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Gull Lake : A Novel

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

GULL LAKE

by

Pamela S. Gross

Florida International University, 1991

Miami, Florida

James W. Hall, Major Professor

GULL LAKE is a novel written in alternate chapters. The odd chapters deal with forty-three year old Megan Harris's recovery from her failed marriage while the even chapters trace her marriage from its beginning until its dissolution. Despite the fact that her artist husband, Martin, has left because of her own insistence, Megan has fallen into a depression and has confined herself to her home. Acting on her friend Ellen Jarvis's advice, she travels north to Gull Lake where Ellen has a summer cabin. At the lake, Megan comes to understand the reality and necessity of her decision to end her marriage. In the magnificent silence and splendor of a northern winter, she begins to feel the comfort of being able to survive on her own.

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Miami, Florida

GULL LAKE

A novel submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

by

Pamela Sue Gross

1991

To Professors: James Hall
Les Standiford
Mary Free

This novel, having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution, is referred to you for judgement upon its substantial merit.

Acting Dean Arthur Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

The novel of Pamela Sue Gross is approved.

Mary Free

Les Standiford

James Hall, Major Professor

Date of Examination: July 9, 1991

Dean Richard Campbell
Division of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1991

(ii)

To Stuart, Debra, Jeffrey, Tammy
Roneet and Carmi
for their patience, support and love

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Chapter 1

Early morning sun streamed through the large bay window and cast a swath of warm light across the kitchen countertop down to the tile floor and up across the table as if someone had carelessly tossed yards of yellow silk.

The kitchen was white - white cabinets, white floor, white walls - startlingly clean. The countertops were bare except for a five-inch television and three white canisters labeled: flour, sugar, coffee. A clown cookie jar, empty except for a trace of chocolate cookie crumbs, and a mug of tepid coffee, the cream curdled, sat on the oak table.

Megan leaned against the sink and stared into the back yard. She wore a faded blue terry robe, her light-brown hair straight and darkly wet from the shower, her feet bare, the coffee spoon suspended under the dry faucet.

The last two snow falls had melted because of unseasonably warm weather, but now, as she stood there, a bitter wind blew in the bank of clouds that had hovered for days near the horizon and light retreated from the kitchen as the mustard sun faded to a pale wintery disk. Leaves from neighboring yards skittered across the brown, soggy grass.

The ringing phone drew Megan's attention, but she ignored it. For weeks after Martin left she'd made a mad dash every time it rang hoping it was Martin saying: maybe

you were wrong, Meggie; maybe we can get things back on track. But it always turned out to be a friend offering sympathy or advice she didn't want.

She made a slight movement to turn on the faucet but placed the spoon on the counter instead, picked it up, put it down a few inches over, picked it and put it down again. She put her finger in the center of the first almond-shaped stain and drew a line of coffee from one spot to the other. Then she took a sponge from under the sink and wiped the counter clean. She washed and dried the spoon.

The telephone continued to ring. Fifteen times. Twenty. She reached for it, finally. No one but Ellen was so persistent. If she didn't answer Ellen would be over in ten minutes like she had last week when the ringer was turned off, panting hysterically that she'd conjured Megan unconscious in a bathtub of bloody water. Megan assured her that she had no intention of doing anything so drastic let alone something that would leave the house messy. "That only eliminates knives, guns and razors," Ellen had retorted.

"I can't believe it," - Ellen's voice into Megan's ear - "I'm a half hour late for work. I turn on the television for a traffic report. And..."

Megan imagined Ellen in her apartment kitchen. A toasted half-bagel in one hand, her briefcase under her other arm, the phone balanced between chin and shoulder,

keeping free of the tangling phone cord, her thick white-blond hair precision layered to frame her face.

"Turn on Donahue, Meggie." Ellen's mission was to pull Megan from the 'rubble' of her marriage and plant her firmly in downtown Minneapolis where she would wear suits, use color coordinated eye-glasses, and eat salad lunches in potted-ivy, high-tech restaurants. All this despite the fact that Megan had twenty-twenty vision and was only qualified to teach learning-disabled children.

Every one of Ellen's visits included a plethora of magazine articles, library books, circled television listings in *T.V. Guide* on how to survive a failed marriage.

"What is it now?" Megan retied the belt on her robe.

"I have to go. Watch the program."

Dutifully, Megan turned on the television but kept the volume off. She picked up her coffee mug, took a sip and wrinkled her nose. Three wide-eyed women sat on the stage like deer caught in a car's headlights. Instinctively Megan knew. Agoraphobics. So Ellen was now into diagnosis.

An iridescent black crow flew by the window and settled in the apple tree. The branch bowed under its weight as it tried to nudge the last tenacious apple to the ground. Light and shadow flickered across the kitchen from the mute television.

She pressed her forehead to the cool, soothing pane. She inspected the wooden frame for cracks, for minute places where the air could leak out.

*

Every morning over coffee she made entries on her calendar: alphabetize the library, label pictures and put in photo album, clean out kitchen cabinets, do laundry, polish silver. She wrote in pen instead of pencil so the task couldn't be erased and put off.

Yesterday she'd discovered her old story-book doll collection shoved way under Patty's bed, so this morning she wrote in -dolls - and beneath, in parentheses with an arrow down through the next several days, she wrote - go through kid's rooms - pack up all junk!

*

She was refitting a piece of cardboard into a pencil-thin crack she found in the upstairs hall window when she heard the mail slide to the oak floor. Down below, the mailman walked into the chalk-white afternoon adjusting the mailbag over his shoulder, his jacket collar up over his ears. He looked back at her, caught her eye for a moment before shaking his head and continuing down the street.

Twice, during the last month, he had rung her doorbell with postage due letters from her son, Rick, in Boston. When she didn't answer the door, he dropped the mail in the slot and walked away.

She opened the door as little and as quickly as possible. If she answered his ring, she would have to stand for several minutes and chat about his children, about the

weather, about Ida Hammerman's dog, Spider, whose high-pitched yip gave him a headache.

She placed her cheek near the window; not even a wisp of air. She had come to believe in these last weeks that sounds and words had substance. That they came out like frosty breath on a cold day, in sentences and paragraphs like captions over a cartoon character's head. That they were absorbed by the walls, the curtains, the sofa pillows waiting to find their way into someone's ear. It was her explanation of *deja vu*.

If it were quiet enough she could hear Martin tell her how much he loved her. She could hear the sounds of their making love, her babies calling for her in the middle of the night. Perhaps she could even hear the words that had eluded her. The ones that held the portent of her dissolving marriage.

*

Except for a few summer skirts and blouses hanging in the closet, a make-up article clipped from *Seventeen* taped to her mirror and her pink ballet slippers hanging from the door knob, Patty's room looked as if she had been gone years instead of months.

Megan sat on the floor, surrounded by dolls and tissue paper, her back against Patty's bed for support. She was surprised to hear Ellen call from the bottom of the stairs.

"Megan, are you up there?"

She should have asked Ellen to give back the key.

Megan walked to the landing.

"How come you didn't call?"

Ellen smiled when she saw her, took off her tam and started up the stairs.

"Because you'd tell me not to come." She followed Megan back into Patty's room and tossed her coat on the bed. "It's so damn stuffy in here. Do you have the heat on 80 or something?" She walked over and flipped the window lock. "You need some fresh air."

Megan dashed over and grabbed Ellen's hands. "Don't."

"Meggie, aren't you carrying this window thing a little far?"

"I don't need any drafts in the house. I'm coming down with something." She reached over and locked the window.

"I'd say whatever you have is full-fledged. Maybe you should see a doctor." Ellen put her arm around Megan's shoulder.

"It'll run its course," Megan said. She shrugged off Ellen's arm and handed her a doll and a sheet of tissue paper.

Ellen sat down on the bed. "Sara told me she can find a place for you."

"I don't want to take someone's job."

"It's your job. And if you want to be benevolent find another one. It was a stupid ass thing to quit in the first place."

"I couldn't work in September."

"This is December," Ellen said.

Megan walked back to the window ledge. Large wet snow flakes floated listlessly to the ground. Ellen came over and slid onto the ledge next to her. They both watched the snow pile on the leafless oak branches. "You've been stuck in this house too long."

Megan leaned over and kissed Ellen on the cheek. "I have to finish this," she said and went back to the dolls.

Ellen took her coat. "I'll call you tomorrow. By the way..." She hesitated by the door. "I picked up some chicken breasts and a French bread. I put the chicken in the freezer."

Megan smiled up at her. "For someone who wants me out, you make it awfully easy to stay."

The downstairs clock chimed eleven. Neither spoke until the chiming stopped and the reverberation faded.

"Go home," Megan said.

"You'll be okay?"

"You asked me that last week and the week before. Am I okay?"

Ellen looked at her.

"Fine. Don't answer. Just let me finish this."

She held her breath until the lock clicked on the front door and the house resumed its regular rhythm. She smoothed the tissue paper across her lap and reached for a Japanese doll. Her yellow silk kimono was tightly wrapped around her porcelain body, her obi tied like a heavy burden on her

back, her small feet bound in white linen, cradled by ebony wooden sandals. Her face was rice-flour white under a heavy black wig, tilted as if listening for something, her smile painted in vermillion red.

*

Rick's room unlike Patty's was a shrine to his teen-age hood. Behind his door, supported by a stack of baseball mitts and deflated footballs, was a full length poster of Michael Jordan too large to fit on walls already cluttered with Howard Jones and Elton John posters and Minnesota Twins and Viking pennants. The book shelves held every book she'd bought them since birth.

Packing up the old children's books was a slow process. *Green Eggs and Ham* had been Rick's favorite when he had the chicken pox. She paged through it before putting it in the box. She had read *Goodnight Moon* to Patty every night before bedtime until she was almost five. Megan left it on the bedside table. She'd pack it later. She curled up on Rick's bed and tried to remember the shape of his baby hand, his moist mouth nuzzled against Megan's neck, the clean smell of his silk hair.

*

She was on her way upstairs with scissors and tape when the phone rang. She almost turned around but remembered her recent list of promises: She would only cry when she was in the shower. If she were passing the phone she had to answer.

"Yes?" she said.

"This is the dentist's office. To remind you of your appointment - 2:30 tomorrow." The voice was young. Rosy cheeks.

Blood rushed to Megan's head. "Uh, no. I can't."

"I'm sorry?"

She paced in front of the telephone table, wrapping the cord around her finger. "I can't make it tomorrow."

"Mrs. Harris," the young girl's tone shifted to the sternness of a school teacher's. "This is the third appointment you've broken."

"I know. I know," Megan said, trying to think of an excuse.

"Office policy is that I cannot make you a fourth appointment. And furthermore..." Megan heard her catch her breath. "If you fail to appear tomorrow, the office will have to charge you a fifteen dollar cancellation fee."

Megan's finger went from red to purple.

"Mrs. Harris, can you hear me? Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said. She let her hand drop, the cord slowly unwound.

She trudged up the stairs. Bright sunlight, shining through the lacy frost edging the window pane, split into a fan of sunbeams across the Rick's carpet. A car honked on the street.

She leaned into the window. The yard was thick with snow, thinly crusted but soft mounds underneath. How would

it feel to freefall headfirst through the clean crunch and then sink into pillows of snow.

She backed away to Rick's bed and picked a book from a box. *Brown Bear. Blue Bull. Brown Bear Blue Bull Beautiful Baboon. Brown Bear Blue Bull Beautiful Baboon Biking Backward.* The pages were worn. On one an orange spot had soaked into an upper corner. Rick must have been drinking juice one morning when she'd read to him.

She recited the entire book aloud, allowing the rhythm and rhyme to lull her back from the fear of the dentist's call.

*

After Martin left the one comfortable place she found for herself was on the landing half way between upstairs and down. She had sat there many nights when the children were young, waiting for them to stop talking to each other through the walls, waiting until they fell asleep. It had been Rick's favorite spy place when they had parties and Patty's place to sit and sulk when boyfriends didn't call on time. From the landing Megan heard the wind through the gaps in the eaves, the furnace's soft rumble, the refrigerator motor, the tick of the hall clock, the catch in gears just before it chimed, the scarcely audible crack of maple branches, dried and brittle, heavy with snow, the scratch of her bare rosebushes as they grazed the stone patio wall whenever the wind picked up. From this spot she concentrated on external noise.

Her lap was piled with Martin's old wool shirts she found hanging in a plastic garment bag in the attic cedar closet. At first she was angry that he had left them behind. She had ripped them off the hangers and they fought her, the sleeves tangling, the buttons refusing to come undone.

She folded them carefully into her lap. She tucked the sleeves behind, straightened the collars, ran her hand up and down the front, feeling the prickle of the wool. She smoothed the shirts across her cheek. Beneath the smell of mothballs a hint of Martin's aftershave lingered and when she closed her eyes she imagined her cheek was close to Martin's chest.

Call me, Martin had said, and I'll come back. For weeks after he left she knew that all she had to do was pick up the phone. But they both remained stubbornly silent until weeks had dissolved into months. They were reversing habit - staying together, staying apart. She still longed for him, longed to be away from him. She could barely wait for the memory of him to fade along with all those other memories she tried so hard to call back.

She was slipping. She couldn't let it happen.

Down in the kitchen she shoved the shirts into a garbage bag and heaved it into the gaping dark basement. The plastic bag rustled as it hit stair after stair and landed with a soft thump at the bottom. She reminded

herself to put the light on the next time she went down so she wouldn't trip over the bag.

*

Megan decided against turning on the kitchen light. The dark better suited her mood. She filled the teapot and leaned against the kitchen sink waiting for the water to boil.

She kept herbs and violets, all in matching blue pots, on the glass shelves Martin had installed inside the bay window. She filled a cup and watered them, then pinched back the dead leaves. Outside in the garden, a dozen neglected asparagus stalks bowed with the wind. The teapot began to whistle; the little red bird in its spout pulsed in and out with the rising steam. She opened a container of oolong tea that she'd had for over five years and filled the tea ball. A month ago she'd used tea bags, but now she took every opportunity to fill the minutes in her day.

The whistle screamed and she turned off the flame. She listened until the whine became as thin as thread.

*

The moon rose through the glass walls of Martin's studio. She opened the door and slipped inside. The room remained as he had left it, canvases stacked against the glass walls, paint brushes blooming in old coffee cans and though he had not worked here in months, the pungent odor of linseed oil and paint clenched the air. This room was

entirely Martin's. She rarely disturbed him here, but lately she'd been drawn in almost every night.

He had packed everything except this studio and vanished. Like a stubborn runaway child. To punish her. And she felt punished - limbless, numb, with only a vague awareness of those excised pieces of herself. Martin had no rooms to enter that could remind him of her. No familiar noises or smells. She had not envisioned this. She dreaded the day he'd come and pack up this room.

Chapter 2

Megan sat on the living room carpet of their new house propped against two packing crates, her legs resting on a stack of couch cushions. The baby, Rick, five weeks old, was cradled in her lap nursing.

Sara Alexander came in, her arms full with newspapers. She stuffed them in an empty box and wiped her hands on her jeans. "This is the filthiest job," she said.

Megan smoothed the baby's cheek. "He's almost done. Martin's mother will be by soon to take him for a walk and then we can tackle the bedroom."

"You'd think you'd catch a breeze off the river. It's brutal out there." Sara stood next to the screen and fanned herself with her blouse. "Are you sure he's not too small to be outside?"

"It's just as hot inside as out," Megan said. The house was stifling and there was no air conditioning. The original owner must have thought the large windows would compensate.

"I'm finally going to get fourth grade," Sara said. She sat next to Megan and pulled over a carton of books to unpack.

Sara and Megan had taught school together; Megan wasn't certain she'd return in September. She agonized about leaving the baby. What if she missed his first smile? His first step? Stay home if you want, Martin said, as his hand

shaped her growing belly. And then last month he'd sold two paintings and she thought things might work out.

The baby's head lolled back into her arm. His tiny mouth moved in slow motion as if he were dreaming about sucking. Megan caressed the flushed spot on the baby's cheek where it had pressed against her flesh.

"Any one home?" Ellen called.

Megan flinched as the screen door banged behind Ellen; she pulled the baby toward her as if her body could protect his sleep.

Ellen wore a crisp summer suit. She put her briefcase down and looked around at the scattered boxes, trails of newspaper. "Martin should have painted a picture of a house," she said. "You could have hung it on the wall, lived with it for a while and then traded it in for another."

"Thanks," Megan retorted. She was tired of the subtle hostility between her husband and her best friend.

"You won't believe what's going on outside," Ellen whispered. She wore red lipstick. Megan ran her tongue over her lips and couldn't remember the last time she'd worn lipstick.

"Here, let me take him," Ellen said and held out her arms. Megan handed him over.

A clamor blossomed in the distance. "There's a massive demonstration on the bridge," Ellen said.

They walked out and stood on the step. The lacy arbor of sugar maples slivered sunlight across the lawn. It was a few degrees cooler outside; the sweat dried on Megan's back. The Franklin bridge, connecting the east and west bank of the Mississippi and the two halves of the college campus, was packed with people, colored placards waved in the air like balloons.

Ellen combed the baby's damp hair into a curl with her fingers. "Dow Chemical set up recruiting booths in front of the Union. I have a story to do. Can you take a break?"

"There's so much to do," Megan said.

"You haven't been outside in days. I swear you're losing touch with life."

"Hey," Megan said reclaiming her baby, "this is life."

"She's in her career mode today," Sara said from behind the screen. "There's no arguing with her. A walk will do you good. I'll work in the kitchen."

"Thanks Sara," Ellen said. "I'll pick up the slack tomorrow."

*

They walked under the shade of the trees toward the bridge. The baby slept in her arms oblivious to the honking horns and erratic shouting. The bridge was thronged with students. Ellen disappeared with a "stay right here, I'll be back." A police siren pulsed on and off trying to clear the road. A student handed her a placard. Last summer

she'd been in the middle of this. She thought by now it would have ended. She pulled the baby close, eager to feel his soft, silky skin. He nuzzled against her neck sending shivers down her spine.

*

Aside from a few boxes stacked in the corner of the bedroom, the house looked like they had lived there for years. Paintings had been hung, books stacked in the board and brick bookshelves, dishes washed and put away. Martin had spent the last two weeks pacing between boxes in the apartment and the new house unable to find a spot for himself. He'd pick up a brush only to shove it back into the paint-stained coffee can, run his finger along the canvas, blow off the dust. He needed things in their place before he could work and Megan sensed the controlled frustration simmering under his surface smile and assurance that moving and the baby were more important right now.

The baby was asleep in the port-a-crib in a corner of the bedroom and Martin was lying in bed, a sketch pad propped on his knees. His black hair was thick and wavy and fell lazily across his forehead. He held the sketch at arm's distance and frowned in concentration; at the slight tilt of his head a knot tightened in her abdomen and memory took her back to the first time he'd held her and she'd known that a missing piece of her life had slipped into place.

She stood at the bedroom door, her hair wet and heavy down her back, shower water glistened on her body. She loved watching him when he was unaware of her. He looked up and smiled, but looked away quickly. They hadn't made love in over two months and the doctor had told her to wait for her six-week check-up.

But she couldn't wait another week. She padded across the room feeling Martin's eyes on her back. She folded a few diapers, then fiddled with the dresser mirror until she got it straight.

"You're dripping," Martin said.

She didn't move.

The bedsprings creaked.

"Do you want a towel?" he asked coming closer.

She shook her head.

His hand trailed down her spine, around to the residual mound of her stomach. The other hand hesitantly touched her breast. She leaned backward and pressed against him. She rocked her head in the crook of his neck.

He led her to the square of white sheet that glowed in the curtainless room. He pushed the sketch pad out of the way. She reached for it. It was a pen and ink of her nursing the baby. Her head bowed, her hair mingling with the baby's, the baby's eyelashes long and dark across the curve of his cheek. "It's rough," he said and pushed it away.

She wove her fingers into his hair and pulled him close. His kisses glided across her body like shower water and for the first time she wanted him more and faster than he had ever wanted her.

"Is it all right?" he asked, his hand so light she could hardly stand it.

She guided his hand to her breast and together they circled it until she felt a light sting and milk flowed out from between their fingers. She gathered a drop on her fingertip and touched it to his lips. He tasted tentatively with his tongue then drew her finger into his mouth.

She took her hand away and arched toward him. She dug her nails into his shoulders wanting him to hold her so hard that she was welded to him. After the baby was born she missed something. At first she thought it was the baby, so long inside her, but now she realized it was Martin. She wanted the pressure of his body, his breath, heavy and hot in her ear.

"Like this?" he asked easing slowly into her.

"Yes." She heard her own breath catch as the stitches tore inside her. She gripped the sheet. He hesitated, poised above her.

"I'm hurting you," he said.

She reached up and pushed the hair off his forehead. It was still damp from his shower. In the dark his eyes turned from blue to violet.

"You could never hurt me." She moved in slow, small circles until the pain burned to a delicious pulse. His arms, trembling from his weight, gave way and for a moment his entire weight concentrated on her inside and out.

*

She was awakened by the moonrise framing a triangle of light across the bed. The sheets smelled from milk and sweat. From the corner the baby gave a few fleeting whines, ready for the next feeding; he sounded like a little goat.

She stretched her arm toward Martin and was surprised that the other half of the bed was empty, the sheet cool to her touch.

Chapter 3

The cone of shower water streamed over Megan's body. She felt like the tiniest of the Russian stacking dolls on her dresser; the one with nothing inside. If it were possible to stand forever under this umbrella of steaming water inside this shower, inside this bathroom, inside her bedroom, inside her house, she would.

*

Martin had designed the bedroom, but it was decisively Megan's. Unlike the clutter in his studio, the bedroom was spacious and sparsely furnished with oak bed and dresser on dove grey carpeting. While the studio reeked of turpentine, the bedroom smelled lightly of lemon-scented furniture polish and Opium, Megan's perfume.

She picked up her underwear from a neat stack of laundry on the rattan rocker. She opened her underwear drawer. The bras were stacked by color, long slips toward the front, shorter less used ones in the back. Until a few months ago, she barely had time to put her things away much less maintain any order. She slid the panties into place, then wiped away a smudge from the dresser mirror. Why did she look so healthy when she felt so awful?

Her light brown hair, grown to her shoulders over the past two years, curled loosely around her face, the few strands of grey lost inside the curl. Her eyes wavered in

color between brown and hazel and the gold fleck in her left iris drew attention from the spattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose.

The mirror reflected the neatly made bed, the rocker, the rug vacuumed up and down, patterned like a newly plowed field.

She moved quickly, tore the sheets from the bed, shoved the rocking chair - the stack of laundry tumbled to the floor. She yanked open dresser drawers, tossed sweaters, underwear, nightgowns into the streaming morning light. She twirled across the carpet, her hair fanned around her, filling her mouth, bras dangling from her fingers, bumping into the bed, the rocker until she was breathless and dizzy.

Clothes and sheets tangled around her feet, she staggered to the bed and hung her head between her knees. When her breathing slowed she slipped to the floor and cried as she smoothed the carpet into place, gathered years of accumulated clothing into her lap and folded it back into small, sturdy piles.

*

Ellen tossed her hat and gloves on the hall table. "This is it, Megan. I've given you two extra weeks. Get dressed."

"Ellen, I'm exhausted. I didn't sleep all night." It was 9:00 a.m. and Megan was still in her robe.

"It's natural. You're depressed," Ellen explained.

"Well, thank you Dr. Laskin. Now, for sure, I can forget about that appointment." Megan walked away toward the kitchen.

Ellen persisted after her. "But hibernating isn't natural."

"It's winter. It's appropriate to hibernate," Megan said.

Ellen grabbed her arm. "Don't you understand? I'm worried about you. An atomic bomb could drop and you'd never know it."

Megan pulled away. "If a bomb dropped, El, there wouldn't be a point in knowing anything."

"You piss me off," Ellen said.

"Fine. Then stay away."

"Listen. I don't care if I have to drag you bone by bone. I made this appointment for 10:30 and you're going to keep it."

Megan leaned against the wall. "I'm going to be sick, El."

"Don't expect me to clean it up," Ellen said. "I just had my skirt cleaned."

Megan looked at her pleadingly.

Ellen settled her hands on her hips.

"Don't do this to me," Megan said. Her heart pounded temples.

*

Ellen stood next to Megan at the open front door. "I promise it will be all right."

Megan fought the urge to pull the door shut. Ellen held her ground as if daring her to do it.

"If you wanted to be a mother you should have had your own children," Megan said.

Her eyes teared from the glare of the snow. She reached into her coat pocket for sunglasses. She didn't want Ellen to think she was crying.

The steps were slick with ice. A fist squeezed her lungs.

"Take small steps," Ellen said taking hold of her elbow.

"Mother May I?"

"Just let all that nastiness propel you toward the car."

Ellen loosened her grip, but stayed close. Megan's heart pummelled her chest.

The street was empty except for Ellen's blue Volkswagen parked at the curb. Next door, Spider barked at the front window. Megan sighted down the walk to the car door and concentrated on it while putting one foot on the next step and following it with the other.

Her hand shook as she reached for the door handle. Ellen jumped ahead and pulled the door open for her. There was no place to go but into the car. She quickly rolled down the window.

"You'll freeze us both," Ellen said maneuvering the car across an icy stretch of road.

Megan leaned her head out further, letting the rushing wind keep her eyes shut, shutting her ears to the whir of the tires on the ice encrusted street.

*

"I suppose Ellen, Mrs. Laskin, told you all about me." Megan kept her eyes on her skirt, pleased that she had chosen this plaid that enabled her to focus on the interweaving of lines. Red across blue, black across blue and red.

"I'm only interested in what you have to tell me, Megan. Do you mind if I call you Megan?" Dr. Fishman said.

His voice was rough, damaged. He smoked. He wore glasses. A three piece suit and glasses. All psychiatrists must wear them.

Silence except for his breathing, deep and nasal. He sounded like Rick whose allergies caused his breath to rasp through his nose when he ate.

"Is there something you'd like to talk about?" he asked finally.

His eyebrows hung heavily over the top rim of his glasses. His eyes, large and watery, trailed down to her lap where her hand had gathered a fistful of plaid wool. He chewed on the edge of his pencil, twirling it between his teeth, waiting for her to say the correct thing.

Feeling stubborn, she stretched out her arms and closed her eyes until she could barely feel herself in the chair. How did Ellen know him? Was he her doctor? She never even knew that Ellen went to a psychiatrist. How could she not have known. She sat up abruptly and opened her eyes.

"Yes?" he asked.

She held her voice even. "Don't your patients have to want to be cured?"

His long lashes blinked over his watery eyes.

She forced her concentration back on her skirt and surreptitiously watched his square hand, chubby fingers slide down the pencil, turn it over, slide down again waiting for her answer. There was a box of tissues and an ashtray on the stool next to her, and on the wall, a print by Matisse, intrusive in bright purplish-red, the people flat and silent. This all fell within a triangle of window light. The rest of the room was dark. He looked at the clock on his desk. He didn't wear a watch.

"Megan, look at me."

She thought she detected a slight accent. All psychiatrists had accents.

She was tired of this game. "I prefer Mrs. Harris," she stared hard at him. This person didn't know her or care anything about her. Understanding her reaction to Martin's departure was something she had to do by herself.

She shut her ears to his onerous breathing. Her hands moved down the leather arms of the chair, her fingers found the jagged holes left there before her.

*

They crossed the Franklin bridge and turned onto East River Terrace, and it was as if she were returning from a long trip instead of a few hours. The houses looked smaller, nestled together on a slight incline of land, all brick and evergreen, something out of a Christmas card.

"You're so quiet," Ellen said. "Are you mad at me?"

"Just at myself." Megan said. She twisted her scarf around and around her hand.

Ellen reached over and pushed a strand of Megan's hair away from her face.

Megan moved away and tucked the disobedient hair behind her ear.

