I don't really even know what you're working on, now.'

*That's because the only thing I'm working on now is a nineteen-year-old cock, that's why that is.*

'There really isn't anything new to report here. Everything's going fine. I'm all ready for school, yes. Thanks for asking.'

'There is one more piece of news I need to share with you, also from Sol.'

'Yeah, what's that?'

'It's all set for me to use the house in Maine this fall. He got the go-ahead from his brother and he's sending me the keys. I can go up there as early as the fifteenth.'

'Of October?'

'September.'

'So, you're not going to drive the kids back yourself? What's the deal?'

'No, I need a car here and it makes no sense for me to drive them and then just turn around and

come right back. It'll be cheaper to fly them home.'

Holland can feel her disapproval over the phone.

'I'm really not happy about this, Holland. Really not. The boys flying alone. It just feels like this whole summer I've been jerked around. This is just your latest cock-up.'

Holland thinks he has never heard her use that particular expression before.

'That's not fair, Samantha. I don't know what you're talking about, honestly. We decided to stay longer because we had an accident and my mother stepped up and offered us her hospitality. And, frankly, it has worked out pretty well for us on this end. The only downside of the summer has been that *you* decided not to come out and join us and be here with the boys. I still don't know why you couldn't just as easily work out here, but that's your business. This is totally on you, Samantha.'

Samantha has never heard Holland speak to her like this. Holland himself is surprised to hear the words come out of his mouth.

'I've been very, very busy here,' she says.

*Yes. Yes, I have.*

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Cocktails

### August

### 2014

'DON'T YOU HAVE to actually be married to two people at once to be considered a bigamist?' Jasper asks Holland.

'Well, yes, technically, that's true,'

'So, what's the deal?'

'The deal is that I want to be able to call this character of mine a serial bigamist. I just don't want to have to rewrite the whole fucking novel.' Holland explains.

'OK, well then, technically, legally, yes.' Jasper says. 'I think in order to be a bigamist you have to be actually married to two people at once. Otherwise you're just a married person with something on

the side, which is not uncommon, of course.'

Holland and Jasper are headed back from a day out on the water looking for bluefish. It has been breezy and slightly overcast, and not too hot, perfect for fishing. They were at a place Jasper knows called The Gut, about a twenty minutes from Pearson's Bight on the water, and easy ride in Jasper's Ranger. They've been lucky. They are bringing back two good sized fish, plenty for Jasper to make a nice batch of his Jamaican ceviche. It will make the perfect hors d'oeuvres for the cocktail party his wife Khaki is hosting. She is dying to give some of her well-heeled friends a chance to meet Holland, now that he is going to be a published author.

They have to shout to be heard over the roar of the engine.

'It's still a novel about the search for True Happiness,' says Holland. 'My guy is still looking for his one and only soulmate.'

'Sure, but now your protagonist, Alvin, has turned into a sociopath who gets off marrying and killing women so he can marry again. I thought your guy was just a normal unhappily married man having an affair. Kinda takin' a turn, isn't it, Holland?'

'Yeah, that's basically it.'

'Well, no wonder your friend Sol didn't respond well. That's some sick shit, right there, brother. That's a big jump. And he's still letting you use his house?'

'Sure. I think he thinks I might eventually abandon this new direction and get back to where I was going before, but my mind is pretty set. It's what's been getting me out of bed in the morning.'

'OK, so, what kind of research have you been doing? Been reading medical journals? Police reports? Hopefully you're not dumb enough to look that shit up on the internet...'

'No, of course not,' Holland lies.

'I'm having fun relying on my own imagination. I did do some research into what it would cost to hire someone to do the job and make it look like an accident, though. A guy I know put me in touch with another guy who gave me some information.'

'Oh, yeah? What's the going rate for murder-for-hire these days?'

'Anywhere from ten to fifty thousand or more, depending on how complicated a job it is, how you want it to look.'

'What do you get for 10K?'

'Just a straight shot in the back of the head, apparently.'

'And for fifty?'

'Well, what I wanted to know was what it would cost to make it look like an accident. But the thing is, my character can't afford fifty-thousand dollars, so he's going to have to do it himself.'

'Shoot his wife in the back of the head? That's grim.'

'Actually, I have a plan I like better, for the first murder, anyway.'

'Sounds like you're moving right along. I gotta say, though, you're walking a pretty thin line with a novel about murdering a wife just for the thrill of it. You want to get published, build on your success with The Atlantic piece. That story is funny and cathartic. This is just black. I don't know what kind of readership you're after, but in this political climate you may be setting yourself up for failure with this idea. You may not get out of the gate.'

'Really. You think so?'

'Uh-huh. I'm just telling you as a friend who's on your side. If I were you, I wouldn't talk too much about this new idea of yours at the party tonight.'

Jasper makes it clear to Holland that the cocktail party is all Khaki's doing.

'She wants to show you off, Holland,' is what he says 'You've finally done something that my lovely wife can approve of.'

'Tell me exactly who is going to be here tonight,' Holland asks even though he knew he can never remember names, but at least he can get a general lay of the land.

'This is just an informal affair, Holland,' Jasper says. 'She's not having it catered, not even having a bartender. I'll be doing all of that. Only a few of Khaki's closest friends, three couples and perhaps one or two extras.'



Holland hangs out in the kitchen with Jasper pretending to help out. As usual, Jasper plays the supporting role, which means he will be tending to the bar and keeping an eye on the food. Holland may be the ostensible guest of honor, but Khaki, as always, is the star of the show.

Khaki walks into the kitchen as Jasper spoons the last of the tapenade onto his homemade crostini. She is working on her second vodka tonic, by Holland's count, and has obviously been listening in.

'I want you to meet some people, Holland, although now I'm not sure I remember why!' Khaki tries to pass this last comment off as a joke but Holland has known her long enough to know better. There are two things that Khaki does extremely well—put you down while maintaining plausible deniability through what passes in her book as humor, and drink too much. So far, she's playing true to form.

Holland is anxious. He is not at all sure he has the right clothes for a summer cocktail party on



the veranda. He assumes everyone else will be attired in what he refers to as 'casual yacht'. Khaki is wearing a white floral print dress with a belt designed to look like a parade of sperm whales, low-heel sandals and pearls. Jasper is dressed in crisp white shorts and a handsome blue and white Tommy Bahama shirt that shows off his perfect summer tan. At Khaki's insistence, he loaned Holland a faded pink polo shirt that Khaki likes but which Holland thinks makes him look pale and effeminate.

The first couple to arrive, Betsy and Benjie Webster, are a distinctive pair, matching Holland's expectations to a tee. Benjie is tall and lanky, and looks much older than his wife, although it could be his florid drinker's complexion playing tricks. He sports Nantucket red slacks and a pale blue plaid shirt with yellow knee socks, a perfect match for Khaki's preppy look. Holland immediately sizes up Benjie as one of those useless men who floated through prep school and an Ivy League college on his family connections.

Betsy, on the other hand, is stylish in pleated linen shorts and jade silk chemise. She looks fit, with a swimmer's well defined legs and broad shoulders. Her short pageboy of shock white hair is perfectly cut to set off her impressive diamond necklace and matching earrings. She could be out of a high-end fashion magazine.

The Webster family has owned land in Pearson's Bight for at least five generations, with a beautiful estate overlooking the water. Khaki makes sure Holland knows that they are some of the original settlers, of whom Benjie is a direct descendant. According to Jasper, the money is all Betsy's. The Webster fortune had been all but completely squandered by the time Benjie stood to inherit. Benjie was land-poor. He would have had to sell to pay the bank if Betsy hadn't come along in the nick of time. In another time and place, he would be called a gigolo. Holland wonders if Bungy isn't gay.

Betsy was an outsider until she married Benjie, nouveau riche. Her money came from her family's retail business, the Marston's department store chain. Founded by her grandfather in the 1920s as a humble dry goods emporium, Betsy's father skillfully piloted the company through the Depression and the Two World Wars to build a small empire selling men's professional wear and ladies apparel. Betsy and her sister Katherine had no interest in running a chain of clothing stores. They sold the company to Target in the early 1990s and walked away with a bundle.

Rebecca and Spencer 'Spence' Allan, the next couple to walk in the door, are younger, closer to Holland's own age. Within five minutes of their arrival, Holland learns from Spencer that he is a senior partner with a large law firm in Boston specializing in commercial real estate holdings. Becca has a position of some sort at the Museum of Modern Art in the City. Apparently, they have something of an art collection, which Spencer attributes entirely to his wife's excellent taste. Spencer is clearly proud of his wife.

'I know nothing about it,' Spencer says. 'It's all these young African-American painters she finds

from all over the place.’

Spence is into classic wooden sailboats and owns two which he sails in exclusive regattas, trying to win fancy trophies. Becca is into tennis and likes to go to galleries. They have two children, a boy and a girl, currently at Stanford and Vassar, respectively. Once all of this information has been shared, Holland realizes he has absolutely nothing in common with either Spencer Allan or the Webster couple.

Fortunately, Becca Allan is a seasoned conversationalist. She immediately congratulates Holland on his Atlantic Monthly success and asks him if she can get an advanced copy of the short story. While Spence hangs out with Jasper in the kitchen and the Webster couple hobnobs with Khaki, Becca peppers Holland with questions about his career. She wants to know all about what he is working on.

Holland takes an immediate liking to Becca. Something about her reminds him of Mickie. She has a wild streak, he is sure of it. He wonders what it would be like to go out on the town with her without her husband.

While Holland is starting to wonder about how much of Alvin Beal’s story Becca is ready to hear, four more people arrive at once. Two are married. Tony and Celeste Clark are more to Holland’s liking than the Webster couple or Spencer Allan. Tony is an entrepreneur who has started several environmental companies and is currently involved in an oyster farm project. Celeste is a private career coach and an author of two books on yoga and mindfulness training.

The other two arrivals, two women, are not married. One is another friend of Khaki’s whom Holland has never met. Cassie Woodridge also graduated from Smith in 2002. Her grandparents bought into Pearson’s Bight in the 1950s when there was still waterfront property to be had at a reasonable price. Cassie spent every summer there and became fast friends with Khaki. They could be twins. Holland quickly dubs them the Pearl Girls.

*Two preppies named Khaki and Cassie  
Like to think of themselves as real classy.  
They try to stay thin,  
Drinking prune juice and gin,  
So they’re not only drunk but they’re gassy.*

Not the best, thinks Holland. A little stiff, but it gets the point across.

The second latecomer is a friend of Becca’s named Jill who also works at an art museum, The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in publishing. Jill is down for the weekend visiting her parents and needs desperately to get out of the house, so Becca told her to drop by.

The very first thing Holland notices about Jill is that she is the exact opposite of Samantha. Whereas Samantha is tall, thin, and blond, Jill is a pixie. Not small, like Mickie, but quick and sparkly. Jill has short, spiky dark hair sticking out in all directions. Apparently, like Betsy, she didn't get the memo about the nautical theme. She is wearing a black' one-piece jumper with a wide red belt and heels. She would be a standout in any crowd but, from the way Khaki looks at her, you would think she was the Whore of Babylon. Holland is instantly smitten.

Becca makes the introductions. Jill notices Jasper is holding something red and delicious looking and asks for whatever he's having—Campari and soda. There is a lull in the conversation as Jill stands in the middle of the room sipping her drink. The rest of the assembled seem to have momentarily lost their bearings. Holland wonders if this happens a lot when Jill enters a room.

Sensing her moment, Khaki raises her glass.

'Well, everyone, welcome! I am so glad you are all here. I don't want to cause him too much embarrassment, but we are so happy tonight because our good friend Holland has just learned that one of his fabulous short stories is being published in The Atlantic Monthly in April! So here's to Holland! Continued success!'

'Here, here!' says Benjie with gusto.

Not even six, thinks Holland, and Khaki is already more than half in the bag.

Everyone drinks while Holland, who has not been drinking at all, sips his soda water and nods sheepishly. Khaki is not done.

'Holland, tell the group something about yourself as a writer that we don't already know!'

*What the fuck. What am I supposed to do with that? What am I going to say, that my wife hates me? That my kids might have recently blown up a boat? That I'm working on a novel about a sociopath who loves to marry and murder women?*

'Well, um, I like to write limericks.' It's the best he can come up with under the circumstances.