Ellen shut off the engine and turned toward her. "It's not going to get better this way. Take my word for it."

When Ellen's husband, Jack, left, Ellen had seemed so strong. She just went north to the cabin for a few days and came back - Ellen. Why was she having such difficulty taking her advice?

The sun slipped behind a cloud, the wind picked up and whistled through the car. Ellen shivered and rolled up her window. "I hate this erratic weather," she said.

Ellen was waiting to be invited in. Megan reached over and squeezed Ellen's hand.

"Did you make another appointment?" Ellen asked.

Megan shook her head.

"You can't stay the way you are."

"I won't." Megan slipped out of the car.

Ellen took a key out of her pocket and pressed it into Megan's hand. "Go up to the cabin," Ellen urged.

"Maybe I will," she said to put Ellen off for a while.

*

She leaned against the front door and smiled at her kernel of triumph. She had not submitted to asking Ellen in. She had not been coerced into making another doctor's appointment. She felt just like the first time she had ridden her bike in the street instead of the sidewalk. The steady whir of the bike chain and wheels on the street, skimming along without cumbersome curbs, the thick summer air blowing her bangs away from her face, her blouse billowing in back as if she were sailing.

She opened the hall closet and hung up her coat. It struck her that the house was different somehow as if the space made by her leaving had been swallowed up and replaced.

She paced through the living room and dining room. This house was their creation. She knew every brick, every fleck of paint, every window pane, every carpet weave.

She was scared. She needed this house. It held over twenty years of her life; the remnants were stored in these rooms.

She went from window to window, her fingers exploring the seams where glass met frame. She searched for something she couldn't see or hear - the solidity of air, the echo of words.

Chapter 4

The yard was in constant motion. Butterflies darted along the light ripple of birthday streamers and balloons. Martin raised and lowered the pinata across the limb of the apple tree. Ellen came in and out of the screen door with trays of peanut butter sandwiches and chips. Ricky, in his vest and cowboy boots, handed out tails and blindfolds to a line of children. Patty rocked and posed, her black banana curls bouncing off her shoulders, her cheeks still round, holding a panda bear with a bright red bow around its neck. Ellen's husband, Jack, squatted around her, taking pictures, calling to her, "Let's see that big birthday smile."

The aroma of near-ripe apples, peonies, and lilies-of-the valley filled the yard. The sun streamed through the clouds, fragmenting light down on them. It was a perfect August afternoon.

The children were having trouble breaking the pinata. Megan was secretly glad. Martin had spent days working on it and it hurt her to have it hang so casually from the backyard tree. But she felt that way about everything Martin created. If it were up to her, Martin said, he'd still have his very first crayon drawing; they'd have to add on to the house just to store everything. She often wondered how he let go so easily. In that way they were so different. She held tenaciously to everything.

Last night, looking out their bedroom window he'd asked her, "don't you want me to be famous?" He nibbled at the back of her neck. "Don't you want to read in *Time* about the latest 'Harris'? He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed until she'd said, "of course." She turned in his arms. "But.." "But what?" he'd asked. "I know it's selfish, but I don't want you to be so famous that you'll leave us behind," she said. He walked her back until she felt the cool pane of glass against her shoulders. "Chances are," he said as he kissed her neck, "that you'll leave me first."

Jeremy Newton snatched Patty's bear and she let out a shriek. Jack grabbed the kid mid-flight and returned it. Relieved, Patty closed her eyes and put her thumb in her mouth. It was hard for Megan to believe that this was Patty's fourth birthday. Next month when she started nursery, Megan would have her mornings free. She could go back to work, but what she really wanted was another baby. Martin's popularity plus his full teaching load made it possible for them to manage without her salary.

"Hey Jack. Come and help with this thing." Martin dangled the pinata so low the kids bumped into it, but it fiercely defied the bat.

Jack ambled over.

Martin and Jack were both six feet, but Martin looked shorter because he was about forty pounds lighter than

Jack's two hundred and ten pounds. In the summer sun, Martin's hair shone with red highlights.

Jack whacked at the pinata. His shoulder length hair fanned around him. The children stepped back respectfully.

"You've outdone yourself, Marty. I'm going to need a sledge hammer."

"You can do it, Jack," Martin yelled.

The kids cheered him on.

A triangle of sweat formed on the back of Jack's shirt.

"This is a trick, right. Like those birthday candles?"

"Just hit it or the kids will eat you for dessert," Martin said.

"What do I get for this effort?" He talked as he swung.

"My car..."

The pinata flew high in the air. The next swing was a miss.

"Your car's a wreck," Jack panted and swung again.

"My wife..."

There was a loud crack and the pinata split open.

"Home run!"

Martin ripped the pinata open and thrust his hand inside to wiggle the loot free. Jack beat himself triumphantly on the chest and started for Megan.

"Good luck," Ellen said coming up behind her.

For a brief moment Megan wondered what it would be like going to bed with Jack, but then Martin dodged around him and scooped Megan into his arms and twirled her.

Jack pounded him playfully on his shoulder. "Hey, I won her fair and square."

"I changed the rules," Martin said. "I'd never let her go. She's worth too much."

*

Martin and Jack dragged the garbage cans down to the curb. Ellen sat on the kitchen table inspecting her nails while Megan leaned against the sink and sipped a beer. The promise of fresh rain washed through the screens.

"I'm getting old, El," she said. She held the cold bottle to her forehead. "I can't believe I used to teach thirty seven-year olds."

"Jack's leaving." Ellen kept her gaze fixed on her nails.

"Leaving? Where? For how long?"

"For Helena, for Seattle, forever." Ellen bit off a nail. She spit it into her palm and it lay there like a faint half-moon.

"Ellen, what's going on?"

Ellen flicked the nail into the garbage. "Don't look so scared."

Martin and Jack came in quietly. Martin disappeared into his adjacent studio while Jack leaned against the sideboard not far from Megan.

Ellen and Jack took turns looking at each other and looking away.

Megan was just about to ask how they could just stand here when Martin returned. "Here's a present," he said and handed Jack an oil he had done from one of Jack's photographs.

Jack held it out for Ellen to see. She nodded. "Pretty neat, Marty," he said. "I'll find the perfect place for it."

Megan looked from one to the other. They all avoided her gaze. Martin had known about Jack all along and had never told her. He held the phone between his chin and shoulder while he looked up the phone number of the Pizza Palace.

"Olives and anchovies okay with everybody?" No one but Megan liked anchovies, not even Martin who always made a big deal of ordering her slices separate. But tonight no one objected.

*

Martin came out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Did you check on the baby?" he asked.

"She'd throw a tantrum if she heard you call her a baby." Megan sat in an armchair, her feet propped on the window sill.

"She'll always be my baby." He leaned over her and massaged her shoulders. Water droplets from his wet hair fell on her face.

"I want another one, Marty," she said. Her heartbeat sped up. Shit! Shit! She hadn't meant to say it now. This was too important to be lost in the inevitable discussion about Ellen and Jack.

The touch of his fingers lightened. "Not now, Meg. This isn't the time."

"When is the right time? Soon I'll be too old." Maybe you'll want to leave me.

"Ellen should have had a baby," she said.

"So now she'd be on her own and stuck with a child." He avoided her logic.

She looked out at the dark yard. Lightning split the sky. She took a deep breath. "When were you going to tell me about Jack?"

"Ellen asked me not to. She wanted to tell you herself." Thunder rolled softly in the distance. Rain misted through the window screen.

He edged away from her and slipped into his robe. "Do you mind if I go down and work for a while. There hasn't been this much quiet for days."

He came back and kissed her neck.

"So go on," she said.

"Should I wake you when I come back up?"

She shrugged.

He ran his hand through his hair. "Megan, I have work to do."

"What about Ellen?"

"She'll be fine."

"I wouldn't be."

"You can be tough if you have to."

Then why did she just want to curl up into his arms? When she didn't say anything more, he said, "I won't be too late."

He paused by the bedroom door. "I'm sorry about Ellen and Jack, Meggie. But sometimes those things happen."

*

Reeking of paint, he crawled under the summer blanket. She breathed in and it made her a little high. His fingers reached under her nightgown and stroked her back. She lay there with her back to him not moving but not moving away. He pulled the thin straps off her shoulders and cradled her breast in his hand. He slipped his foot under hers and ran his toes back and forth across her sole, his knee pushing lightly into the bend of hers. Her skin chilled from his hot breath near her ear. He should have been a sculptor, she thought, feeling herself change shape under his hands. Sleep had stolen her anger. The wind blew the blinds in and out.

"I love you," he said.

He pulled her on top. He was solid between her knees, her nipples grazed his chest. They kissed between mouthfuls of her hair. All of a sudden she remembered Ellen and lay still.

"Everything will be all right," he murmured. He swept the hair back from her face, kissed her chin and her eyes.

He started to move again, slowly at first, his body imploring her to follow and she did until their small concentration of movement was larger than the rolling room, larger than the thundering night.

Chapter 5

Megan raided the thinning pantry and sat on the stairs. Despite the half-box of stale Frosted Flakes, a bag of potato chips Rick had left behind, a chocolate bar and a bottle of Diet Coke, the hollow in Megan's stomach would not go away.

She hadn't snacked like this since she was a teenager, coming in from a late date and sitting on the floor in her mother's dark kitchen in a swath of refrigerator light, nibbling away at leftovers, trying to recapture what the boy had said, what was special about him, what she had laughed at - before going off to bed where it would all be lost in the blur of sleep.

Maybe she needed company. She turned on the living room television while she sat next to the window sifting through a pile of old phonograph records.

She loved this room. It always pleased her. The off-white linen couch, the pillows brightly patterned with parrots and palm trees. The carpet was as green as grass and one of Martin's Mexican oils, enormous flower splashes of fuschia, green and burnt orange, hung over the fireplace. Potted ferns stood on either side of the French doors leading to the front terrace. She worked hard to keep them healthy during the winter.

Outside a light wind blew the top layer of snow from yard to yard. She pushed back a loose strand of hair. Anais Anais- Patty's perfume. It clung to the sleeve of Patty's

sweatshirt that Megan had rescued from the rummage pile. She smiled remembering Patty's homesick phone call from college the day someone walked by wearing Megan's Opium. Fragrant ghosts weaving through lives. Like the smell of lilies-of-the-valley that constantly reminded her of the first perfume Martin had given her. Too sweet for her, so she used it up in her bath water. God, how guilty she had felt.

Her eye caught the energetic arm waving of an evangelist on the television. The camera shifted to a large woman wearing a purple silk dress then back to the preacher holding out his hands. Sweat poured from his forehead down his neck, staining his shirt collar.

Megan walked over and turned up the sound.

"Come on," he pleaded. "You can do it. I know you can." His voice was hoarse with effort.

The woman strained forward. Her husband, who was holding her crutches, placed his hand on her back. "You can do it, Emily," he said.

Everyone, even Megan, held their breath as Emily wobbled upward. Her husband leaned forward with her but just as she was about to stand, the crutches slipped from his lap and clattered to the floor. The woman collapsed in her seat. The audience gave an audible "oh!".

The preacher would not give up. He started his exhortations again.

Now the fat woman had blotches under her arms and up the back of her purple dress. If she didn't stand soon, she'd die

of a heart attack. And then, when Megan's attention began to flag, the woman seemed to rise upward and the entire congregation with her. Megan found herself pulled closer to the set. There was a general intake of breath while Emily balanced herself on her elephant feet. Her husband tugged down the back of her skirt. She took one step and then another before swooning into the preacher's arms.

'Pins and needles' numbed the bottoms of Megan's feet. She massaged them until she felt the heavy motor of a snowplow vibrate through the thick oak floor.

*

She was nervous backing down the driveway and gave the car too much gas at first. The wheels skidded and whirred. She looked out to see if any of the neighbors were watching.

On the street, she was more assured. She had set an easy task for herself. Drive one block, turn left, cross the bridge, turn left, park.

She kept her hands steady by talking continuously, planning lunch for Sara and Ellen. She'd use the blue table cloth. Don't forget to buy napkins. See if there are any red peppers for the salad. Should she buy wine? What about candles? No this is just lunch.

The aching blueness of the sky over the arch of the bridge distracted her. It blocked out river and buildings. The bridge had no end. The wheels were soundless and for a moment it was as if she had taken flight. Keep going. How simple to keep going. She closed her eyes. From behind a

driver leaned hard on his horn. She pressed her foot to the brake and screeched to a stop. The engine stalled.

The driver pulled around next to her, leaned over and rolled down his window. His words came at her in spurts of frosty breath. "Hey are you nuts?" More horns honked.

She looked at him, his overlapping yellow teeth, his red hunter's cap with the ear flaps down, the cigarette squeezed between two fingers.

"I'm sorry. I thought I saw something on the road." She should have walked.

The driver craned his neck toward his windshield. "If there was, it's gone now," he said skeptically. He pulled away and rolled up his window. His tires screeched around her car. The rest of the traffic followed him.

She put the car in park and turned the key in the ignition. The engine hummed to life, already used to the cold. At the end of the bridge the store sign rotated slowly on its thick aluminum pole: *Franklin Grocery. Shop Without Worry.*

*

Megan had set the dining room table with white linen and her good china. She clipped a few evergreen branches for a centerpiece and the room smelled lightly from pine. A Billy Joel album, "Innocent Man", Martin's, played on the stereo. Megan disliked Billy Joel. She preferred The Stones, but they didn't seem appropriate for lunch.

"When's the last time you had home-baked bread?" Sara

asked Ellen. She smeared a slab of butter across a thick slice of pumpernickel-raisin.

"Hmm," Ellen pursed her mouth in concentration. "In September - left-overs from Martin's annual department party." Realizing she had mentioned Martin, she looked at Megan for forgiveness.

Megan smiled.

"I haven't had butter in over a year," Sara said.

As soon as Megan put the apple pie she'd baked on the kitchen table to cool, they had all agreed that this was a celebratory lunch and there would be no talk of dieting. Normally, Sara and Ellen would have insisted on pitching in - Sara some new experiment, Ellen something store bought - but they both must have agreed that it would be therapeutic for Megan to do this on her own. She smiled again. This time to herself.

"I told Megan how much she needed to do something creative," Ellen said at lunch. "How many people can bake like this?"

"I think she'd be better off if she could be creative out of the kitchen. Not that she couldn't stand to gain a few pounds."

Not one sentence of the conversation had been directed to her. "Do you want coffee or tea with dessert," she asked.

"I'll get it," Sara said and scraped her chair back. "You sit."

Ellen poked the fork in and out of the lace insert on the

tablecloth. The hall clock ticked steadily. She had nothing to say with Sara out of the room.

"If you were Patty or Rick, I'd tell you to stop that," Megan said.

"Stop what?"

"Stop ruining the table cloth with your fork, stop treating me like I'm dying or something, stop talking around me as if I don't exist."

Ellen looked wounded. She put the fork down and moved her hand towards Megan's.

"What's wrong?" Sara asked returning with the coffee tray.

Everything, Megan wanted to say. Her hand tightened on the tablecloth. She could easily sweep it across the polished maple, clattering the few remaining dishes to the floor. "Nothing," she said and patted Ellen's hand.

Ellen's and Sara's eyes darted like lasers. "Tell me about your classes, Sara," Megan said. Perhaps the more time she kept them talking inside her house, the less time they'd have to discuss her when they left.

*

She held a capful of foaming bath oil under the faucet and eased herself into the scalding water.

Sara and Ellen had stayed until every last dish was washed and put away. Megan half expected them to wash and iron the tablecloth also. She blew a pathway through the bubbles and scooped water on her face.

They had been funny actually. Both of them making a point to stand facing Martin's studio door so Megan wouldn't have to look that way.

Outside, the late afternoon flurries had turned into a full-blown storm. Wind-driven snow beat against the bathroom window like summer hail.

She slipped down. Under water, the faucet thundered like Minnehaha Falls. The water turned cold and streamed into the tub, reminding her of lake water, a mingling hot and cold. She sank lower and floated, water drifting over her as effortless as Martin's weight above her making love, what she imagined it must have been like floating, connected, treasured inside her mother's womb.

Chapter 6

The lake was the color of seafoam, frothy from idling motor boats. Over a hundred swimmers lined the shore waiting for the starting gun. Each was busy with deep knee bends and arm stretches. Gulls circled lazily over their heads.

Megan sat a few yards back cleaning up the remnants of the afternoon's lunch. She squinted into the sun and tossed a left-over bread crust into the air. The gulls swarmed toward her, their eyes menacing. Megan pitched the last crumbs as far away as she could. The gulls swayed together in one gigantic wave, screaming, and for a moment she thought they might attack and carry her off in pieces. A motor revved in the distance and the gulls flew off.

Rick plopped down next to her. He'd already smeared away the zinc oxide she'd spread on his cheeks to protect from sun burn. His damp bathing suit was caked with sand. "A letter from Dad," he said. Preparing for a show in Ann Arbor had kept Martin away from the lake for the first time. Megan shoved the letter under a dry towel.

Patty and Rick missed him. She had to cajole them into fishing or boating. Thankfully at night they slept like logs, but she wasn't used to sleeping alone. She kept waking thinking she'd lost something and couldn't remember where she'd misplaced it.

"I didn't know Aunt Ellen was going to swim." Rick

accepted the orange slice Megan handed him. This was Ellen's first summer at Gull lake. "What about you?" Rick asked.

"What about me what?"

"You only have five minutes."

"I think I'll pass this year."

When she swam each summer it was with Martin and the kids as her anchor on the shore. It wasn't that she was superstitious but rituals demanded a certain faithfulness.

"I brought my camera," Rick said. His shoulders were brown and freckled like hers. "Dad asked me to take a picture."

"You can't tell one swimmer from the other."

"I'll know where you are."

His face was so earnest.

"Someone has to watch you kids," she said, sifting through her fingers.

"We'll stay next to Mrs. Holmes. I'll watch Patty. I promise."

Megan brushed his hair off his forehead.

"Please?"

She'd been so devoid of energy for the last two weeks that she began to think she had mono except there were no swollen glands, no temperature. From the moment the kids went to bed, she hit the couch and spent the evening staring at the same two paragraphs of her book. It was time to get out of this slump.

"Fine." She held out her hand.

He braced his feet and tugged her up. He started to walk her toward the shore, but she tapped his behind and said, "a promise is a promise. Go find your sister."

The water was cold. She'd let a nine year old bully her. She was mush. She splashed her arms and shoulders. She should never have eaten so much lunch.

Down the uneven row of swimmers Ellen grinned and waved for her, but before she could move the gun went off. The gulls splattered into the air. Megan gasped as the icy water hit her full force.

*

She was weightless, embryonic. Water sifted through her cupped fingers. She swam a little, floated, rocked forward by the rhythm of the other swimmers. She never swam to win, just to get across.

The sun baked on her shoulders. Vision was a watery blur - only the silver tip of a row boat glinted in the distance - shore line, trees, cabins were invisible. The water was pale green, but darker, bottomless when the sun slipped behind a cloud, warm and cold at the same time, lightly caressing yet solid beneath her like her father's hand splayed across her childhood stomach -relax, I'm holding you, you won't drown.

She stopped swimming. She was tired but it wasn't the swim. It wasn't caring for the kids without Martin. Even before the summer something had been nagging at the edge of

her consciousness, like the distant murmur of the boats. Perhaps it was the children growing up, perhaps it was nearing another birthday, perhaps it was Martin pacing in the studio in the middle of the night. She'd dreaded this separation. She sliced through the water with her hand. She was furious with him. They all needed him. He seemed to need to be away from them.

*

She sat on the beach enjoying the warmth of the sun while Ellen congregated with the other swimmers around coolers of beer and Coke, towels draped around their shoulders, sand stuck to the backs of their thighs. They all cheered when a large hay wagon pulled by a tractor rolled to a stop. It filled quickly with the first group of swimmers eager to get back.

It was dinner time. When she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the strains of organ music and the clatter of silverware from the lodge dining room across the lake.

"Coming?" Ellen asked. Her short hair was already dry.

Megan eyed the crowded wagon.

"I'll wait for the next run," she said.

Ellen seemed surprised that Megan wasn't rushing back, but Megan just turned away without an explanation and dug her toes into the sand.

"I'll get the kids ready for dinner," Ellen said. She laid her hand for a moment on Megan's shoulder, then left.

Megan hugged her knees and squinted at the sun lowering heavily into the horizon. Someone had a guitar and was strumming and singing *"Oh, he'll never return, no he'll never return, his fate is still unlearned. He'll ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston. He's the man who'll never return."*

Across the lake, fireworks splashed into the darkening sky. She leaned over and buried her face in her arms. Maybe Ellen will feed the kids. Maybe even put them to bed. She wanted to crawl into herself, become inured to responsibility.

Chapter 7

Compared to the Franklin Grocery which swarmed with people, amorphous music, the constant beep, beep of the cash register, the dizzying checkerboard pattern of white and black tiles, Burnham's was quiet and cozy. Brahms played on the sound system and the cashiers seemed to keep time as they gracefully passed purchases over the computerized screen.

"How are things today, Mrs. Harris," asked the young college student whose I.D. pin said "Robert". He swept a large box of Corn Flakes across the monitor.

The box was too big. It would go stale before she could finish it. "Can I take that back?" Megan asked. Her face burned.

"Sure," Robert said and reached for a void slip.

She looked at her line of groceries. There was a package of grapes that would rot before she could eat them, a sixteen ounce container of cottage cheese, a package of too many peppers, apples and tomatoes.

"Listen, I didn't do this right..."

Robert stared.

Megan returned the groceries to the cart. "There's no way," she said. "There's no way I can possibly use all this. Let her go first," she turned to the woman behind her. "Go ahead. I'll be back. I'm sorry."

*

She tried to ignore the cold on the way home by playing 'kick the can' with a chunk of ice. She hummed the Brahms melody to herself. At the corner there were no cars on the road so she crossed against the red light. She was the only person on the street. Perhaps something had happened she didn't know about.

She was surprised to find the mail on the hall table.

"Ellen?" she called. Ellen must have let herself in and left when she hadn't found Megan at home.

An acrid smell greeted her as she walked into the kitchen. She placed the groceries on the table. It was an odor she had lived with all her married life: linseed oil, turpentine, oil paint, an odor confined to Martin's studio. She turned around slowly. The door was open.

"Martin?" she called. Her stomach lurched. "Martin," she said again, softly.

She walked toward the studio. He was sitting on a stool with his back to her. His hair hung in soft waves and touched the collar of his corduroy jacket. A box of paint and brushes lay near his feet. He was hunched over as if he were sick.

"Martin?"

He turned toward her. His eyes were moist and he held Patty's storybook, *Goodnight Moon*, in his paint-stained hands. He'd been upstairs - in the children's rooms - had he been in their bedroom? Her stomach churned irrationally as if it had been a stranger that had invaded her privacy

instead of her husband.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He wore his docksiders without socks despite the cold and his grey sweater under his jacket. He was tan. Acapulco? Florida? Some place they'd been together or a place they'd never been.

She looked down at the box near his feet. "Why now?" In her more terrifying moments she'd convinced herself that he'd left this room in tact as some sort of promise. Except for the children it had been the last link between them.

"I started painting again," he said. He wiped his eyes with his jacket sleeve; his voice was soft.

She backed away from him. "You can't just come in here and take things."

"Megan..."

"We agreed to keep in touch and you disappeared for months without calling."

"I paid the bills..." He held out the hand with the book.

She pressed against the studio wall. "You should have called."

He walked around behind the stool.

Megan took a deep breath. "What did you do? Wait around the corner until you saw me leave?"

"Please don't act this way." He ran his fingers through his hair, his way of expressing exasperation.

"How do you expect me to act?" Sweat prickled down her

back.

"Jesus, Megan, this whole thing was your idea!"

She glared at him and walked out of the room.

She took her jacket off, stood with her back to him and pulled groceries from the bag.

"You're right," he said coming into the kitchen. "I should have called. I will call."

She felt his breath on her neck.

"Why don't I take what I need and tomorrow I'll come over and we can talk."

She walked to the refrigerator, opened it and put away the milk and cottage cheese. She leaned heavily against the door, letting the cool air erase the building scream.

"Leave the book," she said quietly.

"What?"

"Leave the book." She shut the refrigerator door.

He still held *Goodnight Moon* in his hand.

"I just..."

"Leave it!"

Martin slid the book onto the kitchen table.

Megan took a glass bowl from the cabinet and put in the peppers, tomatoes and bananas.

"You're not making any sense. You're acting as if I walked out on you," he said. He ran his fingers back and forth through his hair.

Megan sat down and cradled the bowl between her hands, stared at it as if it were a crystal ball.

He paced in front of the table. "Jesus, Meg, you close up tighter than a clam. You're like a little kid that thinks if he closes his eyes the scary monster will disappear. Well, damn it, I disappeared so as far as I'm concerned your world should be rosy."

The front door opened and closed and a voice called, "Martin."

Martin looked toward the hall then back to her. "I can come back," he said.

"Martin," the voice called out again.

Megan stood up. "No you can't come back."

The kitchen door swung open. "Sorry I'm late. I needed gas..." The girl was in her twenties. Her chestnut hair was brushed high in a pony tail and her clear grey eyes made Megan's heart clench so tightly she had to look away. It wasn't that she was young; it was the way she looked at him. The way Megan had looked at him for such a long time.

The odor of turpentine and paint seemed to flood the kitchen, strangling her, stinging tears to her eyes. She grabbed for her jacket so quickly that the bowl crashed to the floor, peppers and tomatoes rolled amidst shattered glass.

The girl just stared. Martin ducked to his knees. "I'll get it," he said.

Megan raced for the front door. For the first time in months she longed to be outside, to gulp in fresh, cold air.

Martin came up behind her. How many times had he stood

that way? How many times had she leaned back certain that he would be there?

"She's not important," he whispered. "She has nothing to do with you and me."

The wind blew bitterly at her face. "There is no you and me."

Ida Hammerman rapped on the window pane from her next door bedroom window.

Martin looked up. "Let's go back inside," he coaxed. She refused to move. "What's her name?"

"What difference..."

Megan pulled away.

"Diane," he called after her.

"Martin..." Diane called. "I think we should go."

Megan walked down the steps.

"Just give me a minute," he said.

"Everything okay over there?" Mrs. Hammerman was by her front door now, holding her sweater at the neck with one hand, the other on her door knob. Spider whimpered near her legs.

"We're fine," Megan said. She slipped, regained her balance. Why now? Why did she have to be so clumsy?

Martin reached for her arm. She shrugged him off.

"Everything's okay. Go back inside, Ida," he said.

Ida ignored him and walked down her front steps, holding on to the stoop for balance. "Can I do anything for you Megan, darling?" Spider ran a few feet down the walk

then back to Ida, barking now.

Diane, at the front door, "Can we please leave?" she asked.

They had reached the front sidewalk. Megan had no idea where she was going, just that she had to move. Martin grabbed her elbow. Megan turned and swung at him, scratched his face.

"Shit!" He touched the scratch hesitantly with his fingers.

He reached for her again, held her tight with both hands. His breath was hot and fast on her face. She could see the moist inside of his mouth. "Don't be an idiot," he said. He kept his hands on her arms as if he were going to tell her something of importance, and they stood that way, breathing heavily, their breaths forming a cloud between them.

"Professor Harris..." Ida said as she reached the sidewalk.

"Go inside." His voice had an unusual edge.

Ida backed away.

"What are we going to do?" he asked. His voice was quiet as if they were together in bed afraid the children might overhear.

"I don't know."

"Let her go," Diane called from the steps.

His eyes were deep blue with worry - how he'd looked when she was flushed from childbirth, more recently when a

canvass didn't look just right. She stepped away.

"Take what you want. I'm going away."

*

The house was quiet, the mail still unopened on the hall table. The studio door closed. The smell of turpentine still lingered in the kitchen, but it was lighter, more delicate.

Perhaps if she'd just held on a little longer...

From the drawer in the hall table she took a key with a red plastic tag. The key to Ellen's cabin. Ellen had been right. She needed to be in another place.

She tugged the suitcase from the top shelf in Martin's closet. It thumped to her feet. The empty hangers swayed. She pushed the mirrored door closed. With the large suitcase in front of her she looked like a waif running away from home. She swept her hair back from her face.

An old tampax, a sample bottle of shampoo and conditioner, (she didn't remember from where) and a match book inscribed Posada del Sol were squashed into a corner of the suitcase. She snatched her robe from the rocker and smoothed it across the bottom, then moved from closet to drawer, shoving in flannel nightgowns, sweaters, jeans, socks, toothbrush, books.

She opened her makeup case, loaded it with mascara, lipstick blush, dumped it back in the drawer, looked in the mirror, put it all back again.

When she took the suitcase off the bed, she leaned over

and smoothed the wrinkles from the bedspread.

Downstairs she wound the hall clock carefully, so as not to snap the spring.

She went back upstairs in case there was something she had forgotten.

She paused at the window and looked down at the yard. A train whistled in the distance. She had forgotten about the train. She hadn't heard it in months. She turned the locks and pulled the window up, leaning out so she could hear better. The air felt good against her face. Strong, brisk. She opened the next window. The curtains billowed out. The whistle mourned closer.

She went into Rick's room and then Patty's - opening window after window. The curtains flew outward as if suddenly freed. The blinds rattled against each other like chattering teeth.

A trail of cold air followed her down the stairs. In the living room she opened the French doors, then the dining room windows, the kitchen windows. The aroma of turpentine vanished. There was nothing but clean, white air.

She left Martin's studio untouched.

She wavered a minute by the back door, her suitcase at her side. And then she felt it - a strong wind at her back, pushing her out the door, into the yard.

Chapter 8

"The cab's here," Megan yelled. She opened the front door and signaled the driver to wait. Fresh snow was beginning to fall.

Martin's mother came in from the kitchen. She was a large, raw-boned woman with freckles and consistent china blue eyes unlike Martin's that changed in color depending on his emotions. She wore one of Megan's aprons and had a kitchen towel over her shoulder. "I wish you two'd get out of here already."

The taxi honked again. "Martin," Megan called, impatient.

Martin, with Patty on his shoulders, carried the suitcase down. "The damn zipper was stuck," he said. He almost tripped over Rick who sat at the bottom reading a comic book. "Hey! Do you want me to spend the week in Mt. Sinai?"

"Come on kids," Martin's mother said, insinuating herself between Rick and Martin, "kiss your parents goodbye and come see what I've made for lunch." Patty leaned forward, kissed Megan and slid over into her grandmother's arms.

Martin tousled Rick's hair and went out to the cab.

"Don't forget Patty's ballet lesson and..."

"Meter's ticking," Martin called from the sidewalk.

"Go on. We'll be fine," Martin's mother said.

Megan followed Martin out but turned to wave at Rick and Patty whose faces, framed in frost, were pressed to the living room window. She missed them already.

*

Megan had planned this Acapulco vacation for over a year, saved for it, kept it a secret until last night. It was her fifteenth anniversary present to Martin. Other than a trip to Redwing and a few summers at the lake they had never been away, and never alone. Martin spent his sabbatical year painting and travelling back and forth to Chicago where his work was being shown. The one weekend she had planned to go with him, Patty came down with the chickenpox.

This vacation was important. It wasn't that they had fallen out of love, they had fallen out of energy and she hoped this vacation would give them both a boost.

Martin kissed her behind her ear and her heart picked up. "Happy?" he whispered.

"Delirious," she said. The trip to the airport, the plane, the warm sun and ocean air loomed in the distance like a beautifully wrapped gift.

*

"There are always storms over these mountains," the stewardess whispered. Afraid of being sick, Martin had taken another Dramamine when they landed in Mexico City and was sound asleep, oblivious to the lightning reflecting off

the wing, the thunder and hail-like rain. Megan held tight to his hand.

*

"Meggie, this is fabulous," Martin said. They walked hand in hand down the flagstone path of the Posada del Sol, past the night-lit pool, the palms, the smell of coconut and fish and the moon almost large enough to touch.

She had chosen Acapulco because Ellen had told her it was the perfect vacation. Sleep late, cold beer and pina coladas on the beach until two or three, a late shower, afternoon nap, sex, ten o'clock supper, flamenco, margaritas, back to bed. More sex.

The room was small, paneled in a deep red mahogany and sparsely furnished. Martin kept his hand on Megan's bottom while they waited for the young man who accompanied them to the room to adjust the air conditioning.

When the door clicked closed, he pulled her onto the bed. Like teenagers in the back seat of a car, they squirmed out of their clothes.

"I can't believe you slept through the entire flight." She pulled at the hair on his chest.

"I wasn't really sleeping. I was saving my strength."

*

"Can you hear the ocean?" she asked.

"Mm," Martin murmured into her back. "I could hear it better if you'd go back to sleep."

Megan left the bed and stood at the window. Small rivers of light rolled on the ocean's waves. All that ice and snow back home. The travel alarm glowed in the dark. 3 a.m. Over sixteen hours and she hadn't thought once about the children.

"Do you miss the kids?" she asked.

"I miss you. Come back to bed." He tossed the sheet back and she stretched out next to him. He ran a finger lightly from her knee up the inside of her leg. His eyes were closed, his pupils moved upwards under his eyelids as if mentally following his finger's path. If she slipped away and another woman took her place would he know? Would his eyes drift open then close? Would his hand continue to etch its way along her skin?

"Martin," she said after a minute's silence.

He came closer, burrowed his breath between her neck and shoulder.

Her skin rebelled against the monotonous movement of his hand. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and inched away.

"Marty, we need to talk."

He pushed the hair away from her face. Her leg felt as if his hand were still there.

He kissed her. "Not now. We have an entire week."

They did not make love but slipped into a comfortable position, bend of knee to bend of knee, arm over arm, touching but not entwined. Martin fell back to sleep

easily. Megan lay motionless, listening to the lull of the ocean and staring at the grey shadows in the unfamiliar room.

*

When she awoke the room was empty except for the slight scent of Martin's aftershave that still trailed in the air. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Martin had unpacked and left a towel and her bikini on the dresser next to a plate of papaya and honeydew.

An old man in sombrero and cotton pants rolled at the cuffs bowed when she opened the door, shouldered his broom and stepped back for her to pass. A marimba band was already playing under a striped awning near the pool, and a line of children waited by the diving board to take their turn cannonballing into the water.

She walked toward the ocean along a path bordered with sea grape and hibiscus. The horizon was littered with a blaze of white sails. Thatched chickees sheltered groups of adirondack chairs sunk low in the blistering sand, chairs identical to the ones at the resort they had gone to during the summer only these were painted in bright red and green while the ones at home were left in the natural wood.

"Something to drink, Senora?" asked one of numerous waiters dressed in white scurrying along the beach with trays of sweating beer and thick exotic drinks decorated with paper umbrellas.

"I'm looking for my husband," Megan answered. The sun reflecting off the white clothes, white sand, white water made it difficult to see.

"In Mexico it is easy to find a husband," he answered smiling.

Megan laughed. "I already have a husband."

Then she saw him talking to a child about eight in an ankle length cotton skirt, white blouse and straw hat dangling down her back holding a large leather box open in her arms.

"You're finally up," Martin said as she approached. "Do you think Patty will like any of these?"

Megan picked up a silver filigreed butterfly. "This one," she said.

After Martin paid the girl, he grabbed Megan's hand and pulled her toward the chairs he'd reserved. "I didn't have the heart to wake you."

"It's okay," she said. Martin's dark skin was already flushed with sun. Three empty beer bottles were stuck in the sand.

"Wait until you see this." He was excited.

She noticed the light dusting of colored chalk on his thighs and black bathing suit. Why hadn't it occurred to her that he'd bring his paints?

He pulled his sketchbook from under the chair. The breeze ruffled the pages back, pages splashed with frenetic color.

"Can I see?" She held out her hand.

Martin kept the drawings close to his chest for a moment before giving it over.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He got up and paced, blotting out the sun when he passed in front of her.

"What time did you get up?" she asked carefully turning each page.

"About six."

Her heart seemed to be excavating a larger space for itself. The sketches were the most beautiful she'd ever seen. Up until now he had used mainly charcoal and pen and ink. These pages were filled with composites of color and shape magically turning what wasn't into what was.

For the briefest moment she wanted to smear the chalk across the page. She closed the book.

Martin waited for her to confirm what he already knew - the drawings were breathtaking - filled with energy - but the words wouldn't come. She couldn't separate her praise from her fear -that he had never painted like this before, that from now on he would need more sun, more music, more freedom to be able to work. "Megan?"

She couldn't look up. There were tears in her eyes.

*

They weren't in the house more than twenty minutes when it seemed like they had never left. Patty clung to her and

Rick accepted his hand carved Mexican bat with slight disappointment but growing adult politeness. Martin's mother disappeared into the winter's worst storm leaving a roast and potatoes in the oven for supper.

"I'm exhausted," Martin said around 10:30 and fell into bed.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked. She put a robe over her nightgown to ward of the rising late evening chill. The night was white with snow.

"I'm fine, " he mumbled into the pillow. "Come to bed."

"I'm going to unpack first, okay?" She was happy to be home. Happy to be sleeping in her own bed, but she wanted to return everything to its proper order before she fell asleep.

*

She noticed an envelope marking a page when she returned *Gorky Park* to the bookshelf.

"Marty." She sat next to him on the bed.

"What?" He turned over and pulled the pillow over his head.

"Where did these come from?" 'Patty's 4th Birthday' was scrawled in black magic marker across the front. She slipped the photos out. "I never saw these."

"Meg, it's late. I need some sleep. I have a ton of work to do tomorrow." But he propped himself on his elbow, blinked the sleep from his eyes and riffled through the

pictures. "They're Jack's. He must have dropped them off some time and I forgot."

"Jack's been out of the city for almost four years."

Martin slipped under the covers. "I'll look at them in the morning," he said.

*

Down in the kitchen she watered her plants and checked the refrigerator. Outside, snow fell in thick sheets. She'd have to go shopping tomorrow if they weren't snowed in.

She poured herself a glass of wine and sat down at the table. Once during the last week Martin had asked what she'd wanted to talk about, but Megan had just smiled. She'd remembered her mother telling her that the soup wouldn't boil over if she kept the lid on the pot. Sipping wine, she remembered her father's rejoinder that it depended upon the level of the soup.

Megan reached into her robe pocket for the envelope.

Jack had been gone so long that she'd almost forgotten what he looked like.

The photographs stuck slightly as she dealt them in front of her. Jack was so good. He'd captured Patty so that the sun rimmed her head like a halo. Everyone seemed to be having such a good time. There was one of Ellen in the kitchen making sandwiches, threatening Jack with a stalk of celery. But there was an edge to the smile on her face that Megan hadn't noticed then. There were a half-dozen of

Martin clowning. She never thought about photography as art before, but now she realized why Martin and Jack had been so close. Did he miss him?

There was a piece of note paper and a rubber band around the last group of pictures. "Just fooling around with a new filter." The note said. "Its called a defracter. Let me know what you think. Jack"

The photos were even segments of color, like stained glass or a kaleidoscope. Cubist. It reminded her of Martin's sketchbook only symmetrical. She looked closer and felt dizzy. It was a picture of Megan and Martin, their heads and limbs fragmented into twelve sections. Behind it its duplicate - Megan and Martin, their arms around each other, smiling on a perfectly normal summer afternoon. She shoved the pictures back in the envelope and shuddered. She pulled her robe closer to protect herself from the cold.

Chapter 9

The traffic was light when Megan pulled onto Highway 94. She drove steadily northward, occasionally relaxing her fingers from their grip on the steering wheel, barely noticing the green highway signs flashing Elk River, St. Cloud, and Little Falls. The sun dazzled across acres and acres of snowed-over fields of wheat and corn, too bright to look at without a flood of tears.

She had been irresponsible leaving the house open and while part of her struggled to turn back, the other part held her foot to the accelerator; she'd had enough of the house. Her face ached from months of straining to smile, a permanent lump had settled in her throat, but the rhythm of the tires over the concrete highway seams soothed her. Her breathing eased as she inhaled the cold air that trickled through the car's invisible cracks.

*

Shortly before the Brainard exit, farmland gave way to forests of pine, maple, aspen and birch interspersed every few miles with scarred pockets of scorched trees. In contrast, the birch and aspen were especially lovely, white on white ballerinas stretching into the pale winter sky. Like the Russian forests in *Dr. Zhivago*. She had loved that

movie. Shortly after, Martin had bought her the Russian stacking dolls and a music box that played *Lara's Theme*.

As she drove through Brainard, the late afternoon faded toward dark. When she reached East Gull Lake the car slowed to a glide. The fuel gauge fluttered erratically between empty and a quarter tank and pressing the gas pedal elicited no response. The tires ground over the salt-strewn road while the car rolled several more yards to a stop in front of a store window with lettering: Peterson's General Store/United States Post Office.

After the last asthmatic catch in the Toyota's motor, she got out and looked around. Despite the many summers she'd spent at the lake, she'd never been here. The town was small, framed by the lake on one side and a pine forest on the other. Across the street was a row of smaller stores faced with cedar-wood siding. Their long sloped roofs covered half the windows giving them a sleepy look. There was a bar with a red "Old Milwaukee" sign blinking in the window, a laundromat, whose windows were fogged, and a convenience store. She saw no gas station.

The sign on the window of Peterson's General Store said 'open', and she was greeted by the jarring jingle of brass bells and a blast of hot air from the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room.

The walls, the shelves, the floor, the counters were of rough cut pine. The small floor space was a maze of eye-level shelves stocked with canned goods, shirts, cleaning products, and in the free standing space were stacks of pampers, baked beans and a sunglasses carousel. A burnt woodsy smell filled the air.

The store was as crowded as a department store sale. The door opened and closed, bells rang, the cash register chimed. Three older women gossiped near the onions, looking at each other over the rim of their bifocals. "Get some more celery," a man yelled toward the back of the store. A teenage girl sat on an overturned cardboard box, cracking her gum as she stacked baby formula. There was little room to move. No air to breathe.

A bulky man and a boy of about twelve stood in front of a bushel of baking potatoes. He looked at Megan for a moment, nodded, and went back to picking out potatoes and dropping them into the bag the boy held.

A woman stood behind a counter littered with bolts of material, a length of tulip-flecked pink flannel draped over the shoulder of her man's brown cardigan sweater that barely made it across her large breasts. Pencils were tucked into her wiry grey curls and she wore fingerless leather gloves on her hands. She turned pages of a catalogue, wetting her forefinger on her tongue every few pages. "Can I help you?"

she slapped the catalogue closed and squinted nearsightedly. "Phone's over there," the woman said before Megan had a chance to answer.

"I ran out of gas," Megan said.

"Pump's in the back." The woman rewound the tulip pattern onto the bolt. "You're one lucky woman. You could have run out on one of these back roads. Tell her how lucky she was, Randall."

The man near the potatoes looked up again. "If you say so, Alma."

Megan didn't want to hear about her luck. She smiled. Sweat prickled down her back and under her arms. She didn't want to unbutton her jacket. She wanted to fill up the car and be on her way.

"Can you make it around?"

"The car's dead."

"Randall, this lady needs a hand getting her car around."

Randall crumbled the bag closed. "Sure thing. Come on, Pete."

Pete, buck-toothed and freckled, walked over and held out his hand for the keys.

"Good thing they were here. They'll take care of it." Alma leaned over the counter.

From inside, Megan watched the boy, Pete, get in her car, and Randall place two meaty hands firmly on the car's trunk and disappear from view in a cloud of crystalline air. A red-headed boy came out of the back with a box of celery on one shoulder and two logs under his arm.

"Visiting?" Alma asked.

Megan kept her eye on the boy as he headed for the wood-burning stove. Don't do it, she willed him. The store was sweltering already.

The frost on the door window left enough space to see the empty snow-lined street. It would be rude to wait outside. Megan turned away from the front door.

"The Laskin cabin," she said.

Mrs. Peterson pulled her sweater close around her and swayed back on her heels. "If I remember correctly there are two tanks on the side, but I wouldn't count on them being full or anything. You're going to freeze if you don't order fuel for that cabin."

"I thought I'd check everything out first," Megan said.

"Doesn't seem smart to me. First your car runs out of gas... Well, then..." she said, eager to please, "How about food? I have fresh eggs. Just came in this morning."

Before Megan could come up with some excuse, the door opened and a few snow flakes preceded a woman in her early thirties with two bundled children.

"Good morning, Mrs. Peterson," the young woman cried out in a sing-song voice. "I have three cherry pies and six dozen chocolate cookies in the car for you."

"Two of the pies are already promised," Alma said, "and there must be over a week's worth of mail."

"Lenny, bring those boxes in, honey," she said to her son and moved away down the hardware aisle.

Alma leaned across the counter and whispered to Megan. "That's Louise Ranier. Sweet children."

Megan wasn't interested in Louise or her children.

"Excuse me," Alma said and went toward the wire cage that separated the store from the post office.

Megan took a deep breath and tried to ignore Mrs. Peterson's humming, "*She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes,*" and Louise's daughter reading a *Wonder Woman* comic out loud in a sniffling voice. How long did it take to fill a tank with gas?

On the counter next to bolts of material was an old brass cash register. Tacked to the wall in a small cleared-away space were a five dollar bill, a one dollar bill and photographs. Several were different shots of the lake taken in summer, the trees thick with growth, the water placid.

There was one of a handsome man, about fifty, fifty-five, a sassy grin on his face, holding at arm's length an enormous bass; there were two photos taped together to give a panoramic view of swimmers, knees bent, shoulders hunched, lined up on the shore ready for the annual cross-lake swim. In the sky of the picture was a red-ink circle that said 'Paula' with an arrow down toward the swimmers. Rick had taken a picture like that of her one summer. Paula could be seen more clearly.

Louise put down two plaid shirts, a screw driver and a handful of small white buttons on the counter. She pulled the scarf off her head and bundles of thick, red curls fell to her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed from cold, her eyes shining.

"That's where I live," Louise squeezed next to Megan and pointed to a spot on one of the summer-lake pictures. "Breezy Lodge. Ever stay there?"

A pungent rose perfume clung to Louise. Megan shook her head as she inched away.

"No school today?" Alma asked. She handed Louise a stack of letters.

"Chicken pox," Louise said. "And before that the flu, two ear infections and a tonsillitis. I haven't had a sane minute in months."

The pastry boxes stacked neatly on the counter, the boy stood next to his sister, his hair as wheat blond as hers, their cheeks rough with winter. Wait until they're older, she wanted to tell Louise. When they're gone and the house is silent and you long for the sound of coughing in the middle of the night, for a voice crying, Mommy, near your bed, for the small weight against your body, the damp hair, the burning forehead and then the easy movement of your child's chest, up and down, finally regular and peaceful with sleep.

"This lady's staying at the Laskin cabin." Her voice was loud enough to still all conversation and direct everyone's attention toward Megan. Megan dipped her chin into her coat collar.

Alma scooped the buttons into a small bag.

Louise took off her mitten and extended her hand. "I'm Louise Rainer and that's Lenny and Lanette. They're not twins; I just like the "L" sound, I guess."

Megan strained for the sound of her engine from the back of the store. After a second she held out her own hand. "I'm not staying long. A day or two," she said.

Randall came in through the back. "Filled up and ready to go," he said and handed Alma a slip of paper.

"There's a blizzard on the way down," Alma said to Megan, "and I don't know how you'll have time to get to the

cabin and back here to order fuel. You can always place the order now and pay me later."

"I'll be fine," Megan assured her. The cold keys felt good against her skin.

Alma shrugged and dug a pencil out of her wiry hair. "That'll be twelve dollars even. This really must be your lucky day. I hardly ever see an even number. It's usually twelve-o-two or something like that."

Megan counted the money and added another five for Randall and his son.

Pete pulled the car up to the front of the store and honked the horn.

"I put the store number on the receipt in case you change your mind," Alma said. "It'll ring in the house, if the store's closed."

"Thank you," Megan said. "That's nice to know."

"And I'm close by, if you need anything," Louise added.

Megan closed her eyes and headed for the door. It wasn't until the bells' jangle had muted that she let out her breath. She pressed her hands to the cold car hood. The car keys cut into her palm. She gulped mouthfuls of frosty air.

*

Megan stopped the car at the turn-off to Ellen's cabin. A row of mailboxes lined the road and the yellow one stenciled with the name Laskin was open and half-filled with snow.

The sun dropped through a band of clouds and settled over the road like a space ship out of a science fiction movie sending out rays that blazed across the windshield. Near dusk turned to bright day for a few seconds until the sun dipped behind a slight rise in the road and the light flattened. Shards of pastel colors fanned up through the bare tree tops into the sky.

She shut off the car's blinker and eased back onto the road. She wanted to see the sun set across the lake. She wasn't ready for the cabin.

The lodge, which bordered the lake, was a little further to the right. Megan paused for a moment by the large log-framed sign that read, Breezy Lodge - Everything For Your Summer Enjoyment, and then remembered there was another lake cut-off that shortcutted the longer, winding lodge road.

She parked the car and followed a path sheltered from snow by a canopy of evergreen branches. Acorns and pine needles crunched under her boots.

When she reached the snow-white beach, the sun was to her right, blood-yellow, like the dot of coloring in the oleo her mother bought when she was a child. A wooden boat

ramp was frozen into the lake and near the shore there were stacks of redwood lounges secured with tarp and rope against the snow and wind.

The side of her face marked by the sun was warm, the other half numb with cold. The heat brought back the smell of full-leafed sugar maples, the gentle, hypnotic lull of the water, the keening gulls with their cruel, crazy eyes, while the rising wind on the left sent shivers down her back and arms.

Megan pounded herself for warmth. Through the cloud of her breath the sun was just a sliver suspended above the horizon. Darkness bled from the edges of the sky and in the duller light, the flat disk of the lake took on a shimmering glow, pocked like the moon faint in the sky.

A few flakes started to fall. She walked onto the satiny surface, crouched down, took off her mitten and placed her palm on the ice - it stung with heat. At eye level, in the distance, impressions of roughly cut circles laced along the ice, stretching out toward the center. Not long ago, a day or two, this had been an ice-fishing camp.

She had been ice fishing many times with her father on Lake Superior where the openness and immensity of the lake allowed only the most hardy and foolish to stay more than a few hours. Despite layers of blankets, the wind had burned her cheeks, her eyes had teared non-stop and her frozen eyelashes clicked each time she blinked. This lake,

encircled with pines and firs, was calmer and warmer; a camper might last for days with the right equipment.

She followed the chain of fishing holes. Except for the abandoned holes where only a thin membrane of ice had a chance to form, the lake ice was pale grey and solid beneath her. She eased her foot to the rim of a hole and pressed - when she leaned forward the ice gave a little but held. She curled her toes inside her boot and pressed harder. The ice snapped and water lapped across her boot, giving the leather a patent shine. She dragged her foot along the perimeter of the hole, peeling away the ice as if she were opening the seal on a jar of coffee. The loosened ice floated in place a moment before it swooped under the thick wedge of frozen lake.

That's how people drown in the winter. They get sucked down.

The sun had disappeared; an eerie glow bloomed in its wake along the lake's edge. For a moment she imagined the sound of a motor boat filled the air, but a piper cub flying from Brainard dipped its wing over the lake before heading west.

She walked to the next hole. What had they been after? Pike, perch? She peeled away the ice. This time she pushed the ice under with her toe. The fish were smart. It was warm under there in the seaweed and sand, warmer than up here. She hadn't been swimming in a lake in years, but she

still remembered the feel of moss on the rocks and the soft pull of mud, seaweed weaving between toes, icy fingers of lake water playing her body - sexy really.

The ice on the next hole was harder to dislodge. She got down on her knees and chopped at it. She felt like a child playing some clumsy made-up game she hoped no one would discover. Water soaked her mitten, but once in the water her hand was warmer than in the open air.

Her heart beat faster as the moon brightened into the same spotlight focus as the street light on the skating pond across from her childhood house. The night she'd crept out at two in the morning the air had been so thin and brittle that she'd been afraid if she breathed it would crack. It was as if she'd been in two places at once - on the ice, skating circle after circle, her red scarf swept behind, her cheeks burning, her legs cramping in delicious ache, and at her bedroom window, looking down at the heedless, whirling figure, skating better than she had ever hoped to skate, the dark, the stars, the slick glide of her skate on ice, the unbelievable delight in the freedom of being alone, of having the magical ability to disappear, to be where no one thought she'd be. There was that same freedom here. That exquisite stillness after sunset when everything seems to be holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. The hypnotizing cadence of the water as it sloshed easily at the lip of the hole.

She slipped off her boots, her socks, her jeans. She took off her jacket and tucked it under her as sat down on the ice and slid her legs into the warm water. She couldn't keep her eyes open. She couldn't hold her head up. She was more tired then she'd ever been. She pulled the sweater over her head and started on her blouse buttons. All she had to do was undress as if she were going to sleep, slip into the warm water, be weightless as a child, so that the hollows that had carved their way into her body would be filled.

*

"Lady, it's thirty degrees - if you're trying to kill yourself, a gun would be a lot easier."

She looked around. There was a shadowy blur on the shore line. Her hand grazed the ice as she grabbed for her blouse, knocking it into the water. It bubbled with air before it disappeared.

"Do you need any help?" This time the voice was kinder.

She pushed away from the hole as if it were an accomplice. It glared back at her, a giant, black, unblinking eye. Her body shook - on the outside from cold, on the inside from fear of the dark water and what it would feel like filling her lungs.

"Please go away," she said clenching her teeth so she could speak. Her clothes were strewn across the ice as if

she had come home drunk and had been in a rush to make love. She felt for her jacket, but she couldn't get to it without getting up and there was no way to graciously stand up. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

"Aren't you just a bit cold?"

Megan winced at his voice. She hadn't expected to feel cold. She hadn't expected to feel anything, but the numbness receded like fading novocaine leaving her in startling pain. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself.

"If you look real close," the man said, "you can see Jupiter. Shows up nice this time of year." He spoke in the patient school teacher voice she had used to cajole stubborn students. The same tone her father had used when he caught her that night, explaining how dangerous it was out on the ice alone. She had responded in anger, why had he spied on her? she was old enough to know danger. And now, despite the cold, despite her heart beating both alarm and relief in her ears, that same feeling welled up. She damned well didn't want to be patronized; it was nobody's business but her own where she was or what she did.

"Why don't you just go back to what ever you were doing?" Her voice drifted in a frosty cloud.

The man came toward her. His footsteps crunched over the ice chips scattered when the holes were dug.

"Why?" he asked. "I'd only have to come back again. I'd be the one they'd call to come and haul your carcass off the ice, wrap it in some moldy old tarp and cart it back into town. Might as well wait and save myself the trip."

She leaned over for her sweater and drew it toward her. She turned away from him and struggled it over her head.

He was only a few yards away and in the moonlight she could see him as clearly as she supposed he could see her.

He appeared to be in his late fifties, six feet tall or more, lean with a grey stubbly beard. His cheeks were ruddy and his blue eyes glistened from cold. He was the man with the big fish from Peterson's store.

"Should I wait for you to get dressed before we have a proper introduction?" he asked. He didn't seem to be surprised to find a naked women in the middle of the lake. He stood there. Sassy. Waiting. Snow began to fall. He looked skyward and smiled, then held out his hand. She couldn't tell if he was offering it to help her or just enjoying the feel of the snow.

If he could stand there watching, then she'd give him something to watch. She scrambled to her feet. The faster she moved the less she shivered. She pulled her jacket on and tried to control her feet from running in place, but her hand shook as she reached for a boot.