'Oh, that's right!' Khaki squeals. 'I forgot! Of course! The limerick book! Tell us about the limerick book, Holland.'

'Limerick book? I love limericks!' Benjie says.

'Oh, that's so much fun,' says Jill, looking at Holland with a sly smile.

'Tell us a limerick, Holland!' begs Khaki.

Jill sits back, amused. 'Yes, Holland, tell us a limerick.'

Oh, fuck, thinks Holland.

'OK, well, most of my limericks are from a children's book, remember. My grandmother Mageet taught me all about them, and when my boys were young, I put together a collection of limericks for the

alphabet. Uhh...here is a limerick for the letter 'D':

*The didgeridoo is a wonder.  
It roars like the loudest of thunder.  
I've tried, but I've found,  
That I can't make it sound,  
Like the didgeridoo does Down Under.*

Khaki claps and everybody laughs.

*She's treating me like a clown. I'm just here as entertainment. Fuck her.*

'Give us another, Holland!' sings Khaki.

'Go on, Holland. These are great,' says Jasper. 'I've always liked these. Tell us the one about the kite.'

'OK,' says Holland.

*We made a small kite for the kitty,  
And flew her out over the city,  
I let go of the string,  
And soon the poor thing,  
Flew away out of sight, what a pity!*

'Oh, that's marvelous! *Marvelous!*' says Benjie, clapping his hands like a wind-up toy.

'Is it published?' Becca asks. 'Where can I find it?'

'No, it's not published, yet. But I have it, all ready to go, just waiting for the chance.'

'Aren't limericks often dirty? I bet you know some of those, Holland,' says Tony. 'Tell us a good one. We're all grownups here.'

Holland looks at Khaki. She smiles shakily with that glazed look of someone who has had one more vodka tonic than she probably should have. Does he want to fuck with her here? Now? He gets so few really good chances.

Holland sneaks a look at Jill. She holds her drink to her lips and looks him directly in the eyes. She nods. Good enough for me, thinks Holland.

'OK.'

*There once was a woman from Dourning,  
Who walked out on her kids without warning.  
She gets all her kicks,  
From sucking strange dicks,  
And fucking them blue in the morning.*

'WHOA! says Spencer. Gasps and applause and everybody collapses in gales of laughter. Tony is roaring and Celeste is in tears. Except for Khaki, who sits like a wobble doll, staring at the drink in her hand and slowly turning red in the face. Even Cassie covers her mouth and laughs out loud.

Oops, thinks Holland. Where the fuck did that come from? He looks back at Jill, who is sitting very still with her chin up, as if she is examining something very interesting in the ceiling, a huge grin on her face.

'Oh, man! Holland! We can't take you anywhere!' laughs Jasper.

'Very entertaining, Holland,' says Khaki flatly.

'That was great!' says Tony, wiping the tears from his eyes. 'Tell us another.'

Khaki snaps to attention and says, 'Holland, tell us about your novel, why don't you?'

Holland looks over at Jasper for guidance. These are dangerous waters. Holland tries to beg off.

'Well, actually, I've been playing around with parts of the premise and I'm not really sure I should talk about it too much. I'm a little superstitious that way.'

'Ah, the writer's prerogative,' intones Benjie.

'Something like that.'

'Alright then, say something about this short story that's being published,' Khaki tries again, exasperated.

'Well,' the title is *Two Dogs*, there are some bits about corgis and dog poo, and I think that is probably enough said, for the time being. If you want to know more, you're going to have to read it in the magazine.'

'When is it coming out?' asks Becca.

'April.'

'Well, I can't wait,' says Betsy, graciously. 'And, I'm afraid to say, we can't wait for dinner either! I'm so sorry, but we have plans with my son and daughter-in-law to meet after this and we really have to be off.'

Betsy and Benjie make their apologies and say their goodbyes.

'Well, we knew you weren't going to feed us tonight, so we have made plans as well. I think we're going to have to shove off too,' says Spence. 'Not that the bluefish wasn't fantastic, Jasper.'

After that, the party breaks down. Tony and Celeste say goodnight, Cassie and Khaki retreat to the living room. Jasper busies himself in the kitchen. Holland is left with Jill alone on the deck overlooking the bay.

Jill sets her empty drink down on the glass table, stands and holds out her hand for Holland to shake.

'Well, that was very entertaining, Holland. I am very glad I decided to drop by.'

'Um, yes, well' says Holland, standing. 'I am glad you stopped by too.' he shakes her hand and feels strangely giddy. 'I hope I didn't offend you with my dirty limerick.'

'Oh, no, that was the best part! Wouldn't have missed that for the world.'

Jill calls out her goodbyes to Jasper and Khaki.

'Good night, everybody! Thank you so much for having me!'

Holland walks Jill to the door. He feels like a teenager trying desperately to figure out the exact right thing to say. When will he see her again?

'Well, good night, Holland. Um, maybe I'll see you around?. And I'll look for your piece in The Atlantic. Congrats on that, it's really something special.'

'Thank you, I appreciate that.' There is a pause while they smile at each other.

'Well, hasta la vista!' says Holland, and cringes at the sound of his own voice.

Jill laughs. 'Sure, Holland Dickerson, hasta la vista!' she says.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Ceremonious

### August

### 2014

THE DAY HAS come when Jimmy Finnegan is finally getting married to the love of his life, Violet Ney. Despite all his adventures and dalliances with women, and there have been quite a few, Finnegan has always held a place in his soul for his childhood sweetheart. Only a few people know that this is why, years ago, he painted his beloved lobster boat purple. Even when Vee was married to the lawyer from Dallas and moved away for seven years, Jimmy secretly hoped she would return one day and kept a candle burning bright. Eventually, she did. Now, seventy years old and still going strong, Finnegan is going to tie the knot.

Truth to be told, Jimmy Finnegan has not always been universally loved in Pearson' Bight. Young

Jimmy was a down and out rascal, and there are invariably people in a small town with long memories. It may be that he once owed you money, or that he might have gotten a little too chummy with your girl, or maybe he just got mouthy at the Sand Bar one night and said something that cut too close to the bone. Say what you will about Jimmy Finnegan, he has a generous heart. None of his past disagreements ever dampened *his* love for the people of his town, and he wants everyone to come to his wedding.

In honor of his new bride, Finn has renamed his lobster boat the *Violet N*. This is a very big deal, changing a boat's name, but Finn feels he has lived long enough to do exactly what he wants to do. He wants the world to know that he is starting out on his new voyage in life as a changed man. Finnegan has come up with a magnificent vision for his wedding day celebrations. He pictures a handsome afternoon ceremony, followed by a festive celebration on the beach for all of his friends and acquaintances with great food and plenty to drink. In the evening, guests will gather on the town dock for a dignified re-christening, and then, fireworks. Finn will demonstrate to the townsfolk of Pearson's Bight that he has been reborn in front of God—no small feat for a man who privately considers himself a Buddhist. Freshly blessed, Finn and his new bride will ship off on a Down East island cruise.

Although Finn may have great ambitions for his gala event, and knows something about how to throw a great bash, he is not a seasoned wedding planner. The burden of translating Finn's grand scheme into reality has landed on Violet, and she immediately turned to her best friend, Alice, for help. Violet and Alice have convinced Jimmy that he should be in charge of the boat christening and head up the party, but they will take over responsibility for the marriage ceremony itself.

For reasons best understood by him alone, Finn is adamant that Pastor Fish perform the boat christening. Violet put her foot down about the wedding itself—she and Alice will have nothing to do with Chuck Fish. Alice will officiate. She went online and obtained an official State sanctioned one-day marriage ordination. Violet could not be more pleased with this arrangement and Finn has signed on enthusiastically. He loves the idea of being married by a woman.

The day of the wedding dawns clear and bright. By mid afternoon, a cooling breeze has come up out of the Southwest, bringing with it horse tails of cirrus clouds high above in the luminous, royal blue sky. At Alice's urging, Holland has been able to trade on his success as a soon-to-be-published author to secure the use of the magnificently preserved Webster estate. Massive rhododendrons surround the sweeping lawn overlooking the bay. The dahlias and helenium that Betsy has planted are in their summer glory. Troupes of brilliant orange and yellow daylilies guard the periphery, while the lower half of the pasture has been left to legions of goldenrod gleaming in the August afternoon sun.

The guests arrive to the sight of forty gleaming white chairs set out on the lush, green grass with a spectacular view of the sparkling water in the far distance. Tommy Finnegan, Jimmy's second youngest



brother, has brought his jazz quartet to complete the perfection of the day. A little after three, when everyone has been seated, Alice and Jimmy take their places under the birchwood trellis in front of the audience and wait for the crowd to settle down.

Alice is splendid in a pale lavender and lilac gossamer dress set off by long white gloves. She has dyed her hair purple for the occasion and wears it up, with magenta ringlets cascading down around her ears, framing her face. Finn is dressed in an elegant, three-piece white linen suit with a high collar shirt and a gleaming silver tie. His long yellow-gray hair falls in a thick braid down his back and ends with a plush purple bow, and on his head he wears a crisp white fedora with a matching purple band.

At a nod from Alice, Tommy quietly stands to sing Gershwin's *Someone to Watch over Me* a cappella. People are already daubing their eyes. Seven of Jimmy's youngest nieces scatter pink and fuschia rose petals along the path as the bride comes down the aisle on the arm of Jimmy's youngest brother, Sean.

Violet is absolutely stunning in a flowing empire waist sleeveless gown embedded with intricate patterns of silver beads and sequins. Her auburn-tinted hair is cut in a curly bob with straight, feathered bangs highlighted by a single silver ribbon. She holds a bouquet of baby's breath, lavender, and purple tulips. The crowd is speechless. Jimmy Finnegan and Violet Ney, dressed to the nines. Who in Pearson's Bight could ever imagine such a sight as this?

Holland sits with Henry and Tank on either side and reflects on how much happier he was at Hank Matthiesson's funeral. At least then, he didn't have to reminisce about his own marriage to Samantha.

*Does all of the pomp and ceremony ever make any difference in the end?*

Holland looks down the row at Jasper and Khaki. A hundred guests in attendance at Trinity Church and all the ecclesiastical trimmings. A massive affair, and they are still happily married. Is that what makes the difference? There had been a lengthy writeup in the Boston Globe and another in The New York Times. Holland had stood in as Jasper's best man. He had dutifully taken his position at the front of the church with the three other groomsmen and four bridesmaids. In the satin gray tuxedo rented for him by Khaki's mother, Holland then went to the reception, performed his best man duties, and got stinking drunk.

What would Alvin Beal have to say about the sanctity of marriage at this glorious occasion on the lawn? Holland imagines Alvin going off on a rant about the folly of looking for love and security in the farcical ritual of holy matrimony. After all, for Alvin marriage is a malleable enterprise, a convenient, socially acceptable means to a violent, socially unacceptable end. And how about Samantha? Where does she come down now on the institution of marriage? Given an opening, she would undoubtedly rail

against the obscenity of the primary legal contract that underpins the hegemony of patriarchal rule. She had always been a sceptic when it came to the purpose of marriage. Why get married at all? Samantha is not a particularly romantic person. Why had she even bothered to marry Holland in the first place? She didn't need to do it.

When he and Sam decided to go for it, they didn't tell either of their families they were getting married. On a Monday afternoon in March they took Jasper and Darci along as their witnesses to the Middlesex County courthouse. The reason they picked that day was because the restaurant was closed Mondays, so they had a free place to celebrate with twenty of their friends after the ceremony. Cheryl gave them the week off and they scrounged up enough money for plane tickets to the Virgin Islands where Jasper had a friend with a boat and a small house.

Holland looks at Alice leading Violet and Finnegan through their vows in front of the assembled guests. She is so unabashedly happy—he cannot remember a time he has seen her look so radiant. What had her wedding day been like? Had it been a joyous affair? He has seen the pictures, but that's about it. She has never said anything to him about her feelings about having to marry his father. In one photo Alice and Jack stand together in their ugly 1970s get-up—Jack in cream and baby-blue ruffles and Alice in a high-necked, off-white lace affair—surrounded by strangers that Holland has never met. In another picture, Holland's maternal grandmother and grandfather, Mageet and Frederick, stand awkwardly next to Jack's parents Harold and Ethel, looking as if they have absolutely nothing to say to each other and never will. How soon had the marriage soured? Right from the start? Was it when Holland, unplanned for and probably unwanted, had been born?