He picked up her jeans. "There's a certain order to things," he said and held them out to her.

She tossed the boot down and grabbed the jeans away from his calmness, his warm winter jacket, his fur hood, his gloved hand. The jeans were wet and cracked with ice.

He put his arms around her to steady her. She pulled away but he tightened his grip and didn't let go until she was dressed and he had guided her across the ice, a stretch of snow and into a pine thicket where his pickup was parked.

"There now," he said as he slammed the door after her. He walked around the front of the truck and banged the hood with the flat of his hand.

The sound startled away the shivers momentarily. She blew on her hands to warm them but quickly tucked them under her legs when he got into the driver's side, turned on the motor, shifted the heat to high and cracked his window.

The blast of air quickly turned warm. The temperature contrast set up a new round of trembling. "Don't you have anything better to do?" she asked.

He held out his scarf. She shook her head.

"Actually," he said, "I came to see Jupiter and the lights." He took one of her socks from his pocket and draped it across her knee.

"Make sure you're not frost bitten," he added.

Get out. Go back to the car. She sat there confined by a cocoon of shivers.

"What made you try such a dumb thing?" he asked.

"I didn't think anyone was around," she snapped.

"What's that got to do with it? Mean you wouldn't have wandered out like that if you knew I'd been watching?" He gunned the motor. "What are you doing up here anyway? If you were going to make a mess couldn't you do it in your own back yard?"

She opened the car door. "Just pretend you never saw me."

"If I did that, you'd be in some sorry state by now," he said, pushing his hat toward the back of his head, appraising her. His ease fueled her anger.

"I'd be in the exact state I am in now. Don't think for one minute that your being here made any difference."

"Your sweater's on inside-out," he said in response.

Megan looked down at her sweater and pulled the coat tighter around her. She got out and slammed the door. She looked around for the direction of her car.

He shut off the engine, got out and leaned across the truck's hood. "You have a place to stay? We don't get many visitors this time of year."

"I have a place to stay."

"Good," he said.

Then he looked up at the sky again and this time she followed his gaze. Pale darts of light from the aurora borealis streaked into the sky. "It's unusual to see the lights so late in the winter," he said. "But then, this hasn't been your usual, run-of-the-mill day, has it?"

She wanted to say something. Something sharp, nasty. She wanted to match his horrible country sarcasm, but no speech could make its way through her chattering teeth. She desperately needed to get warm. And she needed sleep.

The wind picked up and whistled through the trees. Dark clouds moved across the moon.

The man pulled his hood over his cap and gave an exaggerated shudder. "You'd better hurry to wherever you're going. There's going to be a blizzard tonight."

"So I've heard," she said. The moon slipped out from the cloud.

He had a smile on his face. "It's over there," he pointed and through the trees she saw the shadowy outline of her car.

She turned away without another word. The ice cracked on her jeans, her toes burned against the wet leather of her boots. She heard the crunch of a few footsteps. He was watching her. She had intended to open the trunk and pull out dry clothes, but instead she walked around to the driver's side, thankful she hadn't locked the door. She didn't trust her hands. Besides, with her luck the lock would have frozen. She caught a brief glimpse of him as she slid into the car. She prayed the motor would turn over; she hoped his smile would freeze on his face.

Chapter 10

"Exactly how fast were you going?" Megan asked. She turned off the sink water.

"Mom," Rick said, "I was going to be late for school."

"How fast, Rick?"

He slumped into the kitchen chair and tapped his fingers on the table. His hair had almost lost its summer frosting. His tan had already faded and his cheeks revealed the flush which might have gone undetected months ago.

"Fifty." He said the word softly, almost as much in awe of the power of speed as embarrassment at being pulled over, and then because there was nothing more to be concealed, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the crumbled ticket. He smoothed it on the table before pushing it toward her. She wished she could have set his alarm fifteen minutes earlier, made all the lights green.

Patty came into the darkening kitchen wearing her 'after school' outfit of tights and an over-sized sweatshirt, a set of walkman headphones on her ears. She took them off to say something but was quieted by the stillness in the room. She looked at Megan and at Rick. A skein of music from the headphones filtered into the air. She took a can of Pringles from the pantry and touched Rick lightly on the shoulder. She paused by the light switch, but left without turning the light on.

Their eyes were the same dark blue and except for

Rick's hair being fairer than Patty's, they looked like clones of Martin. If she had had another baby, would it have looked like her?

Patty's bedroom door slammed shut. Normally, Megan would have yelled up after her. Normally, she wouldn't have allowed her to eat potato chips before supper.

She picked the ticket up. It could have been drugs or sex or some horrible disease. She could tell by the slump of his shoulders that he was upset and scared. She went fifty on the city streets sometimes.

"I'll discuss this with your father when he comes home," she said and put the ticket in her skirt pocket.

The pot of soup boiled over and hissed across the stove.

"If he comes home," Rick mumbled under his breath, but Megan ignored him as well as the exaggerated scrape of his chair. She tore off some paper toweling.

Rick gripped the chair back and stared at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Why can't you take care of this by yourself? Why do you have to tell dad?"

"Because that's how this family works," she said.

"This family doesn't work," he yelled. "We haven't been a family in months. Patty sulks in her room." He walked over, lifted the pot of the soup. "You cook as if there were twelve people in this family instead of three."

"Four," Megan managed to say. "There are four people

in this family."

"You're wrong, Ma. Three. Dad's never home." He stalked out of the kitchen, slamming on the lights.

Megan blinked at the sudden brightness.

"Hold on a minute," she rushed through the door after him. He stopped midway up the stairs, breathing heavily. Megan looked up at him.

"It was just one ticket. He'll go crazy. He'll take away the car."

"This doesn't seem to be about the ticket." She climbed the stairs. Rick slumped down next to her. He had grown so tall. The last time she remembered being with him on the stairs he was small enough to hold in her lap. They sat side by side, not speaking, Rick staring out the hall window, Megan examining her hands.

She spoke quietly. "Do you remember how frustrated you felt this morning by some limitation you were unable to control?" She paused. Rick continued to stare ahead. "You're father's going through something like that now, only his limitation isn't a sign on the street, it's inside himself."

Rick looked at her without sympathy.

"He's unhappy with his work," she said.

"His paintings are fine," he said.

"They're not as good as he wants them to be right now," she said.

"But what about responsibility? You always nag about

responsibility. You can stay for basketball practice, but you have to do your homework..." he imitated her tone of voice. "What about the game dad missed? What about last week when he left Patty stranded at the dentist?"

"He's an artist," she said.

Rick stood up. "He's a father." He turned to blink back tears.

*

Megan and Martin had been arguing for almost a week. Megan had already forgotten why it started. She wanted to make love; he wanted to paint. He wanted to ground Rick until the end of the school year; she felt it was too harsh a punishment. He wanted her to edit the program for his next show; she had to substitute teach for four days and take the kids to doctor's appointments.

She looked over the canvasses Martin had put aside for the Madison show. The gallery was small, but he was guaranteed buyers not just lookers.

She hated when he travelled in winter, hated when he travelled without her. Shit! He was right. She'd neglected the brochure on purpose.

She put up a fresh pot of coffee and spread the brochure on the kitchen table. She read his list of credits. What would they list after her name? Wife, mother, teacher.

Martin opened the door to the back hall, stamped his feet to shed the snow and hung his coat and scarf on a peg.

He would be forty at the end of the month but looked as she remembered him when they first met at the Scholar during their first year of college. She had known him more than half her life. Megan glanced at the clock. He hadn't been this early in weeks.

When he came into the kitchen, she held up the brochure as a peace offering. He smiled.

"We need a fire. It's freezing out there." He kissed her cheek and his lips were cold. "How's it going?"

"Fine. There's fresh coffee on the stove." And then as if there had been no strain between them, she said. "I don't think 'Redwing' goes."

"No?" He poured milk in his coffee and leaned against the refrigerator. He seemed to consider this. "I suppose you're right. It's really a blue and grey grouping. Too much red in that cracked pottery. Thanks."

She shrugged and returned to her work.

He put the cup in the sink and came to rub her shoulders. "Kids home?"

"Uh uh. Rick's at basketball and Patty's working at the library. They'll be home by six."

He worked his hand into her hair. "Want to finish this later?"

"I'd better do it now."

"Afraid that the kids will come home and discover that you still 'do it?'"

"I had forgotten that we did." She bit her lip. She'd

meant to sound teasing, but the words came out as a rebuke. He'd come home early to please her.

Martin pulled away.

"You can be a bitch at times..."

She reached up and pulled his head down. Their lips touched tentatively.

"I don't mean to be," she said.

He kissed her hard. Their arguments always ended the same way. No one apologized, no major discussions of who was right or wrong. Early in her marriage she had often longed for a good screaming battle, a definite clearing the air, but now it seemed more prudent to hold back, to let things slide as they always had.

*

"Have you ever done this before?" Patty asked. She sat cross-legged on Megan's bed watching Megan dress.

"I had a childhood too, you know," Megan answered. She didn't want Patty to know that she'd never been tobogganing. It would be just one more thing that made her fall short. She pulled a sweater over her head then shook her hair back.

"Here, let me fix it," Patty said.

Megan backed up and Patty pulled out the shirt collar and smoothed it over the sweater. "How come you're going? I thought you had tickets some place with Aunt Ellen."

"I didn't know your father had plans," Megan said. She took off her wristwatch and put it in her jewelry box.

"If Amy's coming over I want her here before we leave. I don't want you opening the door after we've gone. Understand?"

"Fine. Can I wear it?" Patty scrambled off the bed and reclaimed the watch.

"Sure. I told you you could have it."

"She already has a watch," Martin said from the doorway.

Megan was embarrassed. She had fallen into a habit of giving Patty things; it made things easy between them for a while. And there were times now when peace was essential.

"Ready? I hear the snow calling," Martin said and broke into a huge grin. It seemed that nothing was going to disturb this evening.

"Remember," Patty yelled after them. "When you can't feel your toes any more, it's time to come home."

*

"It's just like sledding, really," Martin said as they waited for Ruth and Paul Perkins on the steps of Theodore Wirth Lodge. Paul was Martin's teaching assistant.

The night was quiet, no new snow, a bare sliver of moon, the stars faint from the reflection of artificial lights leading up the lodge path. Every so often there was a whoosh like an amusement park ride and an echo of laughter as a toboggan swept down a near-by slope. Megan's stomach lurched.

Ruth and Paul came up the walk carrying the toboggan

over their heads like a ported canoe. The snow crunched underfoot.

"Been waiting long?" Paul asked. They were wearing matching ski vests and hats. The hats had red pompons on top.

"A few minutes," Martin said. He helped lower the toboggan to the ground.

"The snow's moist," Ruth said.

"Is that a problem?" Megan asked.

"No. It'll just slow us down," Ruth said. She bent over and shoved her leggings inside her boots.

"Slow is just fine," Megan said.

They walked in a double line up the nearest hill, Ruth and Megan, Paul and Martin behind dragging the toboggan. A ski jump was silhouetted on their left.

"Have you ever gone?" Megan asked.

"Hell, no," Ruth answered. She was a rugged woman, several years older than Paul. Short, stocky and walked with a man-like swagger. "I like to be close to the ground."

"I know what you mean," Megan said.

"Hey, Megan, relax," Paul called up. "Kids do this all the time."

Martin and I aren't kids, she wanted to say.

She was sweating when they reached the top of the hill. The toboggan was six feet long, made out of oak with a red wool runner to sit on. Martin squatted in front and Megan

tried to find a comfortable spot behind him. The jeans she had worn were tight and pulled across her thighs. Ruth got on next and Paul crouched behind. "Ready?"

Martin settled comfortably and it occurred to her that he must have done this often during his childhood and she had never known.

"Just lean into me, Meg. Close your eyes if you want," Martin said.

Her eyes were already closed. Paul grunted as he gave a shove and the sled shifted with his added weight. It teetered for a few moments until Megan thought, go already, and then it rushed downward, the wind streaming by her ears, whistling through the pines, the snow frothing on either side as if they were on a surfboard cutting through waves. How fast? Fifty? Sixty? The bumps made her heart stagger, but fear was replaced by the thrill of speed.

They slowed to a stop.

"As good as sex," Paul yelled and helped Ruth up.

"Almost," Martin replied and held his hand out to Megan. She unwound and stood up, her heart pounding. "Here, let me fix your scarf," he said and turned her toward him. He kissed her cheek and cupped his hand between her legs. Megan looked to see if Ruth or Paul were watching, but they were pulling the toboggan toward the next slope. "Do you like tobogganing?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm not sure. I'd have to go again," she said catching up to the rhythm of the evening. She leaned in to

him. He kissed her mouth and his tongue was warm. They had hit a smooth section in their marriage. They were both relieved and eager to enjoy it.

The white, glistening hills cut through the black pine forests. By the third run, Megan had forgotten all fear. It was like she had imagined it would be driving across the bridge toward home. Just soaring off into the sky.

"Let's make this the last," Ruth said. "Our sitter has to be home by midnight."

"I hope we can find our way back," Martin said. They had woven their way into the woods, slope by slope. The night was darker, the air a tinge colder.

Megan could have stayed all night, been at the top of the highest hill when the sun began to rise, plunging down into the dark valley and then up again. Back and forth between light and dark until it was completely light.

"I have a pretty good sense of direction," Paul said.

Martin was in front again. Megan pressed her ear to his back and listened to his heart beat from the exertion of the uphill climb. This was the steepest hill they had been on; the bottom was lost in the shadow of the slope and the trees.

Her pulse raced as they swooped downward. In the distance she saw a quirk of light. A shooting star? A headlight around the bend of the road? Another glint. Then dark. They whizzed down hill. Megan's hair came loose and streaked behind her. Martin grasped the rope like a horse's

reigns. Suddenly he jerked upward, his hands shot above his head as if yanked by some unseen force. "God," he said as he held tight to the inch-thick wire that had materialized in their path. The forward speed slapped him back against her, shoving her against Ruth and Paul said, "What the fuck!" and his voice disappeared and the toboggan seemed to stand like a horse ready to rear. "Stay down," Martin yelled and he was flat back on Megan whose legs pinched under her. When Ruth slipped away, Megan's shoulder's smacked against the board and the toboggan blasted forward another twenty feet before ramming into a hillock of snow. The wire hummed behind them.

"Are you two okay?" Ruth yelled down the hill.

A car sped around the curve of the pitch dark road, only inches from Megan's head. Its headlights fluttered across Martin who was rising in slow motion a few feet away.

He called to her. He got to his knees. He crawled toward her.

Paul and Ruth slid downward. The snow billowed in front of them. "What the fuck happened?" Paul asked.

"We should be dead," Ruth said. "That boundary wire could have cut us to shreds. I thought you had a good sense of direction," she said to Paul.

"Jesus, shut up. It was too damned dark to see anything."

Megan huddled in Martin's arms. Nothing was broken. She could not speak. She gulped in deep pockets of harsh

air.

"We're fine," Martin repeated and rocked her, brushed her hair out of her face with his snow-caked mittened hand. "We're fine."

It was the first time she had thought about dying. Just like that. A snap. So quick. She longed to see her children, to be back in her bedroom, naked against Martin on this cold, winter's night with the windows open, the curtains blowing, the blankets thick and warm around them.

"I could go for a hot fudge sundae right now, how about you?" Martin's voice was wobbly, but he was trying to get things back to normal. Hot fudge was her favorite.

"You almost die and you talk about food? You guys are crazy," Paul said.

Megan's breathing became more regular. Another car flashed past. The snow sparkled briefly like diamonds. She ignored Paul. "How are your arms?"

"Sore, but usable." He smiled at her.

"Then how about having it at home in bed?" she said.

"Sounds wonderful," Martin helped her to her feet.

From the road, the boundary wire was clearly evident and they followed its circling path toward the lodge, arms around each other for comfort and for support. Behind them, Ruth and Paul clucked their tongues, talked about how lucky they all were. Megan still felt weak in the knees, but she assured herself this scare would be like childbirth. Soon she wouldn't even remember.

CHAPTER 11

The gravel road slashed through a stand of cedar and Norwegian pine. At the end, to one side of a clearing, sat a cedar-log cabin with irregularly hewn chunks of granite stamped randomly across the front and a few pines crowded around for protection against wind and cold. The porch was supported by fat boulders balanced on top of each other; tips of dried ragweed, illuminated by tracer beams of moonlight through the tree tops, poked through rotting slats of wood.

Ellen had purchased the cabin the last summer Megan spent at the lodge with the children. She had dropped Ellen off once after a picnic but had never been inside. The shuttered cabin was smaller than she remembered and in the frame of her headlights uninviting, but she was exhausted.

Just as she was about to shut off the engine, there was a thud on the car hood. Her heart jumped to her throat as two yellow lidless eyes appeared and disappeared behind the fog of her breath on the windshield. She switched on the defroster and the window cleared revealing an owl with feathers whiter than snow. It reached up slightly and spread its wings; its talons scratched for a foothold.

Leaning forward for a better look, she accidentally sounded the horn and the startled owl flew off with a snap of wings and a lightning of feathers into the night.

*

The cabin was layered with years of dust and sheet-shrouded furniture. And not terribly cold as if summer air

had been sealed inside.

The fuse box was in the kitchen - exactly where Ellen had said. Her fingers were numb and it took several tries before she could pry the metal door open. The fuses were in place but loose, and the lights went on as she tightened them.

In the pantry, off the kitchen, were odds and ends of dishes and pots, candles and matches, a few canned goods, carrots, corn, beans. She traced a rim of rust on a can of corn and replaced it. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, but the thought of food made her stomach clench. She shoved matches in her pocket.

Outside, the top layer of snow danced across the clearing and disappeared into the trees while in the distance a branch cracked like a rifle shot from the weight of snow.

She changed into dry clothes and settled on the living room couch. She remembered the couch from Ellen's family room back home. Rose chintz. She ran her hand down the mahogany arm until it reached the bear claw she had grasped while watching *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock*, her other hand holding on to Ellen's. She hugged her knees to her chest and pulled the dust cover around her. This small space was a relief after her own cavernous house.

It was cold but too late to go back for fuel. There was no telephone. She stared at the empty fireplace and when she put her hands in her pockets for warmth, she felt the matches.

*

The moon, an icy disk, wove through a profusion of

clouds. It would snow soon. How cold does it get up here?

On the side of the cabin she found a khaki tarp anchored down by chunks of ice. Underneath - dry wood.

She lugged in an armful of logs and stacked them in the fireplace, breaking off branches and twigs for kindling. She squatted in front of the hearth and held her breath until the fire caught and the room filled with the prickle of new flame. She unbuttoned her coat and held her hands out to the rippling heat.

The fire roared. A log split and sparks shot like arrows into the dark room. In the flames, she saw the glassy lake, her naked body, the fragility of her bones. Martin and Minneapolis were far away, frozen in another part of her. She lay her head back on the couch, pulled the dust cover around her and buried her face in a couch pillow searching for the old smell of popcorn and fried fish but there was just mold and chimney smoke. She drifted off to sleep lulled by a branch from an overgrown evergreen near the kitchen window brushing back and forth across the screen, gently like a ticking clock.

*

She awoke before sunrise. Every bone and muscle ached. The fire had died and a layer of cold air blanketed the room. In the clearing the wind howled in circles, dashing snow against the roof like rain. The evergreen branch whipped back and forth against the screen.

Wrapped in the sheet, she hobbled to the kitchen. The

burners on the electric range snaked to a glow and she held her hands over them. She took a glass from the cupboard. A frozen drop of water hung from the sink tap, but when she turned the knob nothing came out.

"Damn!" she said.

Then she remembered that the pipes needed priming and Ellen's instructions about the pump on the back porch.

The wind tossed eddies of snow around the house, and she had to shield her eyes to see. She attached the short length of hose to the pump, turned the rusty faucet as far as it would go and returned to the kitchen to flip the switch. The pump hummed softly before it caught; a minute or two later the house sounded like it was breaking apart. Water came in spurts, hesitant and discolored, from the kitchen faucet and from the bathroom sink and shower down the hall.

The wind howled down the chimney sending out puffs of soot into the room. The water ran icy-cold. Her teeth chattered out of control.

*

There was no sunrise, just an appearance of light through a steady curtain of snow. She'd been foolish about the fuel. She'd freeze to death inside this deserted cabin. And it struck her funny how impossible it was today to keep warm bundled in layers of dry clothes while yesterday she barely felt anything.

Maybe there was some oil left in the furnace after all. She tried the dial, tapped the side and tried the dial again.

This time a click and a short hiss. She pressed her hand to the side waiting for heat, but there was only the draft of wind down the smoke stack from the patch in the roof where apparently the caulking had eroded.

She hit it harder. "Work, god damn it."

The chimney rattled, teetered, and for a moment looked like it would tumble down on her before it settled back into place. Megan rocked on her hands and knees. "Damn you, Martin, you bastard. Damn you."

Through her tears she saw the thin black needle leaning far to the left. The word 'empty' ran over and over through her brain.

*

Her face and hands were streaked from tears and dust. There was no hot water so she filled a pot and set it on the stove and when it boiled she took her purse, a towel and the boiled water into the bathroom.

She rubbed the mirror clean and was immediately sorry. This was not the Megan of the hall photograph with Patty on her lap and Rick leaning against her knee, the woman who slept pressed to her husband, her hand between his legs, clasped there as if he never wanted her to leave.

This woman was thinner, drawn and cold. This was the woman who for the last several years had traded happiness for peace and then sacrificed peace. Only the gold wedge in her left eye remained unchanged as it caught the early morning light. She dipped her hands into the pot of cooling water and

bathed her face. She reached for a towel and tucked a strand of hair in back of her ear like she always did. Then she brushed her teeth.

*

At 8 A.M. there was a knock at the kitchen door. A young man yelled out as he unravelled foot after foot of black rubber hose from his small tanker truck, "Hi, I'm Owen Olsgaard. Hope I'm not too early. Alma Peterson called last night and told me to be here first thing this morning."

Megan could not contain her smile of relief. Thank goodness for a busybody. She stood on the back porch in the freezing cold and listened to Owen sing, 'Hang down your head Tom Dooley. Hang down your head and cry...' as he tugged the hose along the snow toward the twin, twenty-five gallon drums riveted to a concrete slab on the side of the house. He was dressed in overalls with suspenders stretching over layers of long underwear, shirts and a hand-made ski sweater with sail boats following each other across his enormous chest. His cheeks and forehead were bright scarlet from the bitter wind.

"Related to Miss Laskin?" he asked as he lit the pilot light in the living room furnace. Snow puddled around him.

"Just a friend," Megan answered. She tugged a dust cover off a chair to wipe up the water.

"A friend," he said blowing out the long wooden match, "would have lent you the cabin in summer.

There you go," he said, standing up. He leaned over and turned the switch. "Now it's going to smell like the place is

burning down, but it's just the dust working its way out of the air vents."

She smelled hot air.

"How long you fixing on staying?" He took the dust cover from her and mopped up.

"I'm not certain," she said touching the side of the furnace.

"Well, there's enough fuel for a solid month. Do you want me to put you down for a regular run?" He gave the furnace a friendly smack before pulling on his gloves.

More than a month up here? The wind and snow had stopped, the sun had fully risen and the evergreens were lush against the blanket of snow.

"Why don't I put you down," he said. "You can always change your mind."

If she could get this place warm, she might stay forever.

"Okay," she said.

"Pay Alma when you get into town," Owen said when she took out her checkbook.

From the porch, she watched the truck exhaust hover over the clearing even after the whir from the engine had disappeared. She had forgotten to ask him about the hot water heater.

*

After a few hours, the cabin warmed but pockets of cold still hung here and there, and despite two pair of socks, she still felt like she was walking on ice.

She spent the day cleaning, boiling pot after pot of water until her hands were raw from wringing out rags, washing windows and floors.

Dusting the mantle, she found an old rifle shoved way to the back. She pulled it down and staggered under its weight. She hadn't realized guns were so heavy. She wiped it off and balanced it near the fireplace. She was alone. There might be an emergency.

There was a set of Agatha Christie and a dozen paperbacks on the bookshelf along with a half-carved statue of a deer. She held it in her hand for a moment and rubbed her thumb over the uneven spots of wood.

She took down the drapes, shook them out, folded the dust covers and pounded the couch cushions against the porch railing. She unpacked her suitcase and in one of the dresser drawers discovered some old clothes Ellen had left behind.

Megan swept the mothballs from the linen closet into a garbage can and refolded the sheets and blankets, keeping out enough linen to make the bed.

*

It was late afternoon when she stood in the doorway and assessed the room. It looked livable enough. Even if she decided not to stay, she was glad for the work - at least she had earned her keep.

*

After a large bowl of soup, she curled up on the couch. The fire and the furnace and the day's work eased her into

exhausted sleep. A persistent thud roused her. She reached for the rifle and stumbled bleary-eyed toward the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Ben Walker. We met at the lake."

That voice. She leaned against the wall wondering how she could avoid letting him in.

"What do you want?" she asked through the narrowly opened door.

"You left this behind," he said and dangled her sock through the door crack.

He must have walked a distance. Snow capped the shoulders of his loden-green jacket. Martin had a jacket like that fifteen years ago. Ben pushed inside while she concentrated on the familiar bamboo buttons.

"Is this how you greet visitors?" he asked and gently pushed the rifle away. He took his hat off and shoved it in his pocket.

He was younger than she'd thought. Not much over fifty if that. His white hair had been deceiving and now she saw that it was long and tied back with a red ribbon.

"I was asleep. You scared me."

"My mother always warned me about two things - leaving doors open so the outside'd get warm instead of the in and leaving my mouth open so I'd catch flies." He put one finger under her chin, tapped lightly until her mouth closed and moved just enough to the side so she had to brush him when she reached over to close the door. "You did some job in here."

"It's late," she said.

He looked at his watch. "I thought you city folks stayed up to watch the news." A certain teasing drawl crept into his voice when he spoke.

She glared. "I'm sure 'city folks' do the same thing as country folks. Besides, there's no t.v."

"Bare necessities, huh?"

She flinched at the word 'bare.'

He smiled in a way that made her uncomfortable. "You look like you could use a shower."

She snapped, "There's no hot water."

He hunkered down in front of the fireplace and brushed a few stray ashes. "Things can't be all bad. At least you know how to build a fire." The color of his hair reminded her of Ellen's when she was a little girl.

"What are you doing up here, anyway?" he asked with his back still to her. "Don't you belong someplace?"

The ghost of cold air that entered when the door opened hovered around her. Why didn't she just tell him to leave?

"Why are you so god damned impolite? I thought you upstate types liked to mind your own business."

He turned toward her almost surprised that she had taken him on. "We do. We do. And I thought you upper class misses knew something about hospitality. I sure could use a cup of coffee."

"Jesus, you could be a rapist, a murderer for all I know." She wanted to close her eyes and make him disappear.

"I'm not," he said, the joking gone from his voice. "I'll tell you what. You go fix that coffee and I'll make sure you get yourself a hot shower before you go to bed. Then I'll be on my way."

Hot water. Her face seemed to nod 'okay' of its own accord. She went into the kitchen, put water in the pot and searched the pantry for coffee.

He walked through the kitchen and out the door. She regulated the flame under the pot and followed him outside where he disappeared around the side of the house. She heard the rustle of the tarp. Returning with an armload of wood, he muttered to himself, his breath a white haze in the night air. He was too comfortable, too much at home.

"I think you should leave," she said as he stepped onto the back porch.

"I thought we struck a deal." He waited, his arms full of logs. She shrugged and opened the door for him. He stamped snow off his boots, and walked past her into the living room.

She shoved the jar of coffee into the drawer beneath the stove. "There's no coffee," she called.

"Do you actually know how to use this?"

She jumped. She had expected him to be in the living room, but he stood in the kitchen doorway, holding the rifle.

Megan shook her head. He looked down the rifle sight and checked the chamber for shells. He aimed it at the ceiling, squinting with one eye, squeezing down slowly on the trigger.

Click!

"Sight's a bit off. Hasn't been fired in years. You could get hurt with this, you know."

"Do you think I'm two years old?" But she saw how it must look to him.

"No. No I don't." He spit into his palm and rubbed the walnut handle. "I could teach you how to use this."

"Fat chance," she mumbled over the boiling pot.

"I'll have tea," he said, motioning to the package of tea bags on the shelf over the stove.

Smoke from a fresh fire drifted into the kitchen as she poured water in his cup. Ben came in dusting off his hands. He pulled out a chair and stretched his long legs, cradling the hot cup against his chest.

"The water tank just needed the pilot lit." He sipped his tea and watched her over the rim of the cup. His eyes were an icy blue but the cold color was mitigated by tiny laugh lines. The planes of his face were angled and flat. Part Indian? The wind picked up and the evergreen started again against the kitchen window.

"That tree needs trimming," he said.

Megan looked at her watch.

Ben leaned back lazily and took another sip. "In twenty minutes there'll be enough hot water to scald your behind."

Megan turned away from him.

Ben seemed to read her thoughts. "It's not like I haven't seen a naked woman. Although," he said scratching

his head in thought, "I never did see one in the middle of Gull Lake before."

"It's late," she said. Who did he think he was bulldozing his way into her life?

"So it is. Thanks for the tea." He pushed in his chair.

At the bottom of the steps, he saluted her by touching two fingers to the brim of his cap. "Don't forget to add coffee to your shopping list." And then he was gone. A dark shadow against the white snow. A few footsteps crunching into the night.

*

Steam filled the small bathroom. She luxuriated in the hot water, far removed from the freezing lake, no longer annoyed by Ben Walker's irritating visit.

The fire was blazing when she came out. The bedroom had not warmed so she brought the blankets and pillow to the couch. This was a summer cabin and streamers of cold air trickled into the room from cracks around the window panes. She could talk to Mrs. Peterson about having them sealed up, but there really wasn't any reason. Working it's way in, the air hummed a little. As long as the furnace worked and the firewood held out, she didn't mind the company.

She boiled more water and when she retrieved the coffee she found a bottle of Southern Comfort. She poured a good measure into the steaming cup.

It was 11:00. Her face stung from heat and whiskey. She missed her uncluttered living room, but there was

something cozy about this room, about the stone and wood reflecting the firelight. She missed her children, but she was clean and warm. The fire dwindled behind her lowering lids while a random list of groceries ran through her mind.

Chapter 12

Day after day of snow. Megan heard snowplows in the distance, but they never made it to East River Terrace. The drifts were shoulder high and the temperature had persisted below zero for over a week. Yesterday, they could barely open the back door and the snow fell faster than Rick could shovel. The schools were closed so she and the children were on a forced vacation.

Patty, angry at Rick because he refused to help her with *The Wasteland*, secluded herself in her bedroom listening to old Beatles' records. The thrum of the bass slipped under her door and beat like a headache through the house.

Megan stirred chili on the stove and watched the cable weather channel from the small television on the kitchen sideboard. The sound was muted but the flashing cloud of snow over the midwest spoke for itself. Five degrees below zero unrolled across the bottom of the screen. Wind chill, 35 below.

She needed a haircut. There was barely enough lettuce for a salad. The electricity had flickered three times since ten o'clock. The chili rolled to a boil, the surface pocked with exploding mini-volcanoes.

"Look on the bright side." Rick bounded into the kitchen, his friend, Eric, trailing behind. "At least if we lose power, the stuff in the freezer will stay frozen." He

gave her a wet kiss and ruffled her hair. "You need a haircut," he said. They galloped down to the basement, two steps at a time.

"Tie your shoe," she yelled after him.

Soon there was the steady click of the ping pong ball and "Gottcha" "My point" drifted up the stairs.

In September he'd be in Boston. So far away. But, she kept telling herself, she'd have more time to spend with Patty.

From the corner of her eye she saw Martin backing toward his studio door, his hand cocked over his shoulder as if he were tossing a football. She lowered the flame and opened the door just as he let go a fist full of canary-yellow oil paint. The blob sailed several feet and landed smack in the middle of a canvas he'd been working on.

"I'm so fucking tired of this weather," he said. "I've forgotten what the sun looks like."

"I don't think it looks like that," Megan said. The yellow lump dribbled. She handed him a paper towel. "That's not exactly your painting style."

He ignored the towel. "What I need is a new style." He walked toward the canvas and scraped at the paint with his palette knife.

She sat on the stool. "Can you imagine," she said, "what they'll think centuries from now when they examine this masterpiece and find this wierd yellow shape peering up through layers of paint?" Can you imagine, she'd said to

Patty the day before, how proud you'll feel when you've finished this science project all by yourself. The words sounded programmed. The aroma of cumin and chili wafted into the room.

"Megan, please..." He gave her a look of exasperation. Patty had given her the same look.

Megan lowered her eyes. Nothing worked anymore.

He walked back and stood next to her and frowned at the ruined canvas. He had been on edge for months, one moment sweet, the other raging, sarcastic. Normally, she kept her distance. She touched his hand hesitantly. He looked down at it as if it were a foreign object. She withdrew it.

"All they'll see is a smear of fucking yellow paint," he said. In the kitchen the chili thundered against the pot cover.

"I just..." want peace, she wanted to say.

"I'm not one of your kids, Meggie. Stop treating me like one."

Everyone's role had shifted. Martin's frustration with his work had shifted him into a petulant childhood. Rick had slipped into adulthood. Patty drifted between the two, her split personality trumpeted by either anger or tears. And Megan who had always managed to be in control couldn't find a place for herself.

"They're our kids," she said, not intending to say anything so trite or insinuatingly argumentative.

Martin grabbed the canvas from the easel and tossed it

against the wall. Megan closed her eyes.

"I can't be a father. I can't be anything when I'm like this. I'm going crazy. I can't see beyond this damned snow."

The ping pong ball ticked up from the basement. Music funnelled down from Patty's bedroom. Their arguments had become as personal as sex to her, something she didn't want to do in front of the children. She slipped off the stool. "Then let's go away. Some place warm and green." She didn't want to leave the kids. On top of teaching, she'd just volunteered for a community reading project at the library.

His shoulders softened. "You're one hundred per cent right. I just need to get away." He poured mineral spirits onto a rag and scrubbed his hand. "I've been a bastard and I'm sorry." He brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. "I don't deserve you."

The white stove top was splattered with chili. Outside, the wind hurled snow by the window like rice at a wedding.

*

Paul Perkins had a house in Florida on Grassy Key. His parents used it every winter, but his mother died two months ago and he offered the house to Martin.

"For how long?" she asked.

"For however long we want it," Martin replied. He had rejuvenated since she'd suggested they get away for a while. For the last two days he'd helped her with dishes, tagged

behind when she dusted, watched her read until she put down her book. Why don't you paint with all this energy, she wanted to ask, but he was like an athlete abstaining from sex before the big game.

The weather had let up a little but the windows were heavily frosted and the sitting room was claustrophobic. Thick icicle daggers, illuminated by the street lamp, hung from the eaves.

"Marty, I can't go for more than a week."

He turned the pages of a National Geographic waiting for her to say something more.

The hall clock chimed.

He closed the magazine. Inside the frame of the yellow cover was a picture of an Ubangi tribeswoman with large lips and long neck encased in brightly colored necklaces. "What if I go ahead and you fly down and meet me?"

She noted the controlled excitement in his voice, the wheedling tone. Can I sleep at Eric's, Mom?

"What about your classes?" She couldn't take her eyes off the magazine.

"Ryan said he'd cover them. The art history lectures also." He leaned forward on his chair.

"That didn't take long."

"What?"

"The plans. How did Ryan manage to free his schedule so easily?"

"I guess I caught him at a good time." He leaned back

in his chair.

Megan stood by the window. She traced the delicate frost with her finger. "You knew about Paul's house weeks ago, didn't you? And you must have had Ryan in your pocket before you started sulking around here, making everybody miserable."

"You're wrong. Dead wrong. Everything just fell into place," he said. He got up and walked over to her. "I can't work in this." His hand swept across the window, indicating the incessant snow.

His end of the seesaw sunk heavily to the ground leaving Megan dangling in the air. The logic suffocated her: Martin had to work to be happy. Martin had to be happy to maintain their marriage, but he had to be away from the confines of snow and family to work. Their marriage suffered from his anxiety and his absence. "When do you want to leave?" she asked fatigue thinning her voice.

He leaned forward, eager as a young boy. "Tuesday." Tuesday. Four days.

"I'll see when I can get away," she said. She had not asked when he was coming back.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," he said as if this were recompense. And she nodded, accepting it.

*

He met her at the Miami airport two weeks later. Against his tan, his eyes were a deeper blue.

"I missed you," he said. He kissed her tentatively.

Megan smiled and brushed the hair off his forehead.
"How's the work coming?" she asked.

"Fabulous," he said and tossed the bags into the back seat of the rental car.

*

The ride to Grassy Key was long and monotonous. Both sides of the road were bordered with long brown-tinged grass, intermittent clumps of scraggly buildings and beyond, to either side, endless water. No different from the yards of snow and the frozen grey lakes back home. "He's an artist," Ellen had told her in one of the rare moments she excused Martin. "He doesn't see what's in front of his face, only what's behind his eyes." If that were true, then why did he have to go so far from home?

Heat rose in waves off the metallic paint of the cars and the air was syrupy with something unfamiliar blooming or rotting.

The house, set up on stilts, was small, but modern. The entire length of the living room was glass overlooking the ocean.

Martin had taken over the house. At home he had been confined to his studio; she had always assumed that was his choice. Here, canvasses were scattered along the walls, paint stained rags littered the carpet, tubes of paint decorated the coffee table. An almost completed oil stood on the easel.

"Do you want to see the ones I've finished?" he asked.

"Of course," she said and forced a smile.

*

He had made plans. They'd drive to Key West. They'd fly to the Dry Tortugas. They'd go fishing.

"What about your work?" she asked. There was a little beach in front of the house. Mostly coral rock and thistle.

"This is our vacation."

There was a tightness between her shoulders that no amount of Martin's rubbing or beating sun could ease away.

*

They sat on the balcony of Louie's Backyard waiting for their table. The sky was divided by purple sunset and black storm clouds. Megan smelled the rain and hoped it would cool everything off.

Martin drew concentric circles on her palm. She concentrated on letting her hand relax. The week had gone quickly and she was returning tomorrow. There had been no discussion of Martin's return, and she was too petrified to bring it up.

The sun set completely and the sky darkened so that it was impossible to tell where the storm clouds began.

He let her hand go. "The winters are killing me, Meg."

He played with the water trickling down the side of his glass. What did he want her to say?

Waiters closed umbrellas and gathered glasses.

"The kids are older now. Let's move down her part-time. You could stay a few more days. We could look at

houses."

"Patty's only fourteen."

"She can come with us. There are schools here." His voice was desperate.

The bartender took the bowls of cherries and olives and lemon twists off the bar.

Her job. Her happiness. Those questions went unasked. Even Patty's happiness seemed secondary. He had no idea what it was like to be a fourteen year old girl.

Rain sliced through the patio in sheets. People scattered. Beer bottles clattered to the stone floor. Napkins whipped in the wind. Waiters stood with their arms across their chests under the bar overhang, complacent that they had foreseen what everyone else had underestimated. Martin sat and waited for her to say something. She couldn't see him through the blur of tears and rain.

"It would be too expensive to maintain two homes," she said finally. Her mouth moved in slow motion; she fought the wind. "I like the snow. I won't give up the house. I won't disrupt Patty." A chair blew over and skidded several feet away. "I don't want to live in this."

Chapter 13

Megan drove to Peterson's to stock the pantry. She bought coffee, cereal, peanut butter, fresh eggs and treated herself to two pink grapefruit flown in, Alma Peterson said, all the way from Florida. She handed Alma the letters she'd written to Patty, Rick and Ellen.

"I'll need some stamps," Megan said.

Alma hefted the letters in her sturdy hand. "What are you writing, a novel?"

"Just explaining my life," Megan said.

"Say, do you like to read?" Alma asked tugging Megan with her to the back of the store where she showed her a large bin of used paperback books.

"Where did you get these?" Megan asked. She reached for a mildewed copy of *Anna Karenina*.

"From the resorts. People leave them behind. Randall's boy collects them and I sell them - three for a dollar. That's a rare one there. Mostly you'll find Agatha Christie or Danielle Steele."

"I'll take these," Megan said handing over six books. She didn't care what they were, she was just anxious to get back to the cabin and escape into reading.

"I don't have much time to read," Alma said fondling a book.

Back in the cabin Megan put the grapefruit in a wooden bowl on the kitchen table where their ripe citrus aroma

permeated the room.

As she walked from room to room, she passed through thin ribbons of cold air. In each room of this cabin, she stubbornly left a window open a few inches. The frigid air kept her from slipping into the lethargy of the early weeks after Martin had left.

She settled on the couch, blankets wrapped around her. In the store, Megan had wished she were as busy as Alma and didn't have the time, but back at the cabin, in front of the fire, the book propped on her chest, she began to realize how little time she'd had for herself and despite the cold, she luxuriated in her solitude, enjoyed the lushness of silent minute after silent minute.

Later in the evening, tired from reading, she wrote another letter to Rick, and to her mother and Sara. If she wrote, they wouldn't worry about her. She enjoyed the sound of her pen as it scratched across the paper, the control of forming sentences and paragraphs, of creating a life for herself on paper. She was grateful that she had no phone; her hand had much more control than her voice.

*

She stood on the front porch, warming her nose with the steam from her coffee and realized that a week had passed and this was the second morning that she had not asked herself how she was going to get through the day. Perhaps if she had given herself more time, she might have felt better at home.

Martin would have loved it here when he was younger, the starkness of the landscape so well suited to his earlier work, but she doubted that she would have considered coming north in the winter. Looking now across the clearing, peaceful with newly fallen snow and at the tree branches with their frosty leafage, she was glad she had come here now - away from Sara's worried calls, away from Ellen hovering like an old mother.

She took a sip of coffee.

There was movement across the clearing. She peered across the lip of the cup. About fifty feet away, where the circle of forest began, where the trunks grew so close and the bare branches so interwoven that snow never reached the ground, a deer emerged, came forward a few feet, nosed the ground and sniffed the air. Another deer moved in alongside and nudged the first deer in the side of the neck.

They were as elegant as the bare-branched birches. The only animals she'd ever seen in her back garden were squirrels and an occasional rabbit. Even during the summers she'd spent up here she'd never seen wild deer. Too many people. Too much noise.

"Mrs. Harris?" A voice whispered.

She turned her head.

Louise Rainer's son, Lenny, stood on the porch bundled in a blue parka with a plaid scarf wound several times around his neck. His eyes watered and his nose ran from the cold.

She looked away from him. The deer had vanished.

"Mrs. Harris?"

He shifted from one foot to the other, holding tight to a brown paper bag.

"Mama wants to know if you'll come for coffee." Spikes of wet, blond hair bristled from beneath his parka hood. A scar from the chicken pox formed the pattern of a snow flake just above the brow of his left eye.

"Well, I..." She looked around for an excuse to say no.

He looked up at her, blinking pale grey eyes and offered the crumpled bag. "Mama sent these muffins also - you can eat them for dinner."

Megan took the bag. Despite his walk, the bottom was still warm. She had not eaten breakfast and her stomach growled loudly. They both laughed as she clutched the bag to her chest to muffle the noise. Lenny, overcome by a run of the giggles, tried to control it by snorts and gulps.

"Mama said it's not good for you to be alone."

Lenny's gentle seriousness reminded her of Rick. There was something so normal and anonymous about sitting in a strange woman's kitchen drinking coffee and talking about recipes and weather instead of the microscopic examinations she'd undergone with Ellen and Sara.

"Why don't I drive," she suggested.

*

Lenny sat quietly next to her as she turned up the side

road to Breezy Lodge. The roads had been plowed recently and were edged on both sides with mountainous banks of frozen snow that had been sprayed with water to prevent the wind from blowing the snow back over the road. Yellow rock salt stains pitted the sculpted snow drifts while chunks of ice and salt crunched under the tires.

The lodge itself bordered the lake, but several cabins were nestled here and there among the trees. They had the same log exterior, the roofs heavy with snow, slats of plywood nailed over the windows.

"Those are birch and those are aspen," Lenny said and his voice puffed with his knowledge.

She smiled down at him and he glowed back at her. She missed teaching. She missed the adoring gap-toothed grins, the small presents of a mica-studded rock or lilacs snapped from the bush on the way to school.

The Rainer house was distinguished from the others by its plowed path.

Lenny stomped up the steps. Louise opened the door, wiping her hands on her apron. "Come in, come in," she said, holding the door wide. Her bright red hair was springy with curls. She was not much taller than her son.

Sunlight filtered through burlap drapes leaving the living room, with its early American furniture, dark and mellow. Logs were stacked in the fireplace. The bookshelves lining an entire wall were stacked with children's games, comic books and stuffed animals.

"This is a children's house," Louise apologized.

Megan's own living room had once been full with the clutter of childhood.

"It's nice and warm in the kitchen," Louise steered Megan out of the room. "I try not to light fires in the middle of the day. Don't want to chop down more trees than necessary."

Megan flushed at her own incessant need to keep her fire burning. She'd already made a note to order another cord from Alma.

The aroma of freshly baked bread and cookies permeated the kitchen. Sun poured through the lace-curtained window over the sink and reflected off the yellow enamel walls. A large florescent fixture beamed from the ceiling. The house seemed sealed off from winter. Megan wanted to open a window and thin the suffocating aroma of chocolate.

"I'm so glad you came." Louise chatted while she filled a mug from a steaming pot of coffee and pushed it across the table. "Not living in town this time of year has its hardships, among them more privacy than I can stand. Sometimes I have this craving for the sound of another adult voice."

Megan was reminded of the last several months alone in her kitchen, sorting spices, using the television to give a semblance of company.

"I guess you're wondering about Mr. Ranier..." Louise said.



"No..."

"Well, he just up and disappeared one day in Alberta with a truck load of beer. That's all right," she waved her hand to ward off any sympathy, "summer's the only hard time without him. But Lenny's getting bigger and he's starting to pitch in. Besides, I got used to it. He was gone for months at a time before I finally chased him out."

Megan listened to Louise's chatter, grateful that she wasn't asked to participate.

"You should be here in the summer. The noise level's so high with this one needing a pipe fixed or that one complaining about squirrels on the roof. Makes me long for winter. In winter I long for summer. Funny, huh?"

The children played a game on the living room floor. The rasp of the spinner and their bantering voices drifted into the room.

Louise bounded around the kitchen; she rinsed dishes, checked the flame under the coffee, all the while asking where Megan lived, what age children she'd taught, what college her children were in.

If Louise hadn't appeared to be so preoccupied, Megan would have thought she was nosy, but Louise just paused long enough for Megan's answer before rushing to the next question.

The timer sounded and Louise pulled two trays of gingerbread men from the oven.

"Let me help," Megan offered eager to be freed from

her chair.

"No sit!" But when Louise finally sat down she agreed to let Megan help decorate the cookies. They sat side by side in refreshing silence.

"You know," Louise said, removing the first tray to the sideboard, "the last time I was in Minneapolis was to pick out my wedding dress."

Megan's mother had spent hours in a kitchen similar to this sewing pastel seed pearls into the bodice of Megan's wedding dress. The gown was packed away somewhere in the attic.

"Do you bake this much every day?" Megan asked.

"Oh, it keeps me out of trouble. Besides bringing in extra cash. I convinced the owners to let me stay on and with this little business I don't even mind Mitchell, that's my husband, being away."

Louise broke a cookie in half and offered it to Megan then bit off a piece herself and chewed it thoughtfully. "I suppose you're not having an easy time of it?"

"It's getting better." Megan spoke though she had no intention of speaking. The warmth and light and energy and easy conversation caught her off guard. "I spent months agonizing about what I could have done differently."

Louise brushed the red curls from her forehead. "And was there? Anything you could have done differently?"

Megan shook her head. "Not a damned thing," she said and was surprised that the flutter inside her chest was

barely noticeable. Martin was right about perspective. Coming to the lake had been a good decision.

"Can we have a cookie now?" the children called from the living room?"

"Kids," Louise said with an apologetic smile and wrapped two gingerbread men in napkins.

Megan was thankful that she had held on as long as she had.

*

There was a pickup truck in the drive when she pulled in and Ben Walker on the porch sitting on a cardboard box.

"Been to Louise's," he said before she had a chance to ask him to get off her porch.

Megan stopped short of climbing the porch steps.

"Are you a private detective?"

"You don't need to be a detective to smell Louise's cookies on your clothes," he said. "Makes me hungry."

"Well, I'm skipping lunch today or I'd invite you in," Megan said. She walked up the steps past him.

"I rarely eat lunch myself," he said. "Aren't you the least bit curious?" He patted the box.

"Curious? Yes, I'm curious. I'm curious why you're sitting on my porch. I'm curious why you let your hair grow like some over-aged hippie. I'm curious what there is about me that seems to fascinate you."

"So I have been on your mind."

Megan glared at him.

He wore a cowboy hat today and he tipped it to the back of his head. He walked down the steps. "Funny. I could never stand an unopened box." He stopped before getting into the pickup.

"My hair is my business and you're a fascinating woman." He gunned the motor and backed away into a cloud of gravel and snow.

It wasn't her nature to be quarrelsome. There was just something about that man that pricked at her. She kicked the box. It was solid. Of course he thought she was fascinating. She was probably the only exciting gossip to hit Gull Lake in years. God, he was arrogant. She opened a flap on the box.

There was a small black and white television inside. The note taped to the screen said: Had this for years in my spare room. Thought you might like it for company. To keep in touch with what's going on in the world. Ben

*

She sat in the kitchen noting the difference between her instant and Louise's fresh brewed coffee. Ben had been right. The smell of fresh cookies clung to her blouse. She buried her nose in her sleeve.

Megan looked out the window into the white sky. She forgot that she had wanted to ask Louise if she knew Ellen.

Chapter 14

"Don't let your mother carry the duffel down, Rick. It's too heavy for her. I'll be up for it in a minute," Martin called from the bottom of the stairs.

Rick nudged the bag out the bedroom door with his foot while Megan sat on his bed smoothing the comforter. He had grown four inches during the summer and his head barely cleared the door frame. He should be at the lake or playing tennis rather than packing up for college.

"Now I don't want you borrowing any of my toys without asking first," he said plopping down on the bed next to her. "I've heard that parents go through a second childhood when their kids leave home."

She touched the buttons on his shirt. "I don't think Clue or Monopoly was what we had in mind."

"Well, just stay away from the contact sports," he said.

Was this his way of hinting that he knew she and Martin were having problems? Megan looked carefully at him. His blue eyes were relaxed and smiling.

"You forget Patty," Megan said.

"Who can forget that little brat. Hey Pat. Come in here."

Patty shuffled down the hall and straddled the duffel. She was a young sixteen, defiantly clinging to childhood. Her hair had been cut short for summer and thick black curls

framed her face. Megan stopped herself before she commented on the shortness of her skirt riding up her thighs, but Rick pushed himself off the bed and hauled Patty up and into the room.

"You're too old to sit like that," he said assuming a proprietary air. "Who's going to teach you how to behave when I'm away?"

Patty turned up her nose at him.

Martin appeared in the doorway. "Okay, guys. Motor's running. If we don't get started soon, we'll have to spend the night in Lansing, Michigan."

"Oh, no - not Lansing," both children groaned in unison.

Even Megan laughed. Their night in Lansing was a familiar family story - where the only motel Martin could find was a five story, rickety wooden monstrosity with no elevator, one bathroom per floor and only a urine-stained sink in the room and Megan was seven months pregnant with Rick and had to urinate every half-hour and refused to walk down the hall where the bathroom lock was dangling by one skinny nail. It had been the only time she'd wished she were a man.

"Let's move it," Martin said clearing nostalgia from the air and both children gravitated to him, Patty stepping over the bag to share a handle with Martin and Rick grabbing the other end.

They trudged forward a few feet when Rick turned and

said, "Aren't you coming down for the final send off?"

"In a minute," she said.

An avalanche of thoughts pinned her to the bed: She was pleased that Martin was driving Rick to Boston because they would have some time together, not that they didn't get along, they just weren't especially close. Maybe that was her fault. And Rick's leaving would give her more time with Patty who as of now only politely gave Megan her attention. More than her fear of Rick being independent, she worried that his leaving would upset the equilibrium she'd worked so hard to maintain. Rick's attention to her and his discipline of Patty filled a void - Martin's time and attention having shifted more and more to his work, away from the family.

"Are you coming down," Patty yelled up the stairs.

"I'm on my way," she yelled back.

She stopped on the landing and looked out the hall window. Martin and Rick were shoving the duffel in among boxes of books and other clothing. They worked well together. They looked so much alike. It struck her that whether Rick was here or in Boston, she really had no control. Her son's arms would carry school books, hold a woman, and even carry his suitcase when leaving that woman and there would be nothing Megan could do about it. Rick got in the car and slammed the door. Martin shielded his eyes looking for her. She stood frozen at the window, an uncomfortable nagging at the back of her mind that life was

out of kilter, that a different, irrevocable direction had been taken.

*

Despite the soaring August temperature and a desire to lie perfectly still and bake in the sun, Megan had agreed to meet Ellen for lunch in Uptown, a newly renovated district of 60's-style shops and bakeries that Megan had not yet visited.

Ellen was good that way. She anticipated that Megan would be in a slump after Rick had gone and left no room for her to sit around and mope. Yesterday, Ellen picked her up and they drove to St. Paul to rummage through old book shops where Megan had found an edition of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and in the evening Ellen rented *The Year of Living Dangerously* for the VCR. "Rereading D. H. will be worthwhile," she had said "if you envision Mel Gibson as the gardener."

Ellen was normally a work-aholic, so when she took off to devote time to Megan, Megan felt too guilty to refuse. And Megan had to admit that reading with Mel Gibson's face floating in front of her eyes was an interesting experience.

With Martin gone for the week and Patty working at day camp, these outings made her feel like she was back in college herself, sitting with Ellen in Bridgeman's giggling over a malted.

Voster's bakery specialized in capuccino and European pastries, lots of chocolate and whipped cream.

"I thought we were going to have lunch," Megan said sitting on the wire frame chair next to the marble topped ice-cream table.

"I've always wanted to eat a meal of desserts," Ellen said sticking her finger into the middle of a miniature chocolate pie. "I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday to prepare for this." She looked cool in a sundress patterned with toucans and parrots. The fabric looked like Megan's living room couch pillows. Megan had worn a long, gauzy skirt and one of Patty's t-shirts.

"I can feel the cavities ringing in my mouth already."

"Cut it out," Ellen said. "There's nothing wrong with your teeth..." she licked the chocolate off her finger, "or your hair or your tits for that matter."

"If you were Mel Gibson, I'd swoon at the compliment." Megan dug her fork into an almond torte and sprinkled powdered sugar onto her tongue.

"What about Martin?"

"What about him?" Megan reached for Ellen's chocolate dessert, but Ellen slapped her hand away.

"I'll take one of those," Megan called to the woman behind the counter. "Martin's off peeing into sinks with Rick. Male bonding. That sort of thing."

"Doesn't he notice your tits?"

"I've never met Mel Gibson."

"Megan."

"This is getting a bit personal, El."

"What could be more personal than sharing an orgasmic chocolate lunch and imagining ourselves in bed with a gorgeous Australian? Besides, I've neglected you and I'm trying to make up for it so at least have the decency to tell me what you would have told me all along if I'd been sensitive enough to listen."

"Are you through?"