*I went to a marvelous wedding,  
In a beautiful, pastoral setting.  
But I had to ask,  
As I emptied my flask,  
Do they know where their future is heading?*

Holland doesn't actually have a flask. He just needed a rhyme that would set the right tone. A sharp jab in the ribs from Henry jolts him back to the present. Lost in his own reverie, Holland has missed the entire show—the ring, the kiss, the whole damn thing. Tommy Finnegan's quartet swings into an upbeat, jazz rendition of Mendlesohn's wedding march and Holland stands to join in the applause as Finn and Violet promenade back down the aisle, Finn as proud as a peacock, Violet walking on air. Soon as he can, Tank is off to wait for cake, and Henry turns to ask Holland if he can have a glass of

champagne.



At six o'clock, Alice and Vee have changed out of their fancy clothes and perch on the guard rail of the marina parking lot overlooking the beach party beginning to take shape below them. Strings of lights criss-cross the air above benches and trestle tables set up in the sand laden with massive bouquets of cut flowers, and there are bowls of fireworks and noisemakers for after the boat Christening later on. Vee has traded in her wedding gown for a pair of chic, navy, pleated cotton shorts and a blue and white striped, scoop neck top. She looks like a twenty-first century Audrey Hepburn getting ready to sail off on an evening cruise.

'How are you doing?' Alice asks, handing the vape stick back to Vee.

'I'm good, actually,' Vee smiles. 'I feel calm, now that that is over.'

'Uh-huh.'

'You know, I was more worried about Finn than anything else.'

'Really? You didn't need to be. I thought he was just fine.'

'Well, for one thing, I had no idea how he would be dressed.'

'Oh, my God, didn't he look handsome though?'

'*Really* handsome! I know, right? Wasn't he? Amazing.'

'He really pulled it off. Were you surprised?'

'I guess I was, but I really shouldn't have been. I am sure that Tommy and Sean had a hand in styling him up. If there is anything I can be sure of, it's that Finn would never want to let me down or embarrass me.'

'It's true. He is a man with a mission. He just wants to make you happy. It's really something to see.'

'I know. I am really, really lucky. He's every girl's dream, a Big Bad Boy.'

'Tommy has a beautiful voice,' Alice says. 'I had no idea. I don't think I've ever heard him sing before.'

'You know, Tommy is single again. He has that sexy tenor. Could be a good match for you,' Vee teases.

Alice giggles. 'The thought did cross my mind. He's a good looking man.'

'Sure, and his kids are all grown and out of the house. I bet he has quite a few years left in him. You should check him out tonight. He's probably up for a private after-party party. Take him for a test

drive.'

'Where? I have a houseful. Isn't he bunking with you?'

'He's actually sleeping on the boat so Finn and I can have the house for the night before we take off tomorrow. That could be fun for you, romping around in a bunk.'

'Wouldn't be the first time, would it?'

Finnegan is in his element manning the bar. He wants to be certain he personally greets every guest, and this is the sure fire way to do it. Tommy and Sean are in charge of the two oil drum grills. Once the charcoals are ready, fish, shrimp, corn, zucchini, and burgers are thrown on the fire. The smoky smell of roasted meat fills the air.

Holland and Jasper stand talking together in line for burgers.

'Do you remember the first time you gave yourself permission to look at girls?' Holland asks.

'What do you mean? Look at them. How?'

'Like, lusting at them.'

'I'm not sure I ever thought about giving myself permission. I just started doing it. It came naturally.'

Just then a voice behind them says, 'Are you Holland Dickerson, the author?'

Holland almost drops his plate. It's Jill.

*I once met a lady named Jill.*

*I met her again, and I still*

*Am all of a dither.*

*I'd like to go with her.*

*I wish I could learn how to chill.*

'Jill! Look Jasper, it's Jill!'

*Shut up, Holland! What am I, a game show host?*

'Hi Jill,' says Jasper. 'Were you at the wedding? I didn't see you.'

'Yes, I was there but I left right after the ceremony. I had a late conference call with the west coast. I figured I'd catch up with you here.'

Holland is tongue tied. Jasper can tell.

'Beautiful wedding, don't you think?' Jasper asks.

'Oh, absolutely. I loved her dress. So elegant and understated. And Finn! I don't know him but I hear he's quite a character. So handsome! He looked like he would burst.'

'Yes, quite a sight, for sure.'

Jill changes the subject.

'So, Holland, when do I get to hear more about this novel you're writing?

Holland swallows hard. 'Um, well, I'm not really talking to anyone about it too much. Except one or two people.'

'I'm one of them,' says Jasper buoyantly. 'Although sometimes I'm not sure I like it that way.'

'Hmm, intriguing. I wonder why that would be.'

Jill looks at Holland, expecting a response.

'Oh...well, it's probably because my main character is kind of a misogynist, and that offends Jasper's wannabe feminist sensibilities,' says Holland with a touch of sarcasm.

'It's a lot more than that,' says Jasper. 'I don't want to give anything away, but the guy murders women.'

'Really? Is it offensive?' Jill Asks.

'You know what?' says Jasper. 'I'm going to go find Khaki. I'll leave you two to work this all out between you.'

Jill smiles. 'Well, gee, Holland, maybe you could use another sounding board that's not your best *male* friend. I would love to volunteer for that job.'

*Is she talking about more than just reading his book?*

'I'll tell you what, Holland. You think about my offer. I don't make it lightly. Do you have your phone? Let me give you my number. Call and we'll eat something and talk about your book. In the meantime, what can you tell me about *Lust*?'

Henry and Tank prowl around the beach looking to pocket as much of the fireworks they can lay their hands on while trying not to stare too much at the women and girls in tank tops and shorty shorts. Henry hears a familiar voice over his shoulder.

'Henry Dickerson, is that you? Tank?' Henry turns to look straight into the breasts of Heather Chute.

'Oh. Wow. Heather,' Henry says. He has to make a real effort to look Heather in the eyes.

'Hi, Tank,' Heather says, smiling broadly at both of the boys. Tank is staring gape-mouthed, not making any effort to look away at all.

Heather wears a super-hot orange, string bikini top and cut-offs. Two other girls Henry doesn't know, dressed the same, hover behind her, looking over his head and talking into each other's ears. He hopes they're not talking about him.

Heather strikes a pose and smiles. 'I haven't seen you in like forever! You two have grown so much! How are you?'

It has been three years since the summer Alice had holed up in her studio for a month with her foot in a cast. Alice had hired Heather, then sixteen, as an all around house-helper to drive her places and do whatever small tasks needed to be done. When the Dickersons came out for their summer visit, Alice kept her on so that Samantha and Holland could have a real vacation without feeling the need to take care of her. Henry hasn't seen Heather Chute since then, and things have definitely changed.

'Er...fine,' is all Henry can manage. 'Um...how are you?'

'We're great!' Heather says with a big white grin, popping up on her toes for emphasis. Heather acts so relaxed, standing right in front of him! Henry starts to stress. The girl seems to be waiting for him to say something, but all he can think about is a familiar warmth stirring in his groin.

'Are you staying for the fireworks?' Henry blurts out, immediately feeling like an idiot.

'Of *course* she is,' Tank says.

Heather pauses, then looks back over her shoulder at her friends.

'Well, OK, Henry,' she says with another smile. 'Nice to see you.'

Heather turns on her heel with a bounce, and strides off, followed by her two friends. Henry watches them go, gape-mouthed at the sight of the faintest touch of soft, bleached hair following up Heather's spine just above at the hem of her shorts. He looks down at his untucked shirt, hoping it hides the knob of his erection pushing out against the front of his pants.

An hour or so later, Finnegan has left the bar to get ready for the next act, the re-Christening of *Scoundrel*, now to be known as *Violet N*. As the crowd turns its attention to slowly making its way out on the town dock, Henry and Tank pilfer a couple of beers from the cooler and duck around gathering up whatever left-behind fireworks they can find. There is still some food on one of the grills.

'Let's stick some firecrackers into a few of these dogs and toss them to the seagulls,' Tank says.

'Yeah, that's good...but I have a better idea,' Henry says, hefting one of the leftover striped bass. 'Let's try this!'

Henry and Tank put their heads together and come up with a plan. They will stuff the fish with as many firecrackers as it will hold, and then they will sneak down into the shallow water under the dock. When the Christening is over and the fireworks start going off, Tank will light it up and Henry will toss it in the air, just to see what will happen.

*This is going to be hilarious!*

☆ ☆ ☆

Pastor Fish arrives fully costumed in high style Episcopal regalia complete with white and gold chasuble and a red and gold jacquard stole over a full-length robe. Around his neck, a large wooden cross hangs on a heavy gold chain. He sports an oversized, floppy sunhat, unnecessary in the early evening hour. Alice thinks he looks like a tall, poisonous toadstool.

The Pastor makes his way solemnly out to the dock, takes his place by the pilings at the bow of the boat, and raises his arms. He has to wait a full minute for the well-oiled crowd to settle down.

'Welcome, all, to this joyous occasion on what has been a splendid day!' Chuck intones 'We could not have asked for a more glorious afternoon, could we? God has surely shone down upon us this day!'

There is some shuffling and snickering in the crowd at this evocation of the Divinity. This is not Pastor Fish's usual Sunday congregation.

'We are gathered here this evening to celebrate not just one, but two glad events! We have an abundance of riches this day, to be sure!'

Holland, standing with Jill, stiffens at the sound of Chuck's voice.

'Earlier today, as many of you know, Jimmy Finnegan and Violet Ney became man and wife. It was a beautiful ceremony. My dear friend Alice Dickerson did a marvelously adequate job, to be sure.' Alice and Violet exchange a glance at this uncalled for swipe. Alice can only shake her head at the pompous old fool.

'And now,' Chuck gestures to the lobster boat tied up beside him. 'We are here to launch this sturdy craft out into the sea of life. I know you all want to thank Finn and Vee for this wonderful party and their generous hospitality.' Pause for hearty approval from the crowd.

'I have promised Finn that I will keep this short, and that is my intent. I hope you will indulge me. I have written a small poem for this occasion And so now I do ask you all to bow your heads in prayer and silent contemplation.'

More snickers are quickly doused as Finn stands up on his toes and looks out at the crowd disapprovingly.

Pastor Fish begins:

*Take the wheel, O Lord, and lead us to tomorrow,  
For where e're the captain goes the crew is bound to follow.  
After all is said and done, the storms are passed, the battle won,  
The captain of the ship does know,*

*The treasure true awaits at home.*

'Dear God, we ask that you bless this noble ship, *Violet N.*, as we set her out on a new course we know will be her long and fruitful journey. Keep her safe and bring her back to the harbor of your love. Amen.'

Pastor Fish nods to Vee, who steps forward cradling a large bottle swaddled in netting. She looks radiant, Finn thinks, absolutely the most beautiful he has ever seen her. Vee raises the bottle high over her head and smashes it down on the bow. The crowd roars. All around the dock, people set off their firecrackers and throw them up and out over the water.

Henry and Tank have been crouching in the shallows under the dock, waiting patiently for this moment. As soon as the fireworks start going off, Tank lights the fuses sticking out of the mouth of the dead striper. They sizzle and pop as Henry launches the loaded fish as high into the air as he can. At the very apex of its arc, a pelican swoops in on the flying bass out of nowhere. In one smooth motion, the giant bird gobbles it up in its pouch, glides directly over Pastor Fish, and explodes.

Chuck Fish jumps back in shock against the wooden railing which snaps with a crack. With a look of utter bewilderment on his face, he loses his footing and disappears over the edge of the dock and into the drink with a massive splash. The crowd stares in horror for a brief moment before everyone doubles up laughing. Fortunately for Pastor Fish, the tide is low, otherwise he would surely have been pulled under by the weight of his vestments. The bottom is a sticky muck of centuries of harbor effluent, garbage, and animal remains below the eelgrass, and Chuck is left standing in four feet of water, soaking wet, up to his calves in mud. He is covered in feathers, fish, and pelican goo. Good, thinks Alice. Perfect.

There is a mad scramble on the dock to get a rope to Pastor Fish. He is absolutely stuck. Several of the men who work at the boatyard crank out the derrick they use for stepping masts. Tucker Black, the Harbor Master, swings down in a bosun's chair to pluck Chuck Fish out of the mud.