"Chocolate gives me a lot of energy."

"No joke."

The waitress put Megan's order on the table. A baroque trumpet concerto came through the speakers on the ceiling.

Ellen sipped her coffee. "We were talking about tits."

Megan stabbed at the tart's cream topping.

"They're sagging. Along with everything."

"My, my. Do I detect a tinge of self-pity?"

"You can't even detect sagging tits."

"Maybe I'm just polite." She gave Megan a coy look as she licked her spoon. "Come on. Rick's leaving was bound to stir the pot. Give yourself a little time."

"The pot, so to speak, has been boiling for a long time now. I just haven't had the energy to face it."

"Eat chocolate."

"Funny."

"Meggie, I just think your vision is a little clouded right now. You and Martin have one of the best marriages I know."

Megan shrugged.

"Okay - no marriage is perfect. But don't tell me you don't love him."

"I love him and I know he loves me. That's the frame. But on the canvas? Nothing but a mess of dots that for the life of me I can't stand far enough away from to make any sense of them."

"God I hate artistic metaphors," Ellen covered her ears.

Megan dipped her spoon into Ellen's mousse. "Me too." They picked at their desserts.

"Do something about it," Ellen said finally.

"I can't. I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

"That he'll leave for good. So I hold back, thinking it won't hurt so much if I have less invested..."

"Megan, that's crazy."

Megan shoved away the remains of her tart. "I know."

*

Megan reclined on the couch listening to The Rolling Stones.

"Do you really like this music?"

Megan opened her eyes. Patty sat on the edge of a nearby chair, her elbows resting on her knees.

"Why?"

"I just wonder if you really like it or you listen to it so you can pretend you're still young."

Megan sat up and looked at her daughter through the

fading light. Children were like animals. They sensed a vulnerability and pounced on it. She could explain patiently that she had grown up with the Stones, that she liked their music. She could yell at her and tell her that it was none of her damned business, that she didn't dictate what music she listened to and she expected the same respect. She could get up off the couch and slap her face so hard that her own hand would sting. But she had never hit her children and she must have asked her own mother the very same question and expected that Patty's would ask her the same. Without saying a word, she lay back on the couch and closed her eyes, concentrating on the rose perfume drifting in from the front patio and the Stones unable to get any satisfaction. After a few minutes she was barely conscious of Patty, who like the remaining daylight, slinked away.

*

"Are you awake?"

What a ridiculous question, she thought scrambling up from sleep. If I were awake wouldn't I be sitting up, reading a book, rather than lying here in my nightgown under the blanket with my eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, Martin was leaning over her.

"I didn't expect you until tomorrow," she said. The clock beamed a red 3:00 a.m.

"I drove through last night." He sat next to her on the bed.

"Everything all right?" She propped his pillow behind her and sat up.

"Rick's settled. He really didn't need me there. As soon as he connected with his roommate they were off in their own world." He unbuttoned his shirt. "Everything all right here?" he asked gently moving her hair off her shoulder.

"A few messages. They're down by the hall phone."

"Where's Patty?"

"Camp overnight."

"You must have known I'd be home tonight and made sure she was away." He stretched out next to her.

His hair was the same hair that she always ran her fingers through. The same smile lines radiated from his eyes, familiar eyes that turned the same violet color in the night. The sandalwood aroma of shampoo and soap that always made her want to bury her face in his neck and breathe him in. But it was the middle of the night and for the first time she felt like he was an intruder in her bed.

"You must be exhausted," she said.

He grasped her hand and holding it close to his cheek, turned to face her. "I am. Bone tired. This was hard on both of us."

Did he think the strain came about just from Rick's leaving?

He ran a finger down her breast bone and gently slipped his hand under her nightgown, searching her hardening

nipple. "Marty, I need to sleep."

"Shut up. I'm seducing you." He spoke in a hoarse whisper.

He pulled the pillows out from under her and kissed her so hard and long that her breath left her and a whirlpool started in the velvet black behind her eyelids and she felt like she was falling, plummeting backwards trying so very hard not to cry.

*

He fell asleep on her side of the bed, imprisoning her in his arms. She was aware of his every breath, the damp length of his skin on hers. A warm summer breeze blew the curtains in and out. She inched away, but he clutched her unconsciously in sleep. Unfairness seethed through her. Rick was gone. Patty would be leaving next year. She hated the self-pity, but it continued to ooze in. In sleep, he nuzzled her neck. The shivers were involuntary. He could not come and go as he pleased. She pulled away.

"Everything all right?" he murmured.

"Go back to sleep," she said and moved a few more inches toward the center of the bed. Her breathe came easier without the his pressure against her back.

Chapter 15

Lenny Rainer knocked on her door just as she finished Ellen's letter and was starting to read Rick's. "Could you help me study for my math test," he asked handing her a box of fresh cinnamon buns with a scribbled 'THANKS' on top.

Lenny had been having trouble in school and Megan agreed to help out with his homework. Louise paid her in muffins and cookies.

"Of course," she said putting Rick's letter aside for later. She missed him.

Lenny dropped his books on the kitchen table and unwound his scarf. "You sure get a lot of letters," he said. At first she'd shied away from having Lenny around, but the cabin vibrated with his constant inquisitiveness. "My dad only wrote me one card since he left."

Megan opened the math book and smoothed the page. "He'll write again," she said. "But right now, you're going to do the writing. Grab that pencil and let's get busy."

*

The deer appeared a minute or two after they walked out to the porch to enjoy the first day of sunshine in over a week.

"Do you see him?" Megan asked Lenny.

The boy squatted and shaded his eyes from the early morning light. "I had a deer once," he said. "Mom and me

bottle fed it from a baby."

"What happened to him?" They both held very still and talked quietly so not to spook the deer.

"When he was weaned dad took him out to the woods. He said he had to do it before he got used to people food. Deer belong in the woods, he said, not in living rooms."

"He was probably right," Megan said.

"I guess so," Lenny said and stood up. The deer caught his slight movement, sniffed the air, turned and vanished among the tree trunks.

"They never stay long anyway," she said and put her arm around Lenny's shoulder.

"Want to track them?" he asked.

*

They walked across the clearing to where the deer had stood and followed the tracks a short way until the snow thinned and the prints faded into pine needles and dried branches.

It was warm in the woods and Lenny pushed his parka hood back to his shoulders.

"Sh. Do you hear something?" Megan asked.

A frantic scratching came from somewhere on their left. A strong odor of pine filled the air. Then she heard it again, something, some noise, as if someone were crying softly.

"From there," Lenny pointed and she followed him deeper into the woods until the narrow path was blocked by a

maze of pine split off from a tree during a storm.

"Look here," Lenny said and scrambled across a thick limb.

A raccoon huddled in a tangle of branches, panting hard. Lenny reached for him. Megan grabbed his hand back.

"He could be rabid," she said.

"He's just caught," Lenny replied.

Megan pushed a branch aside and the raccoon darted backwards, was caught short and knocked flat. Blood stained the snow. A steel ring bit so tightly into his hind leg that fresh blood oozed at his slightest movement; the snow soaked it up like a sponge. She inched closer. Lenny's breath brushed her neck.

"We have to let him loose," Lenny said.

"You keep his attention," she said, "and I'll get him from the other side."

She edged around and crouched, bouncing lightly on her toes, ready to spring back if he attacked her.

She wrapped her scarf around her hand for protection but when she reached over, the animal leapt away with a squeal of pain that laid him flat.

"It'll be all right, " she said. "You'll be up and running soon, you'll see." She talked to him as she would have soothed Rick or Patty when they came running from the playground with a cut, tears spilling down their dirty cheeks.

Gradually she laid her hand on his back. "Come around

quietly," Megan said to Lenny.

Without being told, Lenny's hand replaced hers patting the animal's back while she dug the snow away from his damaged leg and worked the spring gingerly so it wouldn't snap back.

Free, he just lay there, breathing hard, his wounded leg twitching. The fur had been rubbed away, exposing the bone, as white as the center of the broken branches.

It started to snow.

"We're going to have to take him back," Lenny said.

She wrapped the raccoon in her scarf and carried him papoose-style on her back. He whimpered.

"I hope he doesn't bite," Lenny said as he trudged behind. Instinctively Megan loosened her hold so the animal hung almost to her waist.

"Is there a vet close by?" she asked.

"In Brainard," Lenny answered.

*

The wind whistled and the gusts carried the powdery snow through the frosted cedars and pines. They had wandered deeper into the forest than she had anticipated.

"Put your hood up, Lenny," she said and inched her collar over her ears. Ten years melted away and she was with Rick down by the river, collecting branches for kindling.

"Get in front of me," Megan commanded. They walked, heads down against the bitter cold, the trees swayed above

them, the branches danced against the darkening sky.

A limb cracked above them. "Move," Megan yelled. She shoved him forward as a spray of branches plummeted to the ground, showering them with snow and pine needles. Her head buzzed with responsibility - for Lenny, for the animal.

They ran a few yards and stopped to catch their breaths.

"Is he still alive?" Lenny asked.

"It's a contest as to whose heart is beating faster."

A strange moaning noise came from the distance.

"Ghosts!" Lenny said. His cheeks were scarlet and his eyelashes crusted with ice.

"Ice," Megan said, familiar with the sound of frozen snow as it hit the trees. "Get going."

The sleet, ricocheting from branch to branch, sounded like cars skidding on the highway. Shards of ice, shaken loose by the increasing wind, fell around them like broken glass.

It was difficult to walk with the wind coming toward them, and almost impossible to see through the blinding snow, snow so thick that they were several feet into the clearing before she realized it. Megan grabbed Lenny's hand and tugged him toward the cabin. They collapsed onto the porch steps.

"Do you think he's dead?" Lenny asked.

It was wonderful to have a one-track mind. Megan concentrated on catching her breath.

"Right now," Megan answered, "I'm just glad that we're alive."

*

They had swaddled the raccoon in towels and settled it in a dresser drawer on the kitchen counter near the stove. Megan made hot chocolate and forced Lenny to concentrate on his math. "I just want to check on him," he said breaking away from the table. He patted the raccoon's back. He stretched on tip-toes over the sink and stared into the clearing. "It's still snowing."

"Come finish this," Megan said.

"How come you leave the window open?" he asked.

Megan put down her cup and looked up. Lenny waited for an explanation. "It's not exactly open," she hedged.

He waved his hand through the stream of cold air, but before she could tell him she didn't have an answer, the raccoon started to moan.

"He needs a vet," Megan decided and she bundled the raccoon and Lenny into the car.

"Can't I come? Mom and Lanette aren't home."

"No. I'm sorry, Lenny. The roads are too dangerous. I'll leave you at Peterson's," Megan said. "Alma will call your mother later and let her know you're there."

The lights burned through Peterson's fogged windows. Megan left the motor and heater running while she escorted Lenny inside.

"Why don't you call Ben," Alma suggested while Megan

paged through the Brainard directory.

Lenny sat near the stove.

"I don't think I'll have a problem driving to Brainard, Alma," she said.

"What am I going to do here all afternoon?" Lenny whined.

"I seem to remember a test tomorrow," Megan said.

Alma rolled up the sleeves of her gigantic man's sweater. "I know a little about fractions," she said, "and learning goes well with a little chocolate." She scooped out a handful of Hershey kisses from her pocket.

"Thanks, Alma," Megan said and pulled on her mittens.

The sky had cleared. It was a half-hour drive to Brainard. Not much more.

*

There were few cars on the road and those whistled past her, shifting the Toyota to the right. Snow began falling again and the wipers groaned against the windshield. Every few minutes she touched the raccoon on the seat next to her. His breathing was shallow but there was some movement.

The defroster had worked a hole no larger than a grapefruit. She turned on the radio hoping for a weather report and KSTP came in loud and clear despite the storm; she wasn't surprised to hear a 'traveler's warning'.

Having gone further than she expected, she pulled over and took the map from the glove compartment. Just as she located herself the car started to rock. For a moment she

thought a huge tanker had zoomed past, but it was the wind raging down the road at gale force, dragging sheets of wet snow with it. The lull in the storm when she left the cabin must have been like a hurricane eye.

The wipers stuck and when she opened the door to nudge them free, sharp hail-sized snow pelted her cheeks so she could barely open her eyes. The ground glowed white, the sky and the forest inky black. She walked a few feet with the wind at her back but there wasn't a sign or another car in sight.

Overhead, a large limb dipped and bobbed then gave an agonizing crack. It hung immobilized in space by the wind for a minute before it ripped through the lower branches, scattering more ice and snow. She held up her arm to protect her face and pulled back just in time. The limb hit the hood with a smack, bounced on impact and slid forward, snagged the fender and blocked the front wheels.

"Shit!" she said and kicked futilely into the snow. She slipped back into the front seat. She was soaked through. She pressed her foot down on the accelerator and shifted from drive to reverse, trying to back the car out. She got out of the car again and tried to push the broken limb off the bumper and into the crevice the tires had already eroded in the snow bank, but the branches were unwieldy and thick and she couldn't shove it down. She got back in the car, but this time the wheels ate their way deeper and deeper until the most she could elicit was a

gentle rock.

Someone would be along soon. Someone driving home from Brainard. She reached for the stadium blanket from the back seat and spread it over herself and the raccoon. The hum of the car heater competed with the storm.

*

A few hours passed and the gas gauge dwindled to empty. Minutes later the engine died. The windshield and windows were painted with delicate frost. This time there was no movement when she touched the raccoon's back.

The blizzard had abated leaving every branch, every shrub, even the road - one large expanse of white.

She felt the vibration before she heard the low rumble in the distance. About a quarter of a mile away was a yellow snow plow. It looked like a brilliant sun, its rays, streams of snow shooting toward the sides of the road.

With her feet sinking deep into the snow, she walked to the middle of the road, waving wildly, hoping the driver would see her through the mist of his exhaust.

"What are you doing out in this?" the driver shouted over the roaring motor as he jumped down from his cab. He was a rotund man with flaming red cheeks made redder by the reflection of his bright red nylon ski vest. He wore a plaid hunter's cap with the earflaps pulled down, the straps dangling. He had to pick up one flap to hear her.

"I was trying to get to Brainard," she yelled, leaning close to his ear.

"Didn't you hear the storm warning?"

"I was already on the road when the storm hit."

"Most I can do is give you a ride in. Even that's against the rules. But I sure as hell wouldn't want to be responsible for you freezing to death out here. No one will be out until the roads are clear."

"Don't you have cables?" Megan's voice cracked from shouting.

"Can't you understand, lady? I could get in deep trouble for just stopping. I have a schedule to keep. I don't get paid to be the A.A.A."

"Fine," Megan said. "Let me get my things."

She opened the passenger door and slipped out the drawer with the raccoon.

"Hurry up," the man yelled.

She backed a few feet from the car, wedged the drawer into a snow drift and scooped handfuls of snow over it. Lenny would have been upset. She wished she had a shovel so she could give it a decent burial. But at least she'd had the drawer and she hadn't had to put the animal directly into the freezing snow. The snowplow gave a monstrous bellow. She stumbled out of the drift.

"Ever been up this high before?" the driver asked grinning at her. He moved from side to side to get himself comfortable before shifting the plow into gear.

Megan shook her head. He pulled down his ear flap, and they were surrounded by a whirlwind of noise and snow.

*

Ansel's garage was on outskirts of Brainard. Ansel was out on a job and there was only one man on duty.

"I just fill the tank, wipe a windshield or two, check the oil..." the assistant told her in a thick Swedish accent when she explained her dilemma. He wiped his hands on an oily red cloth and showed her to a wooden captain's chair to wait.

It was three o'clock before Ansel skidded into the station, the flashing lights on his truck stirred everything to life. He listened to her, examined the piece of paper the snow plow driver had left describing the exact place the car was stalled, pushed his glasses up onto his wide forehead and down again. Then he handed the paper back to her and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing I can do 'til this afternoon. Maybe not until tomorrow morning."

"I need my car," Megan said.

"I appreciate that," he said. He showed her a clip board filled with names and addresses. "But you have to appreciate these twenty people called in before you. Everyone was caught short by the storm."

She needed excuses to persuade him, children left unattended, a cake baking in the oven, a pet dog to be fed, a husband who would be worried about her. But she had none.

"The best I can do," he said, "is have Ed there drive you to a hotel. I'll call when I get the car in."

He waited for her to nod her assent before writing all her information at the bottom of his list.

Ed wasn't the least bit happy about his passenger. He drove as fast as the road would allow, skidding, adjusting the wheel, swearing in Swedish under his breath. His pickup screeched to a stop outside of Murphy's Inn. He leaned across her lap and pushed open the passenger door. "I'll tell Ansel you're here," he said, spit a wad of tobacco onto the glistening road before he pulled the door closed after her.

*

"We don't take credit cards," the woman behind the desk said. She wore a housedress and cardigan sweater, her features lost in a buttery face. She sipped a cup of coffee and kept one eye on *Oprah Winfrey*.

"I need a place for a few hours until my car's fixed," Megan said.

"We charge by the day, not the hour," the woman said and slapped a key on the cherry wood counter.

The banister was covered with a layer of dust. The woman waited for her at the top of the stairs.

"The bathroom's down the hall," she said motioning with her shoulder.

"What did you say?" Megan asked not believing what she'd heard.

The woman set her hands on her hips. "Look, there's a Holiday Inn and a Day's Inn about a mile further down the

road."

The room was musty and damp. She should have walked the mile. She could have taken a cab back to the gas station.

The phone rang.

"This is Ansel, Mrs. Harris. I have a man now out by your car and he tells me it needs a battery. I'll have it back here in less than an hour but it'll probably take until tomorrow to get it running."

"Are you sure? How difficult can it be to get a battery?"

"Hey, listen, ma'am. I did you a favor and bumped a lot of people just to get your car in here. I can't do nothing about supplies. Everything's closed down."

"Fine," she said. "Just fix it."

She took the phone book from the bedside drawer and paged through it until she found Rainer.

*

"Where are you calling from?" Louise asked.

"I'm stuck in Brainard," she said. "Did Lenny get home all right?"

"Lenny's fine. What about the animal?"

"Dead."

"I expected as much from the way Lenny described it. Did that storm addle your wits? Driving off like that."

"I just wanted to get the raccoon to the vet and get back home again," Megan said.

"Minneapolis?" Louise asked.

Megan was startled. She'd been at the lake only a few weeks and already she'd stopped thinking about Minneapolis as home.

"Megan, do you want me to come and get you?"

"Do you mind?"

"Don't be silly."

*

Megan paid for the use of the phone and sat in the lobby. A few cars were on the road, driving steadily, if a bit slowly. The sun reflected brightly off the snow making everything crisp and clean.

She looked twice when the pickup pulled up.

Ben Walker. She'd kill Louise.

He smiled at Megan. "Hi, Mazy," he said to the woman behind the desk.

"Weren't you just in town yesterday?" she asked.

"Oh, I have a new career. Local taxi service." He turned to Megan. "Any bags, ma'am."

"I don't think I can afford your fare," Megan said.

Ben gently took Megan's elbow. "I'm the cheapest they come," he said. "See ya, Mazy," he called back over his shoulder.

*

"How did you end up in a place like that?" Ben asked but when she glared at him, he added, "Never mind. Don't answer."

He drove carefully. The radio filled the silence.

"Actually," he said as if responding to something she'd said. "I don't mind the quiet. You get that way living alone for a long time. Sometimes, the littlest noise sets me on end. That's why I like fishing. All that space and silence."

Megan was always quiet on car rides. She loved to watch the scenery, look inside other cars and wonder where they were going, what they were saying to each other. The silence had irritated Martin who used it the last several years to accuse her of how little they actually had to say to each other.

"I like the way your eye catches the light," Ben said.

Megan crossed her arms and turned toward the door.

"Do you like Bob Dylan?" he asked turning the volume up slightly.

"I thought you liked quiet."

"So I do."

And that was all he said for the rest of the ride and Megan regretted it. She didn't want to think about the raccoon or Minneapolis or Martin, but she certainly wasn't going to be the one to speak. She noticed that she had developed this nasty stubborn streak lately especially where Ben Walker was concerned.

*

Ben drove slowly up the road to the cabin as if afraid to disturb the new snow. At the end of the drive, he turned

off the motor. Megan tried the door handle but it was stuck. Ben reached across, his arm grazing her chest and shoved the door open.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank Louise. Her corn muffins were worth the trip any day."

So he had to be bribed to come and get her. She turned and plodded through knee-deep snow toward the cabin.

When she didn't hear the truck engine start up again, she turned to see Ben remove a small box from the back of the cab.

"I already have one television," she said.

"It's not a television." He followed in her footsteps and put the box down on the porch.

She stared at it. Ben stared at her. "Okay, okay, I give up. I'm curious. What is it?"

A smile whisked across Ben's face. She squatted down next to the box. She was after all, grateful for the ride.

Ben hunched down next to her and peeled back the flap. "Hey, there," he said. "You're finally awake."

Megan stood up. "If it's an animal, take it away."

He reached in and brought out a spaniel puppy wrapped in red flannel.

"Was this your idea?"

"It was Lenny's actually. He thought you were alone too much and needed company."

"Tell him you couldn't find it. Tell him you thought

it over and it was a bad idea." She backed further away, searching her pocket for the cabin keys.

The puppy started whining and Ben slipped it back into the comfort of its box. "Hey, Megan. He won't bite you."

"You don't understand. I already buried one animal today. I don't want to be responsible for another thing."

She turned away and tripped over a rotten slat of wood. He reached out and pulled her against him, held her chin, his breath warm and coffee-tinged on her face. He smiled for a suspended minute as if debating what he should do with her. He smelled like the inside of her cabin, of pine and smoke and cold air and for one crazy minute she wondered what his mouth would feel like.

"Everyone's attached to something or other," he said his arms still around her.

She pulled away, but paused by the cabin door.

"I'm not asking you to become attached to me," he said.

The heat rose to her cheeks. She pressed her forehead to the cold cedar door. "Regardless of what Lenny thinks you can't just replace one thing with another."

"No," he said and stroked the puppy before he closed up the box. "Of course, not."

Chapter 16

The late afternoon sun had already disappeared over the roof of the house and the eastern sky glowed orange-pink through a clearing, striated sky. Martin hunched over the kitchen table. Megan's coffee mug, a present from Patty that read, 'I'd Rather Be Forty Than Pregnant,' steamed with tea in front of him. He had started looking older in the last month - a softening around the chin line, a few more grey hairs.

The bend of Martin's shoulder would cause a good friend to gently lay a hand there and ask what was wrong. Behind him, his studio door was closed, the shade drawn. He hadn't been in there for almost a month. The subtle smell of oil paint that always lingered on him despite soap and cologne had disappeared.

Megan stood in the doorway of the darkening kitchen.

"We've kind of switched positions haven't we?" His voice was soft, meditative.

"What do you mean?" It was the first sentence he'd spoken to her in several days.

Martin turned in his chair. He appeared to be staring at a spot on the wall inches from her head.

"I seemed to have usurped your job of moping around."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Everything she said lately seemed to have an edge to it.

"Your slump has nothing to do with me."



He bounded from the chair and stood inches from her. His breath was hot and minty. "It has everything to do with you."

"Oh no. I refuse to take any blame. I've never blamed you for preferring the company of your paintings."

"Then what in the world were you doing?"

She shoved him away. "I was blaming myself, damn you. Feeling guilty because I needed so much more of you. Scared that when the kids left I'd have nothing."

"You married an artist. I've never been dishonest with you, Meggie."

"Then don't be dishonest with yourself. Whatever you're going through now is not my fault."

"What do you want to do?"

She'd thought about this question, knew that he'd be the one to ask it, but now that the words were out she shied away from any definite decision. "I think we can get through the summer the way we are until Patty leaves for college."

He nodded his ascent. He reached for her hand. "Whether you know it or not, I depend on you."

"Don't. I don't want you to depend on me. I don't want..." She took her hand away. "I can't depend on you."

*

Martin brought the suitcases down from the attic and sat them on Patty's bed. Megan sorted through a pile of

sweatshirts on a shelf in Patty's closet.

"Why do we have to do this?" he asked.

"Do what?"

After a moment he said, "Let her go."

He sat down between two suitcases and draped his arms over them as if they were his children's shoulders when they were young.

He spoke quietly. "I still think of her as fifteen."
He smiled.

"Well, she's not." Megan tried to keep her voice even. She stacked the sweatshirts on the bed. When she reached over to unzip the suitcase, he grabbed her hand. "You've been waiting for this haven't you?"

"I've dreaded this."

"Then let's just wait a while. We'll have the house to ourselves..." He guided her over between his knees, ran his hands up and down her sides, his thumbs grazing her nipples.

The summer had been hot and quiet. Martin taught one summer session, paced in his studio staring at blank canvases. He spent more time with her - lunch, movies, or just sitting and reading. She knew how difficult it was for him. She caught his fingers tapping impatience on the arms of his chair, but she just went back to her salad or book. He had not tried to make love.

Now he eased her forward until she was pressed against him and they teetered on the edge of the bed. His breath streamed on her neck. He angled for her mouth. She backed

away. He moved one hand to the back of her neck and pulled her close. He reached inside her blouse and cupped her breast. Then his mouth caught hers before she could turn away. She closed her eyes. This is how it used to be. His mouth was so soft. The rim of the suitcase bit into her side. He worked on her mouth, his tongue slid along her teeth, played with her tongue, then drew so deeply from her that parts of her seemed to be sucked away.

The mail slid through the mail slot onto the floor. Patty's voice drifted up through the screen as she greeted the mailman. Her next door neighbor's dog, Spider, barked as if threatened. Megan pulled away.

"I need to get this packing done."

From the corner of her eye, she saw him brush back his hair, straighten his shirt and give the suitcase a thoughtful tap. When he stood up, she deliberately turned toward the window. He touched her hair lightly before he left the room.

Chapter 17

"We're going fishing," Ben said when she answered his knock at the kitchen door.

"Maybe you're going fishing," she said and turned her back. They had fallen into a pattern; she ignored him, he persisted.

"Over on Round Lake. It's fun. You'll love it."

"Look. What am I? You're Gull Lake poster child." He always came around when she looked her worst.

"I thought you'd appreciate the company." He pulled out a kitchen chair.

"I have a television, Lenny, and every time I turn around you're grinning over my shoulder."

"I don't grin for everyone. Why don't you sit down and let's talk," he said.

"I can talk standing," she said. She crossed her arms and leaned against the sink.

He pushed the chair back and faced her, leaning against the table. "Are you planning on staying around here?"

"How's that your business?"

He unbuttoned his jacket and took the red ribbon from his hair. It fell loose on his shoulders. "Well, in case you haven't guessed, I have a tenacious nature..."

Megan smiled.

Ben walked to the stove, helped himself to a cup of coffee and refilled her cup. She accepted it.

"And if you're going to stay, I won't mind making a fool of myself."

"Ben..." she said. It was the first time she had said his name.

His hand grazed her hair. "I'm not asking you to make love..."

A blush crept up her neck.

"I just want to take you fishing." He broke into an easy smile.

The blush burned across her cheeks. "Fishing."

"Then it's settled. Oh," he said, reaching into his coat pocket. "I forgot." "Alma sent this for you." He handed her a slip of paper.

"Your husband called, twice. Once yesterday, again early this morning."

The color drained from her face.

"He said you should call him."

She unfolded the paper in slow motion. Alma Peterson had a graceful handwriting, the letters and numbers lined up evenly across the unlined page. Martin Harris, 612-947-3534.

Martin Harris. That name had filled the covers of her college notebooks. Martin Harris, Mrs. Martin Harris, Megan Harris, Mrs. Harris, Megan and Martin.

Her hand shook. Ben took the coffee cup from her and set it on the sideboard.

"Are you all right?"

"Ellen told him. She's always butting her nose in my business."

"Megan..." Ben put a hand under her chin and tried to direct her face toward his. He seemed about to tell her something, but she pushed his hand away. She picked up her coffee cup and paced in front of the stove. The coffee sloshed over the rim onto the floor.

"It's okay. I have to see him. It's time we talked, settled things. That's what normal, rational people do, don't they?" She addressed the question to Ben but he had already slipped out the kitchen door. She dumped the coffee in the sink, picked up the note and crumbled it in her hand.

Through the kitchen window she saw Ben stop by the truck for a moment and look back. She wished he hadn't left.

*

Megan was leaving Peterson's when Louise caught her. "I was just out to the cabin and you weren't there, so I figured you'd be here." She held her hands out toward the stove.

"She's on her way fishing," Alma said.

"Fishing?"

Megan shot Alma a look. "Never mind, Louise. What's wrong?"

"I just got a note from Lenny's teacher. He passed his test, but they're going to put him back a grade anyway. He'll be with Lanette."

"Why?" Alma and Megan asked.

"He's missed too much school. One third of the year so far," she said in a low voice.

"Was he sick so much?" Megan asked.

"I told you, Louise," Alma said, "Keeping that boy home wasn't at all smart."

Louise explained to Megan how Lenny helped her with chores around the lodge since Mitchell had gone.

"Can't he can go to summer school and make up the time?" Megan said.

Louise shook her head. "I need him in the summer. Can you talk to the principal? Maybe if you can give him some extra help they'll consider passing him."

"Leave her alone, Louise," Alma said. "She's just visiting."

Louise flashed Alma a 'this is none of your business' look, but there were tears in her eyes. It was the first time that Megan had seen her defenses down.

Megan patted her arm. "Let me see what I can do, okay?"

"You're going to be late," Alma reminded Megan. She shoved hot chocolate and extra socks into Megan's travel bag. "This is for Ben," she said, pressing a Hershey bar in Megan's hand. "He loves chocolate." She put an arm around Megan's shoulder and herded her past Louise and out into the crisp winter day where Alma gave an exaggerated "Brrr!" and pulled her old cardigan around her large chest. "I'm going

back inside. It's hard to get way from a place once your warm," Alma said and disappeared back in the store.

*

Round Lake was smaller than Gull Lake and circled with birches and thirty-foot tall pines whose snow-laden branches arced over the ice and blocked the morning sun. The lake was a shanty town of assorted canvas tents. Men, wrapped in blankets, huddled over holes cut through the ice surface. Small red flags bobbed in the water.

A smell of melting rubber from tent heaters drifted through the air. The ice was slippery but solid beneath her. A man, wearing goggles, looked up as she passed and smiled at her.

"Have you seen Ben Walker?" she asked. The man, with a week's growth of beard, was in the middle of sawing out a section of ice about the size of a car tire. He put the ice auger down next to a pail of live minnows, brushed his hands on his padded ski pants and steered her by the elbow a few feet away from his tent.

"Gotta be careful," he said. "Those ice chips are like slivers of glass. One hits your eye..."

Megan nodded and stepped a few more feet away. "Have you seen Ben Walker," she repeated.

At that moment all attention turned to one man down on his knees pulling in a tilt line, red flags shaking off water like a wet dog. Fish, about eight of them, flopped onto the ice. In all the times she had fished with her

father, she had never seen such a large catch.

"Pike," her companion said. "Been at it since four this morning."

A short way across the ice, she spotted the red ribbon tied at the back of Ben's hair.

*

"I'm glad you made it," he said as he opened the tent flap. The tent was set apart and larger than the rest with a portable stove, two cots and a box on runners for tools and his jigging equipment.

"Do you actually sleep out here?" she asked.

Ben pulled out two canvas stools, picked up a line and started stringing weights. "Only if there's another warm body to keep me warm." The weights clicked together on the line. He looked up at her, "I'm kidding," he said. "No one I know sleeps out in this weather."

Megan crouched next to him. "Alma put in a request for perch," Megan said.

"If that's the case then go in the tent and bring me some more weights. The perch are resting at the bottom today."

*

The high noon-day sun warmed her back and shoulders. The few clouds in the clear blue sky swayed like freshly washed sheets on a clothesline, and the water lapped hypnotically around the edge of the fishing hole; she barely managed to keep her eyes open.

A flock of gulls scattered up out of the trees. She was not catching fish, but she was full with patience. Ben hummed to himself and intermittently stretched and wandered off to talk to the other fisherman.

By late afternoon she'd caught four fish, but the sun had paled and a chill settled across the ice. A few fisherman had already congregated around a bonfire that had been built on the shore.

Ben hauled in the jiglines, placed them in the box and slid the box across the ice to her.

"That's about enough for today," he said.

"I feel like I could sit here forever," Megan said. The sky was awash in violets and pinks.

"As it is you're going to be stiff as a board come morning."

*

Ben came through the tent flap with a platter of sizzling fish.

"It's a good thing you stayed in here," he said.

"They're a horny bunch." He pulled a camp table between the two cots.

"I don't need a protector," she said.

"I guess not. It's your fish we're eating for dinner."

She wrapped the green army blanket tighter around her shoulders. "They smell delicious."

Ben peeled back the fish's crisp blackened skin. Raunchy laughter combined with the aroma of smoke and frying

fish drifted across the lake.

The fish was hot and smokey. Ben laughed as she licked her fingers. "What do you do when you're not fishing?" she asked.

He put his plate down. "Checking credentials?"

"I was just being friendly." Despite the gas heater, the tent was freezing.

"Of course," he said. He swung his feet onto the cot, leaned back and pulled a pipe from his pocket. "Do you mind?" he asked.

Megan shook her head. "I'd better be getting back," she said. She folded the blanket. "It was a wonderful day."

Ben sucked at the pipe. The match flame glowed across his face. His hair fanned across his pillow. "Can you find your way?"

"I drove here." Did she expect him to take her back? Did she expect that this was a date and some kind of etiquette was in order?

She picked up her bag. "Oh," she reached into her pocket. "Alma sent you this." She held out the candy bar. Ben swung himself to a sitting position. Megan walked the three feet from the tent door to the cot.

"I do love chocolate," he said, accepting the candy. "How about you?" He ripped it opened and offered it to her.

She loved chocolate. "I can take it or leave it," she said.

"Suit yourself." He put the chocolate on the table next to the plate of fish, leaned back and puffed away as if she were no longer there.

"Thanks again." He was suddenly so distant. The teasing gone. What had she done?

She pulled back the tent flap. It was dark outside. Flames from the bonfire nibbled the night air. The sky was filled with stars.

"Megan..."

She turned around.

"Drive carefully," he said.

*

It was summer and very hot. She was lying on the sun deck outside her bedroom, sizzling under a layer of suntan oil. A mixture of coconut and sweat filled the air. She had just turned on her stomach when the screen door closed. Footsteps crunched on the gravel and a shadow covered her giving her blessed relief from the heat. Ice tinkled against glass, the rush of fizz near her ear, the smell of lime as the glass was wedged into the gravel near her hand, the weight on the lounge next to her, cool skin against hot. Sweat poured into her eyes, stinging them shut tight. A cool hand on her inner thigh. She parted her legs slightly. A finger ran along the inside elastic of her bathing suit. She pressed into the plastic straps of the chair. She dipped her fingers into the ice cold glass; the chill ran down her neck, down her back. She turned to her side and

moaned as the hand slipped inside her suit. She smiled into the bright sunlight. The figure was blurry from the sweat in her eyes, from shimmering heat.

*

"Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

Megan roused herself from deep sleep.

Ben squatted in front of her, backlit by the roaring fire. "It's freezing in here. I put another log on," he said.

"How did you get in?" She brushed the hair out of her eyes and struggled to sit up.

"You left the door open."

She had been dreaming. How long had he watched her sleep? "Excuse me," Megan said and dashed by him.

In the bathroom, she bathed her eyes in cool water. Her hands smelled from fish and she lathered them over and over with soap.

What does he want? Oh, Megan, don't be stupid. She knew what he wanted, she just didn't know what she wanted. It had been so long since someone held her. Do people make love differently with different people?

Her pulse pounded in her temples. She gripped the cold porcelain sink. He was waiting for her. He was sitting on the couch that was still warm from her sleep.

*

She was wrong. He was standing by the bookcase. He

held the whittled deer in his hand.

"It needs to be finished," she said.

"Maybe it's like one of Michelangelo's captives. Maybe the artist wanted it to be caught as if it were coming out of the woods. Like it couldn't make up its mind if it should go in or out."

"Maybe," she said.

He put it back on the shelf. He leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest and gazed at her. The firelight glanced off his face.

"Why were you sleeping on the couch?" he asked again.

"I can't seem to get the bedroom warm enough," she said.

He walked by her toward the bedroom. She followed him but remained in the doorway while he looked around the room. Except for a few books on the night table, it was bare of anything personal. If he noticed the window opened several inches he didn't comment that that might be the reason the room was cold. Then he went to the dresser and she watched with fascination as he pushed the it aside, revealing a fireplace.

"How did you know that?" she asked.

"Most cabins the fireplaces back onto each other. Makes sense."

He walked toward the door. She edged around him and backed into the bed.

"I'll get some wood," he said.

She was still sitting on the bed when he returned. He stacked the logs and started the fire. Smoke and flames sucked upward. The heat reached Megan's face and worked its way deep into her. He tossed another log on the fire. Outside, the snow glowed in the moonlight. The pine branch ticked against the kitchen window.

She felt a wisp of cold air as he crossed in front of the fire to sit next to her. He dug his hands into her shoulders.

"I told you you'd be sore," he said. "Especially after sleeping on that relic of a couch."

The massage was more painful than the ache, but she just gripped the bed frame. His hands rolled over the knots in her neck and shoulders. If she leaned back, her head would fit perfectly under his chin, he'd lean forward and his hair would mingle with hers...

She broke free and went to the fire. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She faced away from him. "In my entire life, I have only made love to one man." Her cheeks burned from the flames.

He came over and gently rubbed the back of her neck. "You're lucky," he said.

"Am I? If I'd had more experience I wouldn't feel so clumsy and stupid."

"Ah!"

She turned. "Ah! What!"

"And I thought it was me." He turned her so her back was to his chest and put his arms around her. "Do you mind me holding you?"

She shook her head, but remained stiff.

"Relax, relax," he whispered. He ran his hands up and down her arms, periodically grazing the outside of her breasts.

A log collapsed and burning ashes drifted out toward them.

Megan closed her eyes and leaned into him.

"I want to make love to you, Megan."

With her eyes closed, the room seemed to spin. She needed to stay close to him for support. He glided her around and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes. His white hair fell softly to his shoulders. In the firelight his cheeks were more angular but even in the darkened room his blue eyes kept their color.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," she said.

He shook her lightly. "You have to talk to me. You have to tell me you want me to stay."

She wanted her dream back, the heat and sweat, the cool hand against her hot skin.

She stepped back from him and pulled the sweatshirt over her head and shook out her hair then twisted it on top

of her head and secured it with a barrette. Without saying another word, Ben backed up to the bed and sat down, one knee bent across the spread, the other foot on the floor. She unbuttoned her blouse. Had he watched her do this before? He tucked a pillow behind his head and rested against the backboard. There was pleasure on his face. Not sexual, but the pleasure of watching a sunset, or the Northern Lights, or a bird's shadow against the night sky. She let the blouse and her jeans slide to the floor.

She walked to the bed. She took his hand and placed it on her stomach. He shifted toward her; the pillow dropped to the floor.

She held him tight to her body and stroked his hair.

"What do you want?" he said.

"I want..." she started to say. She closed her eyes. When she opened them he was looking up at her.

"It's easy. As easy as taking off your clothes. Say it. I want..."

"I want..."

He took the barrette and her hair fell to her shoulders.

"I want you to..."

"Touch me," he said.

"Touch me."

"Where?"

"Just touch me." She buried her face in his hair.

"Where?" he whispered.

"Everywhere," she said. "Everywhere."

Chapter 18

Megan pressed her forehead to her bedroom window. Her breath fogged two small circles on the pane. She wrote the initial 'M' in one circle and 'H' in the other. Soon it will be winter and this will be frost. She smeared the window clean with her hand.

Last Sunday when she'd mulched the garden, the weather had been cold enough to see her breath, but today the city was in the throes of a brutal Indian summer and despite the steady hum of the air conditioner and the whirl of the ceiling fan, a thin trickle of sweat trailed down her back.

The late afternoon sun disappeared over the house, and the maple leaves, fervid red minutes before, drained of color. Only a few asparagus stalks remained in the garden, but they had grown tall and wild, too leathery to eat.

Martin waited for her downstairs. He had been chairman of his department for five years and for five years, every fall, this second Sunday in October, they invited the faculty for an open house. Patty had been gone for over a month, but the excuse of the party had served as a further delay.

The doorbell rang again. Jazz from the stereo drifted out the living room windows up to the bedroom. Her fingertips picked up a slight vibration on the pane. She closed her eyes. The seven o'clock train. Traveling somewhere north.

"Megan," Martin called on his way upstairs.

"Hey," he said from the door, "I don't want to be down there any more than you do."

He looked like he had looked almost every day for the last twenty years standing in the shadow of the bedroom door - tall and thin and young, his black hair barely grey, his eyes a striking blue. They had agreed that he would leave, maybe in a week or so, however long it took to sort through everything. Would they keep inventing things to stay together?

"Then let's not go down," she said. "Let's crawl into bed and watch *Body Heat* or some other sexy movie. Let's drink a bottle of wine and get crazy drunk and fuck each other all over the bedroom."

She heard his intake of breath and its slow letting go.

"Is that what you really want to do?"

"No," she said. "But part of me wants to do that. I want us to be young and stupid and outrageously in love..."

He came toward her and in the uncharitable bedroom light he was older, sadder. "But we're not."

Megan turned back toward the window.

"I wonder how much longer this heat can last?"

Martin came and stood next to her. They looked into the yard. The sky had darkened and the window mirrored, throwing back their vague reflections.

"In December," he said, "you'll yearn for days like this."

She looked directly into his window eyes. "I doubt it."

*

Her smile was painted on, the air-conditioner couldn't keep up with the body heat, the ice cubes melted before she got them out of the kitchen, the graduate students had segregated themselves to the front patio and half the faculty was already holding onto bookshelves for balance.

"Unbelievable chicken, Megan," Paul Perkins said as he walked by. "It's so hot it's still walking."

Paul had left Ruth years ago for Anita. One day, after he'd read an article about the high incidence of suicide among toll booth operators, he decided he'd be friendly driving through, smiled at Anita and two weeks later Ruth was gone. "At least he saved a life," Megan had said.

She used to enjoy these parties, showing off her home. Sometimes it would take hours for her to unwind after, as if she'd absorbed all the excess energy in the room. But now the only energy radiated from the stereo and the ice cubes plunking into glasses.

Abbey Road played and everyone ate and talked and drank faster, their hands and bodies taken over by the rhythm and volume of the music.

The graduate students sat on the patio in the dark. She switched on the soft yellow lights. The two round tables were littered with empty beer bottles and the humid night air was saturated with beer and a sweet smell that

took her a moment to place.

"I guess you guys don't need anything after all," she said and smiled.

"We're fine," they said in unison.

Music wafted outside and washed away the staleness of the inside party.

"You can join us if you like, Mrs. Harris," Elizabeth Hardy said. She made room for Megan on the double swing.

They resumed their conversations. Inside someone turned the music louder and a few couples danced. Megan noticed that there were no insects buzzing around the outside lights; the early cold weather must have killed them off. Martin came in and out of her view.

Elizabeth leaned over and accepted a joint from the person on her other side. She took a long drag and the ash glowed and died to a perilous point. She passed it to Megan.

No one seemed to be taking special notice. She could pass it or take it. It had been years, but she inhaled deeply and held the burning smoke until her head pounded, then gradually let it go.

Martin danced into the frame of the windows with Gail Benson, the dean's wife. They laughed and jitterbugged and it hit Megan for the first time that soon Martin would be dancing with a lot of other women, or one other woman, probably younger and prettier. And then he disappeared. And she took another drag, passed the joint, cleansed her

lungs of breath.

*

The house was quiet and cool for the first time that day. Megan sat in the bedroom dark holding onto the rocker arms, dizzy from anger and fright, watching light seep out from under the bathroom door where Martin took his turn in the shower. The full moon blanketed the yard in creamy light.

The light switched off. Martin padded across the carpet and sat opposite her on the edge of the bed.

"Thank you," he said.

She stopped rocking.

"For what? For the party or the last twenty-two years?" She couldn't help herself. Perhaps it was the pot or the beer or both. The thin veneer of self-promised control evaporated.

"I'm sorry," he answered dully.

"You know, Marty," she resumed rocking, "You can take all your fucking sorries."

"Megan..."

"Come on, Marty. Maybe a good fight would do us good. Something to get us moving." She got up from the chair. She walked toward him.

"You're just tired from the party," he said backing away.

She came at him. "I'm not tired, I'm mad." She jabbed

him in the upper arm. "We had a contract, dammit." She jabbed him in the chest. "And somewhere along the way you broke it." She hit him harder. "And I let you do it." For a moment she thought he was going to explode, but instead he took a deep breath and stood his ground. She raged at his self-control and her fists went wild. He tried to grab her. "Cut it out." His towel slipped and she hit his arm again when he tried to retie it. He slapped her face. The towel dropped to the ground. She slapped him back, then picked up the towel and handed it to him.

"You're right. I'm tired." She went to the bed and took his pillow from under the spread and tossed it over to him. I can't continue on like this, in the same room, in the same bed. It's driving me crazy. The house is empty. Find another place until you're ready to go."



Chapter 19

She was surprised how quickly she adjusted to the strangeness of his body, his weight, his smell, the silkiness of his hair, but she limited her thoughts to the physical. She didn't want to depend on anyone. She might be cold when he left, but she wouldn't be lonely.

By unspoken mutual consent, they made no plans. If he came when Lenny or Louise were visiting he found some chore, a new heating element for the stove, a shelf that needed support, as an excuse for being there. The nights she slept alone she spread herself across the bed like a greedy child. When he stayed, she never slept so close that she was unable to slip away if she wanted. He'd kept the puppy she'd refused. She saw it once on the seat next to him when she'd run into him in town. He stroked it while he spoke to her, ran his finger across its velvet lip. But she didn't ask its name and he never brought it along when he came to her.

*

"I'm going to trim the evergreen today," Ben said sticking his head in the kitchen door. The overgrown branch had already worn a hole in the screen.

Lenny sat at the kitchen table studying science. His school principal had consented to pass him if he put in one extra school day's worth of work a week for ten weeks. That would make up for only ten days of twenty-four he'd missed, but the one on one tutoring would make up for the

difference. Megan had agreed to do it temporarily, hoping that Louise could make other arrangements by the time she left.

She enjoyed Lenny's company. It was almost as if he were her own child coming home from school every afternoon and doing homework in the kitchen while she prepared supper.

"You're going to miss that branch," Lenny said.

Megan put up a pot of coffee for Ben when he was finished.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you're used to it. You don't even know it's here and now you'll know it's missing."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Nine," he answered and reached for the pencil sharpener.

"Funny, I thought you were thirty."

Lenny giggled.

Ben walked by the kitchen window with a saw hoisted over his shoulder.

Lenny looked up from his homework at the same time she looked out the window. "Don't you mind not having a telephone?" he asked.

"If I had a phone, Lenny, you'd be able to call and tell me you couldn't make your lesson. This way you have no choice but to come."

"If you had a phone Ben could call and know I was here so he could just come in and visit."

"Listen, smart aleck. Ben knows you're here almost every afternoon. He comes by because he thinks I'm a poor helpless female."

"Bull shit!"

"I beg your pardon?" Megan said.

"Ben has a crush on you. Mommy said."

"Teenagers have crushes, young man. And children have homework. Get to it."

Megan sat down to look over the list of formulas he'd written down, but she was distracted by Lenny's pencil scratching on the notebook and the sawing from the yard.

The branch thudded to the ground. The saw stilled. Lenny stopped writing. Light from the setting sun beamed warmly across the kitchen table through the naked window and an overwhelming silence permeated the cabin. Lenny glanced at her with an 'I told you so,' and resumed his work.

The shed door slammed closed. A horn honked in front.

"That's your mom," Megan said and eagerly grabbed his jacket from its peg by the back door.

*

Megan turned down the flame on the coffee pot. Ben switched off the kitchen light and darkness took the cabin.

"If company comes, they'll think no one's home," she said.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"No one," she said. She jumped when he kissed the side of her neck.

He massaged her shoulders until she relaxed. He kissed her neck again. He moved his lips back and forth, a fraction of an inch from her skin until her neck hairs sprang erect and goosebumps covered her arms.

He turned her toward him. She reached for him, but he put her hands back by her side. "Stand still," he commanded. He kissed her eyes and her nose.

"The coffee..."

"Sh." He kissed her mouth lightly. "You don't like to talk, so don't talk." He turned off the stove. A cold draft slipped between them. He touched her breast, tracing concentric circles toward the nipple.

"We're not going to rush through this tonight. I want you to relax."

She moved away and rubbed her arms as if she were cold. "God, it's so quiet," she looked to the bare spot in the kitchen window.

He pulled her back. "Then enjoy the silence." He kissed her again.

It was far from the silence of her Minneapolis home where clocks and refrigerators became anonymous noise, where silence was solid and insidious and filled up every available space. This silence was an immense expanse to be filled with breath and throaty sound.

He led her into the living room, left her in the dark and returned with two glasses and the bottle of Southern Comfort. His hair gleamed in the dark.

"How did you find that?" she asked.

He filled the glasses.

"Doesn't everyone stash their whiskey under the stove?"

"Where I come from, they have liquor cabinets."

"Ah, but this isn't where you come from, is it?"

The whiskey was warm from the pilot light.

They each took a sip and he took her glass.

She'd had enough suspense. He resisted her first kiss. The second, his mouth weakened. The third, her tongue met his and she tasted the whiskey again.

"Slow down," he said as they stumbled to the couch, but then he murmured, "okay, okay." One hand eased under her sweater, the other traced the outline of her ear. He kissed her eyes, her neck, the damp spot under her breast. She moved her hips in a slow enticing circle until his kisses hardened on her body.

Ben was wrong. The only way to do this was fast and loose so her mind didn't click in and warn her about the softness of the couch pillows, of falling into a place that would be too difficult to get out of.

*

Ben nudged the hair away from her ear and whispered, "I have to go." He let his hand drift over the blanket down the length of her body as if his touch, not his words, should be the most important thing she remembered.

*

Megan stood on the porch and waited for the deer. The

coffee cup warmed her hands, the steam and her breath warmed her nose. The day was cloudless and bright, the snow glittered, its crust icy and crisp. There had been no flurries for almost a week and her immediate world sustained, if only temporarily, a constancy of rhythm.

She hadn't thought the rhythm would please her. For a long time after Martin left, she'd prayed for the crazy, erratic - anything to keep her from thinking, but now peace had settled among the stark gracefulness of leafless trees.

Except for the nights Martin surfaced and she mistook the scent of pine for sandalwood, she'd managed to suppress most thoughts of him. Although they'd arranged for him to come to the lake next week, she was not yet ready to deal with him.

And then there was Ben. She smiled. So different from Martin. Ben was a kite wafting through spring air; she could let out the string and let him glide away or roll him back as close as she wanted.

*

"How's your mom doing, Lenny?" Megan asked.

He scratched his head with his pencil. "She's all right," he said slowly.

"Hot chocolate?" Megan asked.

Lenny folded his hands across his book. "My dad called. He wants to come back."

Megan placed a mug of steaming cocoa in front of him and sat down. "Does it upset you very much, having your

father away?"

He chewed on his pencil and seemed to think for a moment.

"You're father doesn't stop being your father just because he doesn't live in your house."

"Were your kids upset when your husband left?"

"They're so much older than you, sweetheart. They don't live at home anymore. They have their own lives."

"Don't they ever come home?"

"Of course," she said. "I think that your cocoa is cold already."

Lenny frowned. "She doesn't want him back. She says she's happier without him. Are you happier?"

Megan stirred away the film from the top of his cocoa. "At first I wasn't. It's very hard being alone. But now I have you and all this snow and the deer in the morning. Yes. I'm happier."

A horn honked in the driveway.

"Your mom's early," she said.

Lenny went to the front door. "It's not my mom. That's not her car."

Megan followed him. The car door opened and Patty got out.

"Who's that?" Lenny asked.

"My daughter," Megan said. The car honked again. Rick rolled down the window and waved. "And my son."

"Isn't it funny," Lenny said, "that we were just

talking about them?"

"It certainly is," she said and hugged Lenny tight.

*

To control her surprise and pleasure, she mentally went over sleeping plans. Patty and Rick in the bedroom? Would Patty mind sleeping with her? Meanwhile the suitcases stayed lined up by the front door, their jackets on top.

Patty and Megan had not spoken more than a few polite words, but Rick filled up the silence with his exuberance. "Say, this place isn't so bad after all. I told you," he punched Patty lightly in the arm, "that you wouldn't need electric underwear." Patty gave him a long, dreadful look.

Megan had so little food in the house. Just some chicken, some eggs. "There's a cafe in town if you guys want to go somewhere and eat," Megan said.

"It was a horrible drive. Do you mind if we stay in?" Patty said.

Rick stretched out on the sofa. "Do you need any firewood chopped? Any walks shoveled?"

Patty walked around the cabin, touching everything. Her hair had grown to shoulder length and was amass with curls. With her fair complexion flushed with cold, she looked like one of the story book dolls, from Russia or Czechoslovakia.

"Have you taken up whittling?" she asked as she fondled the sculpted deer.

"I don't have one artistic bone in my body."

"You never did think so," Patty said blandly and continued to inspect everything.

"I'll see what's in the kitchen," Megan said.

"I'll help," Rick bounded off the couch. "I'm starving."

They left Patty to search through the room.

*

Megan prepared scrambled eggs, cream cheese and crackers. It was the lazy meal she'd always prepared when the children were small and Martin wasn't coming home for dinner.

"I tried to convince her to visit Paul Bunyan," Rick said, "but she insisted on coming here instead."

"Why didn't you let me know?" Megan set the table.

Rick took the forks from her. "Because we thought we'd catch you at something naughty," he whispered.

Megan turned to reach for the napkins before the blush reached her cheeks. Rick crept up behind her. "Are you upset?"

"That you came? No. Don't be silly."

He took the napkins from her and gave her a bearish hug. "Are you alright?" He lowered his eyes as if his question was too personal. "Here, I mean."

She kissed his cheek. It was still cold from the drive. "I'm fine. Better than I thought I'd be."

Patty pushed open the kitchen door and they jumped apart. She held Lenny's math book in her hands. "Have you

taken a job?"

"Why? Were you planning on supporting her?" Rick said.

"Dad supports her," Patty said and tossed the book on the sideboard.

Megan handed Patty the napkins. "I'm just doing a friend a favor," she said.

*

Over coffee, Megan asked about school.

"She's getting all A's, of course, and I'm muddling through," Rick said.

Patty poured two sugar packets into her cup. "How come you switched from Equal to sugar?"

"I like the taste."

"Kind of back to basics," Patty said. "Meshing with nature and all that."

"How long are you planning on staying?" Megan asked.

"Aren't you worried about gaining weight," Patty ignored her. "After all, you might want a new husband some day."

"Pat..." Rick said.

"I still have a husband." Megan said.

Rebuked, Patty stirred her coffee.

She had turned into a lovely young woman. Her china-white skin only looked more fragile framed by lush black curls. And Martin's blue eyes were startling on her. Megan was amazed that she had given birth to something so

beautiful, but saddened that this baby girl, nourished inside her, attuned to the beat of her heart, could be so heartless.

Patty took a sip of coffee.

"Have you even been in touch with Dad?" she asked.
"Don't you care about the house?"