'Well, that went well,' Holland says quietly to Jill.

That next Saturday, a photograph of Pastor Fish appears on the front page of the Pearson's Bight Drum and Bugle. Filthy with mud and eelgrass, he dangles from a rope while straddling Tucker Black. The banner headline reads, 'Pastor Fish Caught by Black Off Town Dock.'



A half an hour after the debacle with Pastor Fish is all sorted out, Holland hears a familiar voice coming up behind him.



'Holland, I need to have a word with you.' It's Frank Silva, Pearson's Bight's amiable Chief of Police.

'Sure, Frank. What's up?'

'I think you should come with me.' Frank seems a little embarrassed. He indicates a patrol car in the parking lot. 'Over here. We have a little problem.'

When they get to the car, Officer Pike is standing by the open back door. Inside, Holland sees Henry and Tank.

'What's this about?' Holland asks Frank. 'Henry? Tank? What's going on?'

'Oren can tell you better than me,' says Frank.

'OK.' Holland bends down and looks at his sons. Henry stares straight ahead, sullen and put out, but Tank is clearly scared.

'Are you boys alright?' Holland asks them.

'No!' says Tank.

'Shut up!' says Henry.

'Henry, don't tell your brother to shut up,' Holland says. 'Somebody tell me what's going on.'

'OK, Oren, tell Holland what you saw.' says Frank.

'Ah, Mr. Dickerson, I hate to have to tell you this, but it was your two boys who tossed that fish in the air that blew up all over Pastor Fish.'

'What? That can't be. You must be mistaken. They would never...boys?'

Holland can tell with one look that what Officer Pike said is true.

'There's one more thing, Holland,' Frank says.

'What's that?'

'Well, Oren gave Henry a bit of a roadside sobriety test, and I'm pretty sure your son has been drinking. More than a little.

'What? Henry, is this true?'

Henry says nothing. He continues to stare ahead.

'Holland, can I have a private word with you, over here?' Frank directs Holland to walk twenty feet away on the other side of the police car.

'Listen, Holland. This deputy of mine, Oren, he's something of a go-getter, you know? Well, he has it in his mind that your Henry, and maybe Tank too, might have had something to do with blowing up that Osgood boat last week. I'm not saying I believe him. His evidence, such as it is, is pretty thin. I'm going to let you take Henry and Tank home today and we'll chalk it all up to wedding celebration

exuberance. But just know what I'm telling you and keep an eye on things. Neither of us want Oren getting any more of his ideas. OK? Hear what I'm saying?'

Holland is shaken. This is a shock to him, the idea that his little boys are not so little anymore.

'Sure, Frank. Sure. I'll talk to them. We'll get this sorted out. And thank you, I really appreciate your discretion.'

'By the way, Holland, this may sound completely ridiculous, but, the other day at the cafe, you weren't talking to somebody on the phone about killing someone, were you?'

'*Whaaat??* Nooo! Of course not.' Holland lies. 'What would give you that idea?'

'Just something Oren thinks he overheard. I'm sorry to even mention it, it's embarrassing. He's young and enthusiastic, and that's good, but he has some wild ideas sometimes. I have to keep an eye on him.'

Before Holland and the boys are even halfway home, Holland's phone rings in the car. It's Samantha. He has her on speaker phone.

'Holland, I just got a call from Patricia. what the *fuck* is going on?'

# Chapter Twenty-Three

Lastly

September

2014

ALICE TUCKS ONE leg under her and reaches for her cigarette. The paintings are spread around the studio—some are on the floor, some are on the walls, one is on an easel. They are all dark variations on the colors of gray.

‘What do *you* think, Sylvester?’

Sylvester cocks an eye at the mention of his name, regards Alice sitting on the sofa with disinterest, and goes back to sleep.

Alice is still not exactly sure what to think of these new pictures. They are really unlike anything she's ever tried before. Alice has an ingrained dislike of talking about her work, but if pushed she would sometimes describe it as visual poetry. All of her paintings up to now have been informed by the colors and ambiance of her year-round life in Pearson's Bight. For the last fifteen years she has tried to bring the sights and smells and touch of her home by the sea into her work, day to day, season by season, and with some success. She has had shows in town, been in some pretty prestigious group shows around the region, and occasionally sells a painting to a summer resident.

So why is she now turning her palette to gray? Should she be worried? Could there be some psychic message coming through about her health? About some impending blight on her spirit? Patricia stopped by for a visit just the week before and she seemed to think there might be something to it. They didn't do a full on reading, but as usual Pat pulled a Tarot deck out of her bag and told Alice to pick a card.

'The High Priestess. Why am I not surprised?' Patricia mused.

'The High Priestess. That sounds promising. What does it mean?'

'The High Priestess is all about inner knowledge. Drawing the card upright means it is time to listen to your intuition. More feeling, less thinking. She is the Divine Feminine. She signifies mysterious knowledge, arcana, deep truth. It is a suggestion to look inward. More meditation and spiritual work is indicated.'

'What does that have to do with these gray paintings I am compelled to make, do you suppose?'

'I think what it means is that I can't tell you what it means. Only you can know, and to find out you need to look inward. That much is clear.'

Patricia took a sip of her tea.

'Maybe the gray is about denying your feelings, hiding something from yourself. All your pictures up until now have been about looking outward at the world. Now all of a sudden the lights have gone out. The world has been covered up by the darkness of night. What does that mean in your heart? How does it feel?'

Alice didn't have an answer for Patricia that day but Violet does.

'She's full of shit. They're beautiful paintings, and that's all,' she says. 'It's all I need to know.'

Violet takes a long pull on the joint and hands it back to Alice.

'In fact, I'd like to have one to hang on the boat,' she says.

'No, you don't want one for the boat. Too much like the watery deep. Bad omen. Finn wouldn't like it. He'll let you do it, because he lets you do anything, but he wouldn't be happy about it. If you want

a wedding present, take something that reminds you of the land. Or at least the beach. Where the land meets the sea.'

'That's like Finn and me. I'm the land—solid, safe, reliable. He's the sea—fluid, dangerous, fickle.

'Yes. That is so true.' Alice exhales. 'And it works because you love him, right? And he loves you. You can trust in that.'

'That bitch Khaki asked me at the party after my wedding—on my wedding day, right?—she asked me in that joke-y, snooty way she has, if I could ever really trust Finn. Can you believe that?'

'She'd been drinkin''

'She's always been drinkin', that's no excuse.'

'What did you say?'

'I said, you bet your ass I can trust him. I trust him to be exactly who he is.'



Holland is never more relieved to say goodbye to Henry and Tank than he is when he finally gets them safely on the plane back to Denver. The summer has been eventful, with Tank's broken collarbone, the firecracker incident, and Henry's drinking. Holland has done his bit. Somehow they have gotten through it all without any help from Sam, and now it is her turn to deal with the boys alone. Holland is free, soon to be on his way to Sol's summer home in Maine for a three month sabbatical to work on finishing his novel, *Happiness*. He is a real writer now. He is a soon-to-be-published author.

On the drive in, Holland catches Henry and Tank in the rearview mirror. They still sit in the back together, keeping each other company, but they are not the little boys they used to be. They are coming up behind him, growing fast.

*What was all that about, this summer? Were Officer Pike's suspicions true? Fluffernutters and Sour Patch Kids—that sounds like his boys alright. Could they really have been the ones who sneaked off, stole a boat, smoked cigarettes on the beach, and then set the thing on fire? Henry was obviously drunk that time with the exploding fish episode. That was completely hilarious up until the moment I bent down to see his own two kids sitting in the back of the patrol car. Then the whole thing suddenly got serious. Were they drinking that night on the beach as well? And, where did they get the booze? Did they steal it? Tank is only eleven. How alarmed should I be?*

Certainly he should be concerned if his boys are breaking the law, but that's not what bothers Holland the most. He is more worried about the possibility that Henry and Tank have been picking up on something not right between Holland and Samantha that has been steadily growing over the past—how

long? One year, maybe two? Has it been more? Maybe, in the same way that Holland has been blind to how fast his kids are growing up, he has also been blind to how serious the problems in his marriage are, problems that he still doesn't really understand. Everything about it makes him feel anxious and unhappy. What would Alvin Beal have to say?

Once the boys are safely on their way, Holland heads straight from the airport to The Fours to meet Jill for lunch. Her excuse for inviting him is that she wants to talk about his book. Holland is still not sure why he agreed to let her read the unfinished draft. He's too eager. He has been completely taken by this woman he hardly knows.

*I am married. This is not the kind of thing a real writer is supposed to do. This is the kind of thing an unmarried man on the hunt does, leverage his artistic work for time with someone he has a fancy for. This is insane.*

*I'm going to lunch with a girl.*

*From an oyster, this girl is a pearl.*

*She knows that I'm married,*

*Stressed out and harried.*

*I think I will give it a whirl.*

Holland parks his car on Staniford Street and sets out to walk to the restaurant, happy to get the exercise. Time to stop thinking so much about family problems and more about this woman he is meeting up with. What does he really know about her? Not very much. She works at the Fine Arts Museum, something in the publishing department. He's not entirely sure, but he thinks her job might have to do with finding writers on art that the Museum might want to use. Her parents have a house in Pearson's Bight, but she did not grow up there. She is younger than Holland by almost ten years but she seems very confident and accomplished for her age. She went to college somewhere on the west coast—Oregon? Seattle?—he's not sure, but someplace good.

What is it she sees in him? That's the big question. She must know he has a wife and kids—one of the women at Jasper's party would have told her. Did someone also tell her his marriage was shaky? Jasper would never do that, but Khaki might. So what is it? An older man, someone she is attracted to but is ultimately unavailable? Women are like that. No, he corrects himself, people are like that. Men do it too.

*Am I really unavailable? Could that ever change?*

Holland finds the restaurant—an old, established, urban eatery, spacious, with a well-worn

wooden floor, lots of heavily varnished furniture, brass, and thick, beveled glass. He steps in off the street to find Jill already there, sitting at a sunny table by the window. She's been looking for him and smiles radiantly, waving him over. All worry is wiped from Holland's mind. Nothing matters more than being there with her right now.

Jill stands to greet him with a kiss on the cheek. She looks so young, fresh, promising, dressed simply in a pale blue sweater that looks like cashmere and fitted black jeans. Holland is flummoxed. He sits down and goes straight to the menu.

'I'm sorry Holland, but I am starving. I need to order right away. Have you ever been here? The Specials are up on the board.' She indicates with her chin.

'No, I haven't,' Holland says, simply, trying to focus. 'Do you know what you're having?'

'I do!' Jill says gayly. 'I always have the same thing when I come here, the Robert Parrish. It's the vegetarian entree, grilled portobello mushroom, zucchini and red peppers on focaccia with pesto and provolone. It sounds a little plain, maybe, but there's something mysteriously delicious about the way they do it. I think it's probably that they secretly use the same grill that they do for the meats and that's what I'm tasting. Sort of defeats the purpose of the whole vegetarian thing, but I don't care. It's so good.'

'Sounds great, actually. Any suggestions for me?'

'Well, I was thinking, based on what I've been reading of your novel, that you should order the Bobby Riggs.'

Holland finds it on the menu.

'OK, roasted turkey with bacon and cranberry mayo. How can I say no to that? But why the Bobby Riggs? I don't think I know who that is.'

'Bobby Riggs? He was a tennis player, the number one rated pro in the forties. He was a bit of a hustler. He's most famous for his Battle of the Sexes match in 1973 with Billie Jean King—which he lost, by the way.'

'And you think that might be an appropriate meal for someone who is writing a book about a sociopath killer of women?'

'Exactly right.'

'OK, then. Let's do it.'

The waitress comes over and they order. After that, the conversation moves around. Holland tries not to go on too much about himself but Jill has a way of drawing him out. They talk about growing up in Pearson's Bight, about his grandmother Mageet, and they talk about limericks. They talk about Alice, and what it's like to have a mother who is an artist. Holland recounts the sorry story of the demise of Hank Matthiesson. They talk about the incident with the exploding fish, and Holland tells her about

his summer adventures dealing with Henry and Tank. They talk a lot about his job teaching, other things he has written, and about what he hopes to accomplish during his time in Maine. The one thing they do not discuss is his marriage, much to Holland's relief.

As they near the end of their meal, Holland realizes they have been together for close to an hour and a half and he knows nothing more about Jill than he did when he first sat down, and they still haven't gotten into talking about the novel.

'I've read what you gave me and I think you have something very interesting. I'm captivated by this character, Alvin Beal, by his inner life. He's really quite complex. It seems that what you're after is the question of whether he can be a good person and also a murderer at the same time. That's actually quite funny, in a dark sort of way.'

'Exactly. That is exactly right.'

'Well, it's going to be interesting to see how you get from wife killer to catharsis and redemption, if that is indeed where you are headed. Is it?'

'Yes. Right. Well, that's what Sol, my publisher friend, the one who's house I'll be using this fall, keeps telling me I need to do in order to interest a publisher and let my book see the light of day.'

'That is a consideration, for sure.' Jill pulls back her sleeve to look at her watch. 'Oh, God! Look at the time! I'd completely lost track. We're going to have to continue this conversation next time. I'm so sorry to have to cut it off. I'm having such a good time, but I have to be getting back to work. I have a meeting I'm not looking forward to in an hour and I need time to psych myself up for it.'

With that, lunch is over. Jill insists on picking up the tab. 'I invited you today. You can do it next time,' she says.

Out on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, Holland waits with Jill for her Uber. For a brief moment he flashes on Mickie, about how it was when he said goodbye to her after having a different kind of lunch. He had thought that was pretty special, at the time. And it was. But this is completely different. This is smooth, fluid, natural, relaxed.

'We need to do this again soon, I think. Don't you?' Jill asks.

Holland isn't sure what he thinks. All he knows is that here is this woman, whom he finds overwhelmingly attractive, who seems to feel the same way about him. And that's not even the best of it. The best of it is that she has been interested in him, really interested in him, and even more, in his writing. It seems as if all he could ever want for his own happiness is standing right there in front of him. All he has to do is reach out and take it.

*What would Alvin Beal have to say about this whole situation?*



# Chapter Twenty-Four

Lovie

November

2014

'LOOKING BACK OVER your life, what would you say your legacy will be?' Holland asks.

'I wouldn't,' Lovie replies irritably.

'Would not or could not?'

'Oh, I *could* make up all sorts of drivel if I wanted to, but I won't. Won't do it.'

'Why?'

'Because it's all bull, obviously. That kind of question...the whole direction is wrong, where you're coming from. My work is my legacy, that's all that matters. The work. Other than that, I don't give a damn.'

Holland pretends to scribble in his notepad.

Lovie sets down her Manhattan on the metal TV tray table at her elbow.

'I used to have nice things,' she mutters, flicking her cigarette ash on to the floor. 'It's good for the carpet, keeps the moths away,' she explains.

'I've heard that, too.'

Lovie picks her drink back up and squints at Holland over the lip as she takes a sip.

'I bet you interview people like me all the time, don't you? For a living.'

'Well, sometimes, but not for a living, actually. That wouldn't be much of a living,' Holland says. 'I teach. And I'm here on sabbatical, working on my novel, as you know.'

'OK, sure, but don't you already know the answer to that question?' Lovie asks dismissively, flicking another ash on the floor. 'Isn't that what you ask everybody? Surely you can do better than that.'

Lovie Mariner is eighty-three years old and fit as a fiddle. Her pack-a-day habit and substantial alcohol consumption haven't slowed her down one iota. She is a local celebrity, an artist from New York who moved up to Chokeberry Bluff, an island off of the coast of Maine, in the nineteen-eighties to get away from her two ex-husbands.

Lovie paints all sorts of pictures—landscapes, seascapes, still-lives, pictures of her cats—and Holland has come to realize that he hates them all. He especially dislikes her most recent work which Lovie refers to as 'my new abstracts'. This is unfortunate because Holland has agreed to write a puff piece about Lovie for the catalog she plans to self-publish. Holland foolishly signed on to the deal before he had a chance to spend any significant time looking at her work. Now he is stuck. She is going to pay him five hundred dollars for the job and he could really use the cash.

Holland has been listening to Lovie talk about her paintings since nine in the morning and it is now close to noon. First, there was an hour-long tour of her studio, followed by an inspection of the barn

where almost her entire life's work is stored, meticulously organized and neatly stacked. Now Holland is sitting on the white wicker sofa of Lovie's screened-in veranda watching her drink her second Manhattan of the day and pretending to care deeply about the arc of Lovie's life as an artist.

*This is not how it is supposed to go.*

It is November, and Holland has been at Sol's family's summer house on Chokeberry Bluff since the middle of September, supposedly finishing his debut novel about Alvin Beal. He has had three months to figure out how to reconcile Alvin's desire to be known and remembered as a good person with his predilection for serial murder. So far, Holland is not satisfied with his efforts.

Holland is aware that his conception of Alvin Beal as a sociopath who wants to be known as a loving father and husband is not entirely original. He knows that there are people in the world who actually think much the same way that Alvin does. Nonetheless, he is doing his best to write literature, not True Crime Stories. Holland's main concern centers around how to create a vibrant and convincing inner thought life for Alvin that will make him into a sympathetic character and pull the reader in. Today, for some reason, the juxtaposition of Lovie's demands on his time and Alvin's demands on his mind is particularly hard to cope with.

*I was hired to write about art,  
But I'm not really sure where to start.  
I don't want to sound crude,  
But this woman is rude.  
The writing is breaking my heart.*

Lovie is still talking. Holland absentmindedly looks past Lovie's head at a painting on the wall that shows the view from the veranda. The painting hangs next to a window that shows the exact same view.

Lovie senses she is losing her audience.

'Well, here is something you can write about,' she snaps, raising a finger and jabbing at the notebook in Holland's lap. 'Maybe *this* will help to get you going!'

Lovie lights another cigarette and launches into her story.

'There was a professor at Sarah Lawrence when I was there—Horace Feidler was his name. You can write that down—he's surely dead by now. He had a great influence on me and my work. Horace was from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and he had studied in Philadelphia with the great American Ashcan School artist and teacher, Robert Henri, so he was the real thing, you know. And we would have these critiques in

class. All of us ladies would bring our latest paintings we were working on and arrange them around in a circle, and Horace would tell us what he thought of them. He wasn't really interested in what we had to say. He wanted to tell us what was what, 'how the hog ate the cabbage', as he was fond of saying. Horace was a very plain-spoken man, being from out West I guess, and he always told the unvarnished truth. I used to tell myself that I did very well in those critiques because I thought I was pretty good at talking about my work, but I was stubborn and not a very good listener myself. Every single critique he would say the same thing to me.

*'Miss Mariner, it's not about the talk you talk, it's about the work! It's always and only about the work!'* he would say.

'And one time I remember in particular, he said to me, *'Miss Mariner, let the work speak for itself. If the work can't speak for itself, either you have nothing to say or are not a very good painter. My guess is that in your case it's a little of the former and a lot of the latter!'*

'He said that, right in front of everyone. I'll never forget it.'

Lovie takes a huge drag off of her cigarette, pausing for effect.

'Well, hearing that really shook me up, I can tell you, because he was such an impressive and powerful man, but I learned over the years that Horace was right. Absolutely right. It's not about what I say or don't say, it's only about the *work*. There, put *that* in your article!'

Holland searches his mind for some thought, some inspiration that can pull him up out of the depression he feels himself slipping into.

Lovie flicks the ash onto the carpet again and squints at Holland through the layer of blue-gray smoke hanging between them. She goes on.

'That's why I don't give a hoot about these galleries not wanting to sell my work. I am an *artist*. Lots of great artists went unappreciated in their time. It happens. I may not be able to sell my paintings now, but I'm eighty-three years old, and, as you saw, over the years, I have kept them, every single one of them, safely stored and properly cared for. They will all go to my children. Just imagine how well off they'll be when I'm gone! There must be five hundred paintings in the barn here. It's like money in the bank. They're going to be rich!' Lovie slaps her knee. 'And *that* is my legacy!'

Lovie is triumphant. Holland has a very bad headache.

*How am I going to be able to say anything positive about this delusional old bat?*

Lovie and her article are not the only thing on Holland's mind. He is also thinking about Sol's phone call the night before. Sol had called to tell Holland that his brother, Eli, is driving up from the City with his family for the long Thanksgiving weekend. Holland is at a crucial turning point with his novel. This will be a disruption at precisely the wrong moment. Now Holland worries about when he will find

the time to clean the house and wonders how big Sol's brother's family is and whether he will have to move out for several nights. As hard as it is to imagine, he realizes that he might have to ask Lovie if he can bunk on her porch for a few nights, since she is the only person on the island that Holland has managed to get to know over the last two-plus months.

Meanwhile, he will have to find some peace and quiet in which to write.



*The parking lot at the overlook is packed. Alvin drives a little further on past Dead Horse Point until Cathy spots an open area about a hundred and fifty feet off the road that has a good view of the river. Alvin puts the car into four-wheel drive and heads up the incline.*

*The panorama is spectacular. The Colorado River flows steadily below them, continuing its long journey snaking its way slowly through Arizona, running along Nevada and California, and down to Baja. The sun's rays slant low, tipping the mesas to the west brilliant orange and coral red. The vaulted sky, light, clear turquoise blue, hosts high flying clouds of pink and purple in the evening light.*

*Alvin sets up his tripod and starts lining up shots.*

*'Let's get a couple pictures of us while there's still light, before I get started onto the serious stuff,' he tells Cathy.*

*'Where do you want me?' Cathy asks.*

*'I think right over there would be great,' says Alvin, indicating a smooth, flat outcropping overlooking the breathtaking view. 'Find a good, solid place to stand there and I'll set the timer.'*

*'Do you think it's safe?'*

*'Oh, God, yes. I'm sure we're not the first tourists to stop here for pictures.'*

*Cathy inches out, finding a comfortable spot several feet from the ledge.*

*'OK, but this is as far as I'm going, Alvin.'*

*'That's great! That'll be fine. Just hang on.'*

*Alvin looks through the lens and fiddles with his camera. He stands and smiles.*

*'Fantastic! This is going to be great! It will be our Christmass card! You are a beautiful woman. I probably don't say this enough, but I feel so lucky. You are a wonderful wife.'*

*Cathy smiles hearing this. It's true. Alvin doesn't tell her nice things often enough.*

*'All right! Setting the timer. Get ready! Here I come!'*

*Alvin walks out on the promontory, puts his hands on Cathy's shoulders, gives her a big smile, and shoves.*

*Over the precipice she goes.*



Ever since he arrived on Chokeberry Bluff, Holland has been at an impasse. He's figured out how to make Alvin a murderer. That wasn't too difficult. But he has been unable to find a satisfactory way to bring the deeper, psychological, and emotional story to a close.

*How am I going to get Alvin sympathetic? How can I get him to the catharsis that Sol wants in order to pitch the novel?*

Holland has had enough of Lovie for one day. The morning has been a disaster. He is furious with himself for agreeing to write about a person who, for one thing, doesn't seem to like him very much and, two, he does not respect as an artist.

During the tour of her studio, Lovie handed Holland a stack of postcards. They are the kind of five by eight, hi-res images that galleries print to advertise their openings, except that there is no exhibition mentioned anywhere. Instead, on the flip side of each card, there is an impressive headshot of Lovie in a black turtleneck looking intently at the camera, the title and year of the artwork, and a brief artist's statement describing her inspiration for the painting and passion for art in general. Back at Sol's, Holland lays the postcards out on the kitchen table and paces the floor trying to come up with a plan of attack.

The most obvious problem for Lovie is that she just can't draw. Lovie has painted countless portraits of anthropomorphized cats and other various animals—dogs, horses, birds, squirrels—over the years. Fortunately, Holland notes, the one genre Lovie doesn't work in is the human form. It's one thing to get the nose out of line when you are painting a pig. But with people it's different. When you are making a picture of anything that requires coordinating two eyes, a nose, and a mouth on a human face, reasonably competent drawing skills are a prerequisite. Otherwise, what you end up with are scary mutants.

The other big problem with Lovie's paintings is that somehow, for all of her years slaving away in her studio, she has never developed any kind of natural color sense. Her color is all over the place, completely disconnected to anything remotely related in the actual, physical world. After all, Holland grew up with a mother who devoted her life as an artist to studying the poetry of the colors of the actual world. Lovie's ill-conceived experiments in color expression assault Holland's finely tuned aesthetic sensibilities. They hurt his eyes.

But in terms of just plain God-awfulness, Lovie has completely outdone herself with her ‘new abstracts’. Clearly, as far as Holland is concerned, she has no idea what she is doing. She has taken everything that is wrong with her other paintings, multiplied it tenfold, and tossed it all together with gusto. Or is it gesso? Holland’s mind is beginning to wander.

The worst part of it for Holland is that the new paintings are so derivative. To his eye, Lovie’s paintings are poorly made, badly informed imitations of work by every marginally known mid-century American painter who has spent any time at all near the coast of Maine. There are a lot of those painters. The new abstract paintings have no depth, offer no insight, and have nothing original to say. Holland keeps pacing, unable to stop the back-and-forth dialog unspooling in his writer’s brain.

*How am I going to write about this stuff? It may look like modern art but it’s really just not any kind of art at all. Still, compared to the vast majority of mediocre, hard working artists out in the world, Lovie is not a bad painter, exactly. You have to hand it to her. Getting up every day and applying yourself to a single discipline for over half a century is quite an accomplishment. Unfortunately, Lovie has never gotten any better. It’s hard to do something consistently over such a long period of time and not learn something. You have to really work at it.*

Holland sits down and folds a piece of printer paper lengthwise in half making two columns, one side for all the good things he thinks he can say about Lovie and her work, and the other side for all the reasons that he thinks her work doesn’t deserve to be written about at all. Before he is halfway through, he runs out of space on the negative side and gives up writing.

‘I take it back,’ Holland says out loud, crumpling up the paper and tossing it toward the trash. ‘Her work is shit.’

Later that afternoon, Sol’s brother Eli, his wife Rachel, their three young daughters and two yappy dogs arrive at the house in a frenetic flurry of sticky hands, whiny voices and the odor of fast food. They had left the City at four in the morning to catch the last ferry to the island and the five of them are hungry, sleep-deprived, and angry about being stuck together in a car for seven and a half hours. They all need to pee.

Holland hears the car on the drive and is standing on the porch to greet them. While the children run amok, Holland, Rachel, and Eli get acquainted. What did Sol tell them about him? Holland worries about what the little girls might find if they get into his stuff. It is immediately apparent that Rachel is not impressed with Holland’s housekeeping. It is also instantly clear that Rachel and Eli do not want some random, strange adult interfering with their long-awaited weekend getaway. That’s fine with Holland. He has taken an instant dislike of the children, hates the dogs, and doesn’t want to have to listen to the parents fuck.

*From the looks of it I'd say this isn't going to work.*

Holland tells Eli and Rachel that he will do his best to find a place to crash. Their relief is palpable. They expect nothing less. The question of where he will eat his Thanksgiving dinner never comes up.

Holland decides that if he is going to ask Lovie for this big favor he will have to do it in person, not on the phone, so he hops in his car and drives across the island to see what he can work out with her. When Lovie doesn't seem to be up at the house, Holland walks back down the drive to her studio. He taps lightly on her door and sticks his head in.

'Hello?'

Lovie is bent over a table looking at a lump of something colorful and jabbing it with a spoon. She straightens up without turning around.

'Oh. It's you,' she says flatly. She sounds disappointed. 'Forget to ask me one more important question?'

'Yes, it's me.' Holland tentatively takes a half-step into the studio. 'Hi Lovie. Twice in one day!' He tries to sound bright.

'Yes, apparently so,' Lovie drawls, still poking at the palette.

Lovie takes a drag of her cigarette which she holds between her pinkie and her first finger like a British gentleman. She sets it down carefully in an ashtray she has made by bending in the edge of a large tuna fish can, turns to face him, and asks, with exaggerated precision.

'To what do I owe this great pleasure?'

Lovie's voice is deep and gravelly. A sweaty tumbler of what looks like watered down Vermouth sits on the table.

'Well...Lovie...something has come up unexpectedly...um...well, it was expected, just not how many of them...um...and I have a problem that I hope you might help me with.'

'And what might that be?' Lovie takes another drag and reaches for her glass. She holds both her cigarette and her drink in her right hand so her left is free to lean on the table.

'In short, Lovie, I need a place to crash for a few nights. The brother of my friend who is letting me use his house has just come up for the weekend and, with their three kids and the dogs, there really isn't any room for me to stay there comfortably, and I don't think they want me there interfering with their family time anyway.'

'And you thought you'd ask me?'



'Yes...well...I thought since I am working on the piece about you, I thought, one artist to another, you might be willing to help me out. It's just that I'm in kind of a predicament. I've called around and I really can't find even a room to rent for the weekend, the island is full up.'

This was a lie, of course, but Holland told himself that it could, reasonably, be true. Anyway, it might as well be. He just doesn't want to pay for a hotel.

'I see. Well, let me think for a minute.' Lovie turns away, takes another long pull on her drink, and a deep, satisfying drag on her cigarette, crosses her arms and looks absently out the large window on the other side of her worktable.

After a long moment Lovie speaks.

'My favorite, the red-wing blackbird. Right there I see two of them. They always look so smart, in their handsome black uniforms with the bright yellow and red epaulets.'

She turns to face Holland.

'We sometimes get a cardinal once or twice, but I prefer the blackbird myself. More dignified. The cardinal reminds me of church.' Lovie pauses and looks Holland up and down as if she were measuring him for a suit. 'Put that in your book about me.'

'OK! I will.'

'Well...you have a sleeping bag of your own? Because I prefer you not use mine. If you have a sleeping bag, you can bunk on the porch.'

'Not really. No, not a sleeping bag. But I can bring blankets. I'll be fine.'

'Hmm. Bring three good ones. It can get nippy this time of year. You'll be wanting a pillow and sheets as well.'

'Yes. I'll bring those too. I won't be any trouble,' Holland insists. 'Thank you so much, Lovie. You're really helping me out. And this will be great, I'll be able to talk to you some more and maybe even watch you work...'

'Well, that's not happening,' Lovie cuts him off with a flick of her wrist. She turns back to whatever it was she was working on when Holland came in.

'The reason I say porch,' Lovie says with her back to him, 'is that I have some friends coming in tomorrow for Thanksgiving and I never know how many people I may have to take on, you know, once the drinking starts.'

'OK Right. Well, I'll just stay out of your way, don't worry about that. I'm sure there will be places open on Thanksgiving day where I can get something to eat and hang out for a while.'

'To hell with that! If you're staying with me, you're eating with me. That's the deal, take it or leave it.'

'Well, gee, Lovie, that is very generous of you. Is there anything I can bring to the table?'

'Wine. We can always use more wine. And pick up a fifth of vermouth while you're there at the package store. You don't need to worry about food. The way it works is that I cook the turkey and everyone else brings the rest. You'll eat just fine.'

That first night Lovie puts Holland in the downstairs guest room off the kitchen. In spite of her instructions earlier, the bed is made up with cool linen sheets and plenty of covers. If anybody arrives later that night, she has more space upstairs, she tells him. But she doesn't think anyone is coming until Thursday.

'You can sleep here tonight', Lovie says, 'but tomorrow I'll probably move you either to the sun porch on the other side of the living room or, push comes to shove, you'll be out on the veranda. On the wicker. If it gets really cold, I'll let you sleep on the floor next to the fire. How's that sound?'

'Sounds great, Lovie. Thank you again.'

'Well, don't thank me yet. Let's see how you're feeling in a few days. What do you eat for breakfast, usually?'

'Coffee.'

'Coffee and toast? I'm not asking because I plan on cooking anything, you understand. But coffee and toast, that we can do, and there's fruit. And cereal. Milk. Just don't eat my yoghurt.'

'Right. Sure. Coffee and toast is great. I expect there'll be plenty to eat later on.'

'And that there will be.'

On his way out to the liquor store, Lovie tells Holland she wants him to pick up two bottles of Noilly Prat and another couple of bottles of wine, something drinkable and not too sweet. That seems to be her main criteria.

'And get some limes. We're always running out of limes. They sell them there,' she says.



Holland's phone rings. It's Jill.

'Holland! So great to hear your voice! How's it going up there? she asks.

'Hi Jill. How are you? It's going well. A beautiful setting. Big house, very quiet...lovely solitude.'

'So you're able to work?'

'I have been, yes. Making good progress, I think.'

'Found an ending you like yet?'

'um...I may have, yes.'

Holland is at a loss.

'How are you doing? he asks reflexively. 'How is work?'

'Everything is fine here in my life. Running smoothly.'

'Good! Glad to hear it.'

Short pause.

*Where is this conversation going?*

'Holland...I was wondering if I might drive up there next weekend. I'd love to see the island, where you're working. I'd love to see you. We can talk about your book in person. What do you think?'

Holland is not at all sure what he thinks, but, for once, he is pretty sure how he feels. Jill has a way of bringing that out in him. This is new.

'Well, actually, I think...um...as much as I would like to see you too, maybe right now isn't such a great time.'

*Did I really just say that?*

'The thing is,' he continues, 'It would be very romantic, I'm sure, but I'm thinking that's such a good thing for me right now.'

*And that! Did I really just say that?*

Another awkward pause.

'I see,' Jill says after a moment.

'Please don't be angry. I know we would have a lot of fun together. It's just not great timing for me. I need to keep my head clear, and having you up here would muddle me, and I don't want anything to interrupt my focus.'

'I'm not angry. I think I understand. I'm just disappointed.'

'Disappointed how? Disappointed that you don't get a weekend in Maine, or disappointed that I am telling you not to come? Or that you get the idea that I don't want to spend time with you? Because if you think it's *that*, you're very wrong.'

'Both. Mostly the second one. I can get to Maine anytime, it just would be so much more interesting if you were there too, I think.'

'I know it would. That's what I'm afraid of.'

'I see. Well, maybe when you decide not to be so afraid we can pick it up where we left off. May I call to check in with you once in a while? Would you ever call me? I hope you would think to call me if you get stuck or want to run something by someone.'

'Definitely yes to both of those...all that.' Holland says, with feeling. Has he just made an unforgivable mistake?

'Alright, Holland Dickerson, soon to be published author. I'll talk to you later, OK?'

'OK. Great. And thanks for calling, it's really great to hear your voice.'

'Yes, you too.'

"OK, bye then.

'Bye.'

Holland stares out the window at the ocean dotted with islands. A lone seagull passes across his vision. He looks down at his shoes—faded blue Converse sneakers. What just happened?

*Here I am, writing a book about a man who is so NOT afraid of his own happiness that he will literally kill for it, and I am telling this woman, who makes me happier than I've ever been, that I am afraid of seeing her. What the fuck is that about?*

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## By the Board

### November

### 2014

WHEN HOLLAND ROLLS out of bed and into the kitchen around seven the next morning there is no sign of Lovie. He finds the Thermos of coffee, bread, butter and marmalade laid out on the counter. There is a note that directs him to where he can find cereal and bowls and tells him to help himself to fruit from the bowl in the middle of the table. Milk is in the fridge but. stay away from the yoghurt. Once he feels sufficiently caffeinated, Holland walks down to the studio to see if Lovie is there.

Holland knocks but no one answers. He knocks again—still no sound. The door is unlocked. Holland pokes his head in and calls Lovie's name but she isn't there. His curiosity gets the better of him and Holland steps into the large, sunlit room.

The first thing you notice about Lovie's studio is the light—lots of New England coastal light, cool in November. Tall, slender windows run from the floor to the top of the rafters along the entire southern wall. Everything in the room is painted white, floor to ceiling. Then you look and see how much open space there is—four wide, glass-topped tables, plenty of room to spread out and make a couple of good messes at the same time. And then it envelopes you, the deep and restful silence.

Light, Space, and Quiet, the three things that cost money, Holland thinks. The three things that poor people can't afford and well off people take for granted. It is only the people in the middle, the ones who see the world for what it is and think of themselves as lucky, they are the ones who truly appreciate the value of an airy, sunlit, peaceful place. All that's left to add to the equation is Time.

*Too bad the paintings are so hard to look at.*

Holland hears the sound of a car coming up the drive from the bottom of the hill and quickly steps back outside to see who is coming. As he closes the door, a muscular, bright red SUV corners around a stand of juniper trees and pulls up next to where Holland waits on the steps. A solid-looking woman with short, dyed-black hair, lowers the window and sticks out her elbow. She sizes up Holland with a knowing grin.

'Hi there,' the woman says jovially. 'Who are you?' Holland guesses she is about fifty-five, fifty-eight.

'Hi!' Holland responds. 'I'm Holland. Holland Dickerson. Are you looking for Lovie?'

'No, not really. We're pretty sure we know where to find her.' The woman's voice is surprisingly deep and rough.

From the passenger side another woman, younger by at least ten years, leans over, lowers her head to look at Holland, and reaches across to offer her hand.

'Hi. I'm Susan, and this is Precious,' she says with a big smile.

Holland shakes Susan's hand through the window. 'Are you friends of Lovie's?' he asks, shading his eyes with his hand.

'Sort of,' says Precious. 'You might say that. I'm her daughter.'

'Cool. Well, welcome, um, home, I guess.'

'HA! That's a good one!' Precious snorts, nodding. Both of the women are big on eye contact.

'Sorry,' Precious catches herself. 'Long story. We'll be needing some alcohol first... She up at the house?'

'She is somewhere. I haven't actually seen her this morning, that's why I'm down here,' Holland offers by way of explanation.

'Oh. And who are you again?'

'I'm Holland. I'm a writer. I'm doing a piece on your mother'.

'Whoa, that is a job I would not want,' Precious says, gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead. Both women are laughing at some shared inside joke.

'Well, see you at the house,' Precious waves and hits the gas, spewing gravel and dust. Holland steps out of the way and then decides to follow them up on foot.

While Susan and Precious install themselves in the guest room, Holland moves the few belongings he had brought with him out onto the sun porch that runs the length of the house along the south side. It's a beautiful open space, long and narrow, airy, cool in November, and quiet. The musty smell of old wicker furniture and canvas cushions that have spent years aging gracefully in the salt air by the sea punctuates the room. Holland props one of Lovie's postcards up against the wall where he can see it and sits on the davenport with his laptop on his knees, trying out different introductions to the piece he is trying to write about this artist whose work he just can't stand.

*In a studio, airy and bright.*

*I struggle to focus and write.*

*It's impossibly hard*

*My retina's scarred.*

*These paintings are truly a blight.*



Much as he dislikes Lovie's paintings, Holland has to admit that he doesn't really dislike Lovie herself. Lovie is authentic. Holland can respect that. There is something that appeals to him about her unapologetic emotional self-sufficiency. In spite of her rudeness, Holland doesn't really think she dislikes him. It's just that that is the way she is. Even if Holland hates her artwork, she is a dedicated artist who is serious about what she does.

The Art World is the one place where Lovie seems to have a chink in her armor. She insists that she is completely indifferent to how the expanded artistic community treats her, but Holland doesn't believe that for one minute. Otherwise, why would she want to publish a vanity book of her paintings and commission Holland to write a puff piece about her?

Around ten Holland hears a loud banging sound coming from the kitchen and goes to find Lovie standing at the sink with her arm up to the elbow of the cavity of a massive turkey, her head sheathed in a halo of blue cigarette smoke suspended in the sunlight streaming through the open window. Piles of vegetables—onions, potatoes, carrots, celery—lay strewn across the long butcher block table along with a large roasting pan, soft butter on a plate, a colander of parsley, an assortment of kitchen knives, a bottle of vermouth, and a heavy-looking cut glass ashtray. Precious and Susan are nowhere to be seen.

'Good,' Lovie croaks over her shoulder when she catches a glimpse of Holland standing at the doorway. 'Make yourself useful. Do you know your way around a kitchen? Please tell me I don't need to worry about letting you use one of my knives, do I?'

'Yes. No. I'm good with a knife, sure.' Holland assures her.

'I need two onions, a couple of carrots, maybe three stalks of celery, rough cut, for the stock. And cut the stems off that parsley too,' Lovie orders. She juts out her chin and squints against the cigarette smoke irritating her eyes.

'First, come over here and take this fag out of my mouth. Got my hands covered in turkey juice.'

Holland gingerly removes the cigarette from Lovie's lips trying as best as he can to not let the ash fall on the bird but it does anyway. As he sets down her butt in the ashtray on the table he hears a loud sucking noise as Lovie pulls the nine-inch neck out of the turkey.

'Always reminds me of my second husband,' Lovie cracks, tossing the neck in the large pot at her feet.

'It's washed already, the parsley,' she tells Holland. 'You can set some nice sprigs aside for garnish, stems for the stock, and then chop up the rest, that would be great.'

Lovie notices Holland looking at the vermouth.

'You have to marinate the chef,' she says by way of explanation. 'Get yourself a glass and pick your poison' Lovie nods towards a counter with an assortment of liquor bottles. 'Do you know how to set up a stock? I must get this bird in the oven if we're all going to be able to sit down by five.' Lovie drops the turkey into the roasting pan with a loud plop.

'Fill that pot two-thirds of the way up and set it on the stove. Light the burner. Put some heat under it. Let's get it going,' Lovie barks.

Lovie grabs a gobbet of soft butter and starts pressing it under the turkey's skin.

'Here.' Lovie motions with her head. 'Salt and pepper. All over the bird. My hands are greasy. Use the Kosher salt, the pepper mill is there, back of the stove.'

Holland moves fluidly around the kitchen, easing into the workflow as he did twenty-five years before when he worked in restaurants in Boston.



*This is fine. We're going to get along just fine.*

Once they get the turkey in the oven and the stock working on the stove, there isn't a whole lot left to do except peel potatoes and wait. Lovie leans back against the kitchen counter and watches Holland chopping parsley.

'OK, well, I'm heading down to the studio,' Lovie announces. 'Looks to me like you've done this before. You think you can keep an eye on things here for a few hours?'

'Certainly. I have it covered,' Holland smiles.

'Right. I want to work for a while. Ever tend bar?' Lovie asks.

'Some.'

'Good. Usually, people start rolling in around three. There's plenty of ice in the fridge. Olives, maraschino cherries, baby onions, all that are there too. Wine glasses, old-fashioned glasses, those things you'll find in the cupboard out in the dining room. All the booze, some is on the counter, there, and the rest is in the cabinet under the sideboard. People will want to start drinking right away, believe me. There's everything you'll need, whiskey, vodka, gin, vermouth, mixers, everything to get started. People will be bringing their own supply as well. And they'll be bringing wine too. You can open up some bottles, look around in the drawer with the utensils, you'll find a corkscrew.' Lovie points across the kitchen.

'I don't mess around with beer, people know that about me. If you run out of soda water or tonic, there's plenty in the pantry, and there's coke and ginger ale there too but usually nobody wants that. You can cut some of those limes you picked up, that will be great. Put 'em with the wine glasses.'

Lovie drops four ice cubes into a tumbler and tops it off with vermouth from the bottle on the table.

'Don't be nervous,' she says, smiling. 'These are all regulars today. Everyone who's coming knows their way around here. They'll all take care of themselves. You just need to act nice and don't say anything too stupid. Precious and Susan should be back before long and they know everyone. You'll be fine.'

Lovie stubs out her cigarette, grabs her drink, and heads out the door.

'I'll see you in a few hours. Get those potatoes peeled and on the stove, and don't forget to baste the bird, all right?'

'Right,' Holland nods.

☆☆☆

Around two-thirty, the first to arrive is a woman around sixty named Dink, another painter. Susan and Precious still have not returned to the house. Soon after Dink, Pamela and Sissy roll up, one of whom owns a restaurant and the other is also an artist of some sort—she is somewhat vague. Then there is a middle-aged couple from Boston, George and Sheila, who both work at WGBH, and a younger man, Steven, with his date for the weekend, Eddie. Steven introduces himself as Precious' younger brother.

Everyone brings at least one food item and a bottle of something. Dink has brought roasted Brussel sprouts with chestnuts and two bottles of California chardonnay. Pamela and Sissy carry in no less than six different fruit pies—apple, pumpkin, cherry, blueberry, pecan, and an old fashioned mince pie—along with an assortment of cheeses and flowers for the table. George and Sheila show up with a crab and macaroni casserole and sparkling pink rosé. Steven proudly presents his oyster stuffing and traditional New England cranberry relish, paired with more wine and a bottle of Campari, and Eddie rounds out the gifts with a chafing dish of sliced string beans with mushrooms and shallots, and a bottle of Absolut. Precious and Susan return around four with more flowers and a fifth of Jack Daniels.

Just as Lovie predicted, people start drinking early and hard. It turns out that no bartender is necessary. Everyone seems to know each other, and everyone seems to be familiar with the ins and outs of the house. People make their own drinks and meander about, chatting and catching up.

Lovie makes her appearance around five-thirty dressed for dinner, cheered by all like a returning hero. Holland hadn't noticed her come up from the studio—she must have come in the back way and sneaked upstairs to her bedroom. She has changed out of her work clothes into black leather jeans and a black satin men's button-down shirt which she wears untucked, sleeves rolled up. Holland is impressed. With her short salt and pepper hair and large spade-shaped silver earrings, she is elegant and understated, looking for all the world like the sophisticated artist ready to step out for an upscale evening event in the City.

Lovie is in her element. Steven seems to know exactly when his mother would arrive because he has made Manhattans. He hands one to her with a warm greeting and a double kiss on the cheeks. She makes the rounds before settling into her throne, the plush red armchair at the head of the long oak dining room table.

All of the side dishes are ready and the turkey is in the oven and under control. Precious has volunteered Susan to mash the potatoes. Holland is happy to sit by himself nursing a cranberry soda and making up stories in his mind about the other guests. Dink brings over her drink and sits down next to him.

'Hi,' she says, brightly. 'I'm Dink.' She holds out her hand. 'And you're the one I've been hearing about who is writing a piece on Lovie! Am I right?' Dink asks.

'That's right.' Holland smiles. 'I'm Holland. I'm actually here on sabbatical, working on my novel, but I've gotten to know Lovie and she has asked me to write something for her catalog,' he explains. 'And you're the painter, I understand. Is that right?'

'Well, not *the* painter. A painter. Lovie is *the* painter.' Dink smiles, conspiratorially.

There is a pause as the two size each other up.

'So, yes, the catalog! Very exciting,' gushes Dink. 'It's about time too. I can't *wait* to see what you write! I love everything she does, don't you? Have you seen the new abstracts? Have you looked at them, I mean really looked at them? Fabulous!'

Dink pauses for a sip from her drink and then continues.

'Lovie has been such a huge influence on me and my work, it's embarrassing to say how much.'

'Really. In what way?'

'Oh! That color! Her color sense is so unique, don't you think? My work is all about color,' Dink tells Holland.

Dink smiles broadly, so happy to be talking to Holland about art.

Something about Dink makes Holland feel devilish. Dink is a typical example of the legions of baby boomers born into the emergent prosperity of the postwar middle class. Their mothers were replaced in their factory jobs by the returning G.I.s and turned into modern homemakers. Re-cast in the supporting role, women were instructed by Dr. Spock to raise the next generation of Americans in a newfound celebration of childhood, where all children were encouraged to be Creative. Preschool and kindergarten, everyone was all in on the new Cult of Creativity. Kids got art classes in school. Every child had Crayola crayons and coloring books and paint-by-number sets. Every child's simplest doodle was a cherished Work of Art.

*Such a cliché.*

Holland can't help himself. He has to needle Dink.

'Couldn't that be said about most visual artists? When it all comes down to it, isn't color the one essential ingredient in the language of Visual Art?' Holland asks.

'Oh yes! Certainly, it is! Let me show you! Are you on Instagram? Here, I'm on Instagram.' Dink pulls out her phone. 'Wait a sec...OK. This is my work.'

Dink proudly hands Holland her phone. What Holland sees is an unholy mess. He swipes through a few images. Every one is the same, a string of garish colorful explosions. He hands the phone back to Dink.

'Where do you show your work?' Holland asks.

'Oh, I'm just like Lovie,' Dink explains dismissively. 'I don't care for the whole gallery scene. Too corrupt, too snooty! You know what I mean?'

'Sure, I get that,' Holland says, reaching for his glass. 'Have you been painting long?'

'All my life, ever since I was a little girl. My parents were so supportive. I was the artist of the family. I had all the materials I needed, from my aunts and grandparents, every Christmas and birthday, it was wonderful.'

*Right. I bet you did.*

Holland takes a moment to reposition his glass directly in front of him. He is ready to step the conversation up a peg.

'Well, I'm guessing that you grew up in the fifties and sixties. You're a baby boomer.'

'That's right.'

'That was a great time for the new middle class, the post-war years. Parents were told to encourage creativity in their kids. Everyone was 'Creative', all children were Artists. It became the new norm.'

'Well, of course, *I* was different. I wasn't normal like that, in that way. I *knew* I was an artist from the time I was in grade school.'

'Right. That's what I'm saying.'

Dink is not at all sure *what* Holland is saying.

'Oh no, I didn't *think* I was an artist. I *knew* I was one.' Dink insists. 'I went to art school, studied with some of the best.'

'Oh? Where?'

'The School of Museum of Fine Arts,' Dink says proudly.

'Oh, yes, the old Boston Museum School, now Tufts. Not really known as cutting edge back then, was it.'

Dink is not sure if she should be offended. She pauses a moment to regroup.

'I'm just like Lovie. I've been making art my whole life.' Dink sounds defensive.

'And that is quite an accomplishment, for sure,' Holland says. 'If you can pull it off. You and every other baby boomer were told you were an Artist from birth. People like you and Lovie were privileged. You could afford to spend your whole lives living out this fantasy that you are an Artist. This is why we have so many irritable old people wandering around the planet pissed off that no one is giving them the respect they think they deserve for their devotion to making their little pictures all their lives.'

Dink is not sure she likes the sound of this.

'Well, it is what you make of it, isn't it?' Dink huffs.

Eddie and Steven, sitting across the table, have been listening in to the conversation between Holland and Dink. Holland is just getting started.

'It's just the post-war baby boomers who think this way. Most people couldn't afford to coddle children in the nineteenth century, at least not unless they were royalty or petit-bourgeois. It's ridiculous, really. Can you imagine if one summer day Mrs. Van Gogh sets out a couple of bowls of green gunk and some paper on a farm table and tells little Theo and little Vincent, 'Go ahead! Celebrate your life! Go on, use your hands! Make a mess! That's great!'

Eddie laughs. 'Oh, that's hilarious!'

Holland holds up his hand.

'Then....I'm not finished yet...then, of course, she would have to nail them up to the side of the barn and ask her two farmwife friends to look over the fence and critique them so she can decide which ones to keep on the kitchen wall and which ones to throw out.

'And, *then*, one of the women says something like, 'Well, I love Vincent's pictures. He's so expressive, look at how he moves the paint around! He's going to be just fine. But Theo's, look at Theo's. They are so tight and restrained, I think he's the one you should be worried about. It is completely ridiculous.'

The insult is finally becoming clear to Dink. Stephen and Eddie are thoroughly enjoying the spectacle of her indignation. Holland is pleased with himself, in an evil sort of way. Dink is outraged.

'Are you comparing me to *that*?'

Holland says nothing. He rocks back in his chair, picks up his drink, and smiles at Eddie and Steven, savoring the moment.

'Oh, girl, he has you tagged!' Eddie says. 'Remember, it's not cruel if it's true!'

Holland thinks it's time to leave the glaring Dink while he's ahead.

'Excuse me, I see that Lovie has gone back to look at the bird. I think I'll just go and see if she needs a hand.'

When Holland pushes his way through the swinging door, he finds Lovie alone in the kitchen, bent over the stove, wrestling with the oven rack under the roasting pan. She has a cigarette in her mouth. There is smoke coming out of the stove.

'Can I do something to help?' Holland asks.

'Nope. Just a little butter spilled, making this smoke. No biggie.' Lovie is shaking the rack. 'It's just stuck,' she grunts.

'Here, let me...'

'No! I've got it.' Lovie leans back and jerks hard on the rack, once, twice, she shakes it and pulls with all her might. The rack suddenly lets go, sending her back on her ass, her feet up in the air, and the turkey spinning out across the floor on a sheet of its own fat. Holland is frozen, watching the twenty-five-pound bird bounce off the baseboard and come to a rest in the corner. The floor is covered with vegetables, lemon stuffing, and turkey grease.

'Fuck,' Lovie mutters, chasing after the turkey on her hands and knees.

'Oh, my God,' says Holland, unable to look away, tears in his eyes, doing everything in his power not to laugh out loud.

'Quiet!' Lovie hisses, gasping with laughter. 'Keep the noise down! SHHH! Help me get this fucker into the sink.'

Still on her knees, Lovie slips sideways and crashes against the wall, flat on her ass on the floor, laughing, useless.

Holland wraps a kitchen towel around the turkey, slipping on the greasy floor and almost going down himself. He hefts the bird over to the sink.

'Quick! Rinse it off! Let's get it back in the pan before anyone else comes in!' Lovie wheezes between gulps of air, struggling to her feet.

Holland runs water over the bird, scrubbing with his fingernails to get as much of the cat hair and dirt off the skin as he can. Lovie slides around like a toddler on skates collecting carrots and potatoes, scooping up lemons. Together they arrange the bird on a large platter, surround it with roasted vegetables and parsley, and restuff the cavity as best they can. Holland removes the dead cigarette.

'OK!' Lovie pants. 'You grab the gravy.'

Holland picks up the two full gravy boats and waits, watching Lovie drain her Manhattan and light another cigarette.

'Go on! Take those out to the table, I'll follow you,' she orders impatiently.

Reluctantly, Holland does as he is told. He backs through the swinging door and turns to see the entire company looking up at him expectantly. The conversation dribbles to a halt.

'Does she need any help?' Precious asks cautiously.

'Nope, it's all under control,' Holland announces, setting down the gravy boats and taking his seat. 'She'll be out in a jiff.'

Right on cue, Lovie barrels headlong through the swinging door, struggling with the giant bird on the massive silver turkey platter, a look of grim determination on her face, cigarette hanging from her bottom lip. As the door slaps shut behind her, Lovie looks up in shocked bewilderment at the assembled guests seated around the dining room table as if surprised to see them all there. She takes a drunken

sailor's half-step to the right, away from the door, and pitches straight back into the wall behind her, clonking her head. Her chin comes up, her eyes roll back, and very, very slowly, Lovie slides along the wall, down, down, down until she is seated on the floor, spine perfectly straight, legs splayed out in front of her, turkey platter cradled in her lap.

'Brilliant!' Precious stands and raises her glass with sincere appreciation.

'Nicely done!' Eddie claps, and all rise to give Lovie a standing ovation.

# Epilogue

## December

### 2014

THREE DAYS LATER, Eli, Rachel, and the kids are gone and Holland is back to drinking coffee at Sol's kitchen table, staring at his manuscript and brooding about Alvin Beal. Thanksgiving has come and gone, Christmas looms on the horizon, and Holland's sabbatical in Maine is quickly coming to an end. In a week he will be closing up shop and heading back to Denver where family and job await, and the sad truth is that he is no closer to finding a way to end his novel than he was when he first arrived in Chokeberry Bluff in September.

*It's like the Great White Whale. There is something right here, right in front of me in the middle of all this, I am sure of it, but I just can't see it for the fog.*

Holland has gone over and over Alvin's plight in his mind a million times and still cannot find a way forward. Alvin is selfish and self-centered. He lies, he cheats, he steals time from a life he could otherwise share with his family. Also, he had an affair, got caught, and murdered his wife. Not great behavior from Alvin. Alvin may not fully realize the depth of his character defects, let alone his criminal behavior, but he feels the effect of it's stain on his heart. Alvin is unable, or unwilling, to take ownership for his transgressions, and if he can't take responsibility for his sins, then he can't do the work to make himself whole, murderer or not. So Holland is stuck. How can he find a way for Alvin to have the catharsis his publisher-friend Sol insists he must experience?

*Is this something that I have to find for myself before I can write about it?*

The day before, Samantha had called at two o'clock in the morning to tell Holland that she would be leaving right after New Year's Day. It was midnight in Denver. Clearly, she had been drinking.

'Leaving? What do you mean, leaving?' Holland had asked.

Sam didn't answer the question, exactly.

'I want a fresh start,' she said. 'It just makes sense.'

It made no sense to Holland. He was totally blindsided. 'How long will you be gone?' he asked, thinking this is just a temporary thing.

'I'm leaving, Holland. Maybe for good.'

Holland could hear her inhale. She is smoking. He told her he didn't understand.

'I don't expect you to.' She hung up.



The day after Holland gets back to Denver Samantha walks into the bathroom while he is shaving and announces that she will be going out of the country for a while, and that he will be alone with the boys. No more than six months, she promises. Then, when she gets back, they can figure things out.



'Where are you going, Sam?'

'I'm going to South Korea, Holland,' Sam says curtly. 'You should know, I'm going with Daniel,' she adds, as an afterthought.

'Who the fuck is Daniel?'

It turns out that Daniel is Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at the University of Colorado Bartlett School of Theology. Sam met Daniel at a playgroup with Tank and his own son Eric.

'It's called the Shincheonji Church of Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Daniel is doing research for his PhD. I'm not going to take the time to explain it to you, Holland. Google it.' She turns and leaves.

Holland thinks to ask her what she will be doing in South Korea while Daniel is writing his thesis, but then decides he really doesn't want to know.

True to her word, two days after New Year's Sam walks out the front door with a flight bag and a roller and drives off in somebody else's late model Land Rover. Holland sits alone in his upstairs office, thinking that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference, and doing the mental math of the mortgage.

The next month is hard, starting with the mechanics of it—getting Henry and Tank up, dressed and fed, ready and off to school, shopping, cooking, laundry, and basic cleaning, bedtime, baths, the whole works. Fortunately, Holland's schedule for the winter and spring semesters allows him to teach from nine to four-thirty so he can just barely get it all done during the day. Finding time at night to correct papers, email students and colleagues, and come up with fresh lesson plans, on top of everything else, leaves precious little time or energy for any of Holland's own writing projects. All that came to a screeching halt as soon as he got back from Maine. He misses Jill.

Before she left, Sam had avoided sitting down with Holland and the boys to talk through what was happening. Holland is left with the job of trying to come up with some sort of explanation that they can all get their heads around. This is problematic for Holland, not only because talking about his feelings doesn't come easy but also because he himself is not really sure what is going on. There are days when he would like to tell Henry and Tank that their mother is a lying bitch and a fucking whore to boot, but Holland has enough self-awareness to know that he loves his boys more than he hates his wife, so he does his best to keep his rage in check.

There are the usual sorts of questions.

'Did we do something wrong?' Tank wants to know. Tank is eleven.

'No, of course not, buddy. This is just something mom has wanted to do for a while and the opportunity came up, so she took it. Mom works hard for us. We should be happy she gets to do what she wants to do.'

'How long will she be gone?' Henry asks. Henry is fourteen.

'A few months, maybe four. But don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. It's just going to be the three of us guys for a while.'

'What about Easter?' Tank asks, a tinge of panic in his voice. 'Will she be home for Easter?'

'Maybe. Maybe not. We'll have to see. I can't promise anything. But I'm sure Easter will be great as usual either way.'

'But it won't be the same!' cries Tank, tearing up.

*Nope. It won't be the same.*

Every morning for the next two weeks, Tank asks when mom is coming home.

'Not today, buddy,' Holland says. 'But I promise you, as soon as I find out you'll be the first to know.'

Eventually, the three of them settle into a routine. The boys, led by Henry, apply themselves to figuring out what they need to do to keep their heads above water. Holland is proud of them for the way they dig in and work as a team. They keep themselves and each other busy, as if each of them in their own way want to protect the other two from being sad. Also, Holland discovers that he is not as bad a single dad as he feared he might be.

The worst times are when Sam calls home out of the blue to talk to the boys. South Korea is fifteen hours behind Denver and Sam never seems to be able to figure out how to make it work. By the time she gets her courage to call at night the boys are off at school. When she does phone at an appropriate time, the calls bring both boys to tears, and Holland lets them cry as much as they want. To Holland's ear, Sam always sounds much happier than he would like.

*We used to make love, it was great,  
But, we haven't been happy of late.  
Like dogs stuck when fucking,  
Twisting and bucking,  
We snarl and we bite our own mate.*

☆ The End ☆