Rick looked as if he were about to tell her to be quiet, but settled back in his chair, giving Megan a look that said, she came up here to say this, if not now, later.

"I saw your father before I left." She thought about telling her that Martin was coming up next week, but she decided it was none of Patty's business. "I'm sure the house is just fine."

"Well it's not."

"What's wrong with it?"

Rick leaned forward. "Nothing's wrong with it."

"Dad's back," Megan said.

"Alone," Rick said and sunk back into his chair.

Megan's heartbeat quickened. So they knew about Diane.
"I'm glad he's given up the apartment. It was getting to be too expensive."

"Don't you care about that girl?"

"Leave her alone, Pat. This seems to be more your problem than hers," Rick said.

Patty ignored Rick. She shoved the coffee cup away.
"No, you don't care about her or dad or us, do you? You have this quaint little cabin, a new little boy and for all

I know some hunk you fuck every night."

Megan slapped Patty's cheek. Her hand prickled from the sting. Rick sat up and put his arm between them. Patty's mouth rounded in amazement and tears stung the corners of her eyes. Calmly, Megan took the coffee mugs and put them in the sink.

She kept her back to Patty, giving her time to run or cry or throw something, but when Patty's response was perfect silence, Megan asked. "Patty, I came up here to get away from anger. Why did you come?"

Patty sniffled in the tears so she could speak. Megan had heard it a hundred times; her child holding back tears, trying to regain some semblance of pride.

"To be with you," she said softly.

Megan turned around. This black-haired woman was still the small child who had been turned down from a part she'd wanted in the school play, who had been unfairly treated by a friend. Rick held Patty's hand.

"Then let's forget about everything else and just do that. Let's just be together."

Patty had always been immovable until she cried. Megan knelt beside her. Rick's face held a sweet smile as Megan took Patty in her arms, brushed the hair from her forehead, wiped the tears from her eyes. "I love you," she said. "I will always love you."

*

The next day Megan and Patty went into town for

groceries leaving Rick to school work. Coming out of Peterson's they ran into Ben.

"Shopping?" he asked.

Megan fidgeted with the grocery bag. "This is my daughter, Patricia."

"Ben Walker." Ben extended his hand. Patty gave him her hand but withdrew it quickly.

"You forgot the cumin. I'll get it," she said and disappeared into the store.

"When's she leaving."

"Tomorrow. Maybe the day after." Megan shifted the bag from one hip to the other. "My son's here too."

"Full house. I don't suppose you want me to help you with that?"

"I'm fine, really."

"Great."

Megan started for her car.

"So this is recess. Isn't that what you teachers call it?"

Megan turned back. "She's my daughter."

"She's what, seventeen? Eighteen?" He took the package from her arms. "Hm. Lamb chops. You never made me lamb chops."

Megan grabbed the package. The visit was going well now, but Megan was eager to have her new life back.

"Just be patient. I'll make you something special."

"So you're not going back?" He leaned against his

truck.

"I didn't think it mattered."

"It matters," Ben said and tipped his hat as he walked toward his truck.

*

"Fresh tortillas would have been perfect," Rick said as he shoveled in mouthfuls of chili.

"Pig," Patty said.

"I said living up here was comfortable, but not perfect," Megan said.

"You seem to be managing fine." Patty now seemed almost eager to please.

"You know," Megan said as she stabbed at the salad with her fork, "I really am."

"What are you going to do about dad?" she asked. It was the first time since yesterday that Martin had been mentioned.

"Oh God, not again," Rick groaned.

"It's all right." Megan patted his hand. "I'd be lying if I told you I that I wasn't happy Diane is out of the picture. But that doesn't change anything between your dad and me." Would they understand this? Would they understand that no woman could be more of a threat than Martin's need for his art, a need that stretched beyond the boundaries of marriage or fatherhood.

"What if he finds someone else?" Patty asked.

"Oh, Patty. He's going to find someone."



"Are you coming back?" Rick asked.

She was surprised that he was the one to ask. "I don't know."

"We have to leave tomorrow. We promised dad..." Patty said.

"That's fine. Don't worry."

"He's going to ask about you. What should I tell him?" Patty asked.

Megan wondered if they knew that Martin had plans to visit her. "What do you want to tell him?"

"That you're fine...and beautiful," Rick said.

"That he's a jerk," Patty added.

Megan took Patty's hand.

"No. He's just himself. For a long time I thought he could be some other way, some fantasy of a husband I'd dreamed up, but that wasn't possible."

"I thought you didn't care about him," Patty said.

"I care. I cared for over twenty years. I guess I just got a little selfish and decided to care a little about me."

*

The children had been gone three days and Megan couldn't find a place for herself. She paced the rooms imagining the kids talking about her to Martin until her head thrummed. She bolted for the cool, crisp outdoors.

*

His house was red brick with lamp-lit windows and smoke

steaming from the chimney. Megan hesitated outside his door. He opened it before she knocked.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked.

"This isn't exactly mid-town Manhattan," he said. His hair was tied back and in his jeans and plaid shirt and shaded by the hall light, he looked mysterious, very Indian. "A tornado makes less noise coming up my path."

"Cut it out," Megan said.

"Do you want to come in or fuck in the snow?" He stepped back.

*

The rooms were sparsely furnished with Danish teak furniture. Two deer's heads framed the fireplace. Besides a stereo, the bookshelf was neatly stacked with books and the coffee table with magazines and small animal carvings.

She picked up a statue of a puppies nursing from their mother. "Did you make this?" she asked.

"Everyone up here carves something or other. A boy's first present is a Swiss Army knife," he answered non-committally.

"My husband is an artist," she said.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good for him," she said.

"Do you know you've never asked about me. Where I was born? Who my mother was? Where I went to college?"

Megan looked from the statues to his blue, blazing eyes.

"Oh. Surprised you. Didn't think I went to college?"

"Are we going to argue?"

He walked over, took the statue from her hands and replaced it. "No we're not going to argue."

"Then what are we going to do?" Megan untied the ribbon from his hair.

"How about mad-passionate-roll-on-the-floor-sex?"

"How about in a bed?" she replied. "How about making love?"

"Ah. Love." He took her in his arms. The puppy whined in the kitchen.

"Is he lonely?" she asked.

"A bit. But he needs to know his place. If I let him sleep with me, he'll be spoiled for the nights I'm away."

Megan nodded and started for the stairs.

*

She wanted his hand to stay just where it was. She wanted him to stop. She was lost in the rolling movement, in the waves, her breath, his breath, hard in her ears like swimming underwater. She reached overhead for the brass headboard. He leaned across and loosed her hands, interlocking his fingers in hers. "Hold onto me," he whispered.

"Where were you born?" she asked.

"In this bed," he answered securing her mouth.

"Who was your mother?" she asked when they stopped to catch their breath. Her body was slick from his kisses and

their sweat.

"Eva," he licked her nipple. "Eva Mapleleaf."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Where did you go to college?"

They were both quiet now, hands still entwined.

"Does it matter?" he asked, his hair tickling her neck.

"Nothing matters," she said and leaned forward to catch his lips.

*

"Was she Canadian?" Megan asked. She and Ben were wrapped in blankets holding mugs of hot tea laced with brandy.

"Who?"

"Your mother?"

"Canadian?"

"Mapleleaf."

He chuckled. "Funny."

Megan shrugged.

"So he's an artist."

"Who?"

"Martin. That's his name isn't it? Martin?"

She nodded.

"Does he paint, sculpt?"

Megan sipped her tea.

"I swear, the only time you talk is when we're making

love."

The word 'love' sounded good this time. She felt good. She unwrapped herself.

"Then make love to me and I'll tell you everything."

Chapter 20

Early mornings and evenings were cool. All the glorious fall colors drained and the brown and brittle leaves covered the grass and sidewalk. The faucet in the kitchen dripped, the door to Martin's closet was off the track, the hall lightbulb needed replacing.

Boxes were stacked by the front door. The apartment Martin had rented was furnished so they agreed to leave the furniture in place until they decided whether or not to sell the house. While they had not discussed divorce, only separation, they never mentioned coming back together. Things divided up so easily. They only argued over a few books and records. Martin had not been in his studio in over a month and refused to pack it. When Megan offered he snapped at her to just leave his things alone and told her it was still his house and he hadn't realized she hated him so much that she wanted to get rid of every last remnant of his presence.

When Martin was home, Megan buried herself in a cleaning frenzy. When he was gone she often just stared into space. She was poised by the living room window, her hair brushed into a pony tail, when he came up the front walk.

She returned to dusting the blinds when he entered the room. He'd had a haircut and been to the dry cleaner. He looked like a boy packing for college, or a young man

leaving his parent's house to get married. Perhaps she should be out buying him underwear and socks.

"The yard's a mess," she said.

"I'll rake the leaves this week."

"One of the neighbor boys will do it," Megan said.

"Then why tell me about it."

She shrugged.

"I'll take care of it."

"Fine," she said.

He started to leave the room.

"And don't forget the kitchen faucet," she said.

"Just make me a list. I'll do everything before I leave."

He laid the dry cleaning across the boxes and went upstairs. Megan watched his plastic covered suit and pants slide in slow motion off the box to a puddle on the floor.

*

She sat in his chair watching television. In the bedroom Martin walked back and forth between the dresser and the two suitcases on the bed. She watched a rerun of *Magnum* and every few minutes turned the sound louder.

Martin stood in the doorway. "Ellen's on the phone," he held out the portable phone.

Megan shook her head and Martin walked away.

She hadn't spoken to Ellen or Sara or the children in over a week. She hadn't left the house, afraid that he'd leave when she was away. This was irrational. She wanted

everything held in a freeze frame. She wanted him gone, but was petrified of his leaving. She had been determined and strong until the suitcases came down from the attic. Then the pain started in her arm. She had trouble seeing, concentrating. She willed time backward to those other times she'd screamed for him to leave, when he'd promised to change, when she'd believed him.

His chair was comfortable. She pressed the lever and reclined farther. She could even sleep here. Stay right in this spot forever.

*

The first thing she saw when she awoke was the clock - 2:00 A.M. The next was Martin, standing, silent at the edge of the bed, staring at her. Rick and Patty did that when they were young, when they were sick or just couldn't sleep, just stood and stared until she gradually became aware of them and floated up from sleep.

"Is something wrong?"

He continued to stand there.

She got out of bed and touched his shoulder. "Are you sick?"

When he turned, his eyes shimmered with tears.

She dropped her hand. She didn't have to deal with his emotions; she could barely manage her own. She reached for her robe.

His hands clutched her shoulders, gently kneading the taut muscles. They had not touched for several weeks and

his hands on her body gradually brought her back from a place she'd cowered into. He swept the hair away from her neck and kissed her. He slipped his hand under her nightgown down her back. "Oh, Meggie," he whispered.

Move away. Don't do this.

His hands moved slowly over her. He repeated her name over and over, "Megan, Megan, Megan, Megan."

She turned around comfortable in the familiarity of the dark bedroom, the exact placement of the rocker, the bed, the dresser, Martin's breath in her ear, his hand now on her breast, his mouth on her neck. This was what they needed. They held tightly to each other, rocking unsteadily in their sea of darkness, afraid of letting go.

They made love on the floor. As if they were both stoned. Lingering. Sentimental. Without urgency or passion. Like a blind person touching and retouching a face, etching it into memory.

*

Sometime during the night, she returned to bed. Martin pulled the blanket over her shoulders and kissed her cheek. In the morning she reached across the sheet for him, but he was gone.

She came downstairs, fuzzy from sleep. The boxes in the hall were gone.

Sunlight flooded through the open kitchen windows and broke the early morning chill. The back screen banged in the wind.

She didn't have to look to know his car wasn't there. Her heart thudded in her ears and her knees gave way and she grabbed the sink. When she looked outside, her eyes teared from the brightness and a slight buzzing in her ear made her reach again dizzily for support. She closed the window and groped toward a kitchen chair.

Breathe slowly. Concentrate on one thing at a time. Sit very still. Right here she was safe. Inside, in the house, where everything was familiar, she was safe.

Chapter 21

It poured all night but by early morning the temperature dropped again leaving a few scattered flurries and a thin skin of ice covering the clearing.

Megan awoke stiff and cold. The living room fire was long dead and she had forgotten to set a fire in the bedroom fireplace before falling asleep. She pulled the bed linen around her and made a dash for the bathroom where she turned the shower water on and shivered on the square of chenille rug until hot steam filled the room.

Dressed in jeans, blouse, sweater, sweatshirt and two pairs of socks, she turned the furnace to 85 degrees and started the living room fire. She turned the television on for a weather report, but the reception was poor. When her stomach rumbled, she went to the kitchen, cut an apple and some cheese and wandered back to the couch to towel-dry her hair. It had grown almost long enough to braid. She'd have to get it cut soon. A wiry white hair had come out in the brush, and for the first time she contemplated putting a rinse in it. She knew she should be doing something. Tutoring Lenny. Starting another book. Writing letters. But Martin's pending visit had set her in some sort of limbo.

There was a light knock.

"It's open," she called.

"It's me, Meg." Martin's voice at the open door, but she could barely make him out against the brightness of the day. She jumped from the couch.

"I didn't expect you," she said. "You were supposed to come tomorrow." She heard herself babbling. He stepped in and closed the door. He was taller than Ben, sweeter looking.

"I'm sorry, Meg. I thought you said Friday."

Had she? Bees buzzed in her head. "You're early," she stuttered. She stood by the couch. He stayed by the door.

"Early for Friday or early for Saturday." He smiled easily at her confusion.

"Either. Both." This wasn't how she had planned this. "You're not supposed to be here." She hadn't wanted him at the cabin. Some place neutral, she'd said. She'd made reservations in Brainard. At the White Heron.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep, so I left about 3:00 A.M. I stopped at the hotel and left my bags, but check-in isn't until noon."

She came around the couch toward him. "I can't do this now."

He shrugged. "I shouldn't have come out."

"Go back to the hotel. I'll be there soon. I promise," she said.

He shot a look over her shoulder; perhaps he thought someone else was in the cabin. Megan stood her ground. He

shrugged sheepishly. "It's okay. I'll get some breakfast. Maybe I can persuade them to let me check in early. I can do with some sleep." He leaned forward a bit as if to kiss her goodbye but pulled himself back. "Take your time. Just ring up to the room when you want me to come down."

From the window, Megan watched him leave. The room was boiling. Megan lowered the thermostat. So that was it. They hadn't seen each other for months and they stood talking as if he'd just come home from work and she'd asked him to please save her a trip and run back to the store for milk.

*

She pulled into the White Heron's parking lot, turned off the motor and angled the rear view mirror to catch a glimpse of herself. Her hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders, rich brown tinged with red from sunlight beating through the windshield. The grey barely showed. Her eyes were more green today, the fleck more gold.

Inside the lobby, she avoided the house phone and stopped to leaf through a magazine at a small kiosk.

"Can I help you?" A girl in her late teens wearing her boyfriend's letter sweater leaned over the counter. Megan could smell the sweet aroma of bubble gum on her breath.

"Just looking," she said.

"As long as you don't bend the covers," the girl said and smiled with a shrug that said they weren't her magazines anyway.

After a few minutes, Megan straightened the stack of magazines, took a deep breath and called Martin's room. "I'm downstairs," she said, and he offered to meet her in the restaurant.

She waited in the open door of what appeared to be more a lounge than a restaurant. The light from the lobby blurred the inside except for the red glow of cigarettes and the neon 'draft' sign above the bar. Tinny music floated out from the darkness. The calm she'd felt at the cabin disappeared. Her hands went clammy and a cold sweat trickled down her back. She'd call Martin and tell him this was a mistake. She'd come back to the city. They could talk there. She spun around into Martin's arms.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said and clasped her forearm as if he were afraid she would bolt.

The cuticles on his left hand were stained amber, a blue paint residue under one fingernail. When he tucked his hands into his jacket pockets, she realized she'd been staring at them.

He peered into the bar. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"This will be fine." She forced herself forward. The gentle pressure of Martin's hand on the small of her back burned through her coat to her skin.

It took a while to adjust to the darkness. Many of the tables they passed were occupied, men on a business lunch, several women escaping the dull routine of housework. She

followed him to a back table for two. A foil-wrapped plant of African Violets nestled against the wall and in the middle of the table, a citronella candle covered in red plastic netting gave off a faint pool of light. She wondered how the plant survived in this darkness.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked.

She shook her head.

The waitress appeared before the silence became uncomfortable, and Megan ordered a chef's salad, hoping the continuous movement of the fork to her mouth would overcome the pounding in her head.

He asked about the weather. He told her about his classes, a promising student. He drew patterns with his finger through the moisture on his water glass as he spoke. She folded and refolded her napkin.

"The kids looked great, didn't they? I suppose they told you everything you needed to know," he said.

"Marty, we have important things to discuss."

Martin straightened in his chair and cleared his throat. "I made a list - He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and smoothed it on the table - should we sell the house? what about the furniture? the kids' education? a divorce?" He shrugged almost mournfully. "I've never been good at lists." He stretched his hand across the table.

She took his hand and ran her finger over his paint stained nails. Perhaps they weren't ready for this now. "How's your work coming?"

"Better, finally," he said.

She tapped his hand thoughtfully before slipping her own back in her lap. "So, the separation has been good for you." She pinched a dead leaf from the African violet.

"Megan..."

She shook her head at him and continued, "A few months ago I would have gone crazy knowing you were painting again." She rubbed the leaf between her fingers. "I was so angry with you. I wasted so much time feeling that you deprived me of something I was entitled to and I'm sorry about that. The failing was mine, not yours."

Martin, patient while she spoke, broke in, "Can't we do something about it now?"

"I don't think so. I've changed. Especially now with the kids gone. I want more than you can give."

He seemed to swallow painfully. "You know that I love you."

"I know," she said.

*

They stood at the lobby door, neither able to make the decision to leave. Out on the highway, headlights darted into the night like fireflies while behind them the elevators chimed softly as they opened and closed and an old man in overalls plowed the vacuum back and forth across the carpet.

"I found the library books. They were two months overdue."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"And Sara called. She said she'd write and made me apologize for her nagging, but your replacement's leaving after Easter and she wants to know if you want your job back."

She'd have to go back to work. She knew that. But one month. "I'll call her," she said.

Night darkened and the window reflected them standing side by side. Martin, as if unsatisfied with the composition, slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close. He brushed her hair off her neck and kissed her.

"We didn't discuss divorce," he said.

Megan sighed. "No, we didn't."

"I still need you," he said.

Now was the time to tell him about Ben. Tell him she'd stopped needing him months ago. "No you don't, Marty. You may want me in some physical way, but you don't need me."

How many times had they tried to explain to the children the difference between want and need. How difficult had it been for them to understand that difference themselves. They had both desperately wanted their marriage to go on, but they were mistaken that it was a necessity.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I have to go. I'll come down in a few weeks and we can settle things."

It was drizzling when she stepped outside and the light rain refracted in rainbows around the street lamps. She'd expected that this meeting would give her some sort of

exhilaration. A release. But when she turned to wave
goodbye she was overcome by the painful fear that when she
returned to the city, when things were in the hands of
lawyers and accountants, they might forget the wonderful
parts of their lives, that they had been friends, that they
had been lovers.

Chapter 22

She wanted Ben. She waited for him at the cabin and when he didn't come she tacked a note to the door and headed for his house. His truck wasn't in the drive so she drove into Gull Lake.

"Hey, Megan," Louise called from across the street. She carried an armload of freshly folded laundry. "What are you doing in town?"

"Cabin fever," Megan said.

Louise tossed her red curls and balanced the laundry on her hip to reach for her keys. "It's just spring coming on."

Megan took Louise's keys and opened the trunk for her. Louise put the laundry down and started unloading baked goods.

"I have to pick up some groceries. Want to keep me company?"

"Sure. It's better than counting ceiling cracks. I'm down to an egg and a half stick of margarine anyway." Megan took some bakery boxes from Louise's arms.

Peterson's was busy. The bells jangled and snowflakes sprinkled in through the opened door, streams of light pooled across the polished floor. It was an unusual day - clear and dazzling - the snow appeared from nowhere.

Louise chatted non-stop down the vegetable aisle while Megan tossed cucumbers, lettuce, celery into her basket.

"How many people are you planning to feed?" Louise asked

and pointed to the bag of apples that Megan was rapidly over-filling. "Is there something particular on your mind?"

Before Megan had a chance to answer, Louise looked at her list and said, "Speaking of minds, I forgot milkbones. I promised Lenny I'd pick some up for Ben's dog."

"Why didn't you let Lenny keep him?" Megan asked.

"I'm crazy, but not that crazy. Besides, Lenny's going to care for him in a few weeks when Ben leaves and that's more than enough for me."

Ben was leaving? Megan turned quickly to conceal the surprise on her face and didn't notice the potato barrel until the wagon jabbed back into her stomach. Potatoes tumbled to the floor, and Megan bent down quickly to retrieve them.

"Are you okay?" Louise asked as she crouched down next to Megan.

"Is something the matter?" Alma called.

Megan gathered the potatoes in her lap. "Everything's fine, Alma. I'm just clumsy."

*

Louise persuaded Megan to stop at Sally's for fresh jelly donuts. The restaurant had a juke box, old-fashioned soda fountain stools and cake plates heaped high with donuts and sweet rolls under plexi-glass. In Minneapolis, Sally's would be teeming with teenagers but in Gull Lake, during the middle of the week, it was empty.

Louise cut her donut in half, licked out the jelly from both halves then dipped the rest of the donut in her coffee. She pushed the platter toward Megan who was still picking at the one on her plate.

"I don't see how you can eat these. You bake so much better," Megan said.

"Because it's a pleasure to eat something I didn't have to work at. Isn't that why people eat in restaurants? Isn't that why men prefer picking up girls on street corners?" Louise said.

"My mind's too numb for philosophy today," Megan said.

"It's not philosophy, it's common sense." She took a sip of coffee. "What's really bothering you?"

"Nothing," Megan said.

"It has something to do with Ben, doesn't it," Louise persisted. "He didn't tell you he was going away, did he? I should have kept my mouth shut." Louise said.

"We are not attached at the hip," Megan said.

"I'm sure he's planning to say something."

"Louise, relax. It's not important." Megan fidgeted on the stool. She didn't want it to be important.

"He goes every time this year," Louise continued. "There's a gallery in St. Paul that buys his work. He goes down, signs the pieces in person, smiles at the ladies. Everyone says he has the finest hands. Handles wood like it's clay. Wish I could afford one."

Megan's mouth went dry. "What are you talking about?"

"His sculptures. His animals. Ben's an artist."

"Ben's a fisherman," Megan said.

Louise sat erect on her stool, apparently offended that Megan didn't believe her. "Well, he's a fisherman who's an artist."

The nursing puppies from Ben's coffee table. They'd hadn't been merely 'whittled' as Ben had so casually tossed off. And she had passed it over so easily.

Megan wrapped the rest of the donut in her napkin and pushed it away. "I think I'll head back. Tell Lenny I'm expecting him tomorrow."

"You know, Megan, Lenny asks me every day if you're going to stay up here or go back to the city. He's worried that he'll fall behind again."

"I haven't decided." Megan slipped on her jacket.

Louise put a hand on her arm. "Does Ben play any part in your decision?"

Megan slipped on her gloves. "I can stay at the lake with or without Ben," she said stiffly.

Louise withdrew her hand and flushed to the color of her hair. "I guess this is my day for butting in. I'm sorry."

Louise had meant no harm. "It's okay." Megan patted Louise's hand and smiled. Louise smiled back. She was a child - like Patty - easily hurt, easily appeased; Megan would never be that young again.

*

The temperature had risen fifteen degrees and the icicles along the eave rhythmically dripped an icy crevice through the snow. The yellow-eyed owl that had greeted Megan's arrival at the cabin returned, scratched for a place along the roof.

Megan sat on the floor, her back to the couch. "When are you leaving?" Her voice, disembodied, drifted back to her in that wifey, whiny tone that grated the air like fingers on a chalk board. She cringed.

Ben was eased into the couch, a glass of whiskey balanced on his chest, his eyes closed. He let out a soft snort. Megan let her own breath go. She could take the question back - he was sleeping.

The fire snapped and a chip landed near her hand, burning in a red, x-ray glow.

"I'm not sure I am," he said quietly. He opened his eyes and that small movement caused the whiskey to lap up the sides of the glass. He reached down to caress the top of her hair.

"Why didn't you tell me you were an artist?" she asked.

Ben sat up. His elbows on his knees, he rolled the glass between his palms. "Does it matter?"

She took the glass from him and took a sip. "Yes. It does."

"So I was right not to tell you. You'd have stayed clear away from me." He reached for her hair again but she

shrugged him away. "Megan, there's no such thing as a generic artist." he said. He leaned back into the couch. "How did your meeting with Martin go?"

Megan stretched her feet toward the fire, leaned her head back against his leg. "All right." She played with the buttons on her sweater. "It was sad. I miss him."

"Miss him as in part of me is missing or miss him as in I'm missing the last check I wrote."

Megan didn't answer.

"Would you miss me?" he asked.

She got on her knees and inched between his legs. She took the glass and set it on the end table. "If I don't know all the parts of you, how will I know what to miss?"

He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. "It takes a fair amount of time to get to know a person," he said.

*

"Ouch," he said and rubbed his upper arm where Megan's teeth marks rose to a reddish swell. "You're plain crazy."

Megan pulled her hair back with one hand and raked her finger nails down his chest with the other. Then she leaned over and nipped his lip.

"You need to get out and run a mile or two." He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her over. Megan closed her eyes and imagined them rolling together down the hill at North Commons, ragweed clinging to her hair, bits of newly cut grass flecked across his cheeks. When she opened her

eyes, she was lying flat on her back and Ben was at the window.

"Why do you leave it opened?" he asked.

She propped herself on her elbow and tucked the blanket between her legs. "I don't know."

Without demanding further explanation, he slammed the window shut. The cold stream of air disappeared.

Chapter 23

"Been hibernating?" Alma asked. "I haven't seen you in days."

"Working up some lesson plans. I might go back to teaching at the end of the month," Megan said.

"You sure do a lot of writing," Alma said accepting the letters from Megan. She sifted through them and stopped when she came to one addressed to Martin.

Megan cleared her throat.

"Just checking for stamps," Alma said and peeled back a loose corner from the stamp, moistened it with a small sponge and smoothed it back in place.

The brass bells jangled. Lenny bounded in through the door, jacket unzipped, face shining as if it were the first day of spring. Ben's dog yipped after him.

"Hi, Megan," he said and hugged her around the waist.

"Lenny, you know that dog doesn't belong in the store," Alma said. She shoved Megan's letters into a canvas mail bag and came around the screen. "He's going to piddle all over the floor and someone's going to slip and sue the pants off me. What are you doing with that animal anyway?"

Lenny picked the puppy up and zipped it inside his jacket. "Ben's going fishing so he told me I could watch him," he said.

"Fishing?" Alma asked. "You tell Ben that it's time to grow up and stop taking chances. That ice has to be

slick as a bald man's pate. My husband always told me what's easy to drill through is easier to fall through." She turned to Megan with that 'maybe you talk sense into him' look. The ringing phone drew her toward the back of the store.

"Ben out for pleasure or business," Megan asked Lenny. Lenny shrugged his shoulders.

Alma trudged back. "You better get home this minute, Mister," she said to Lenny. "Your mama's awfully angry. The wood's half done, she said and the axe is out there rusting. Here, give that animal to Mrs. Harris. She'll take the dog back. Hurry before you get your hide tanned."

She grabbed the dog from Lenny's jacket and thrust it into Megan's arms. "Kids try and get away with murder," she mumbled, but a small smile played around her mouth.

"I suppose Ben's at Round Lake," Megan said.

The puppy had begun a thin whine and Megan jiggled it as she would a cranky infant.

"I suppose," Alma said and returned to sorting mail. Megan started to look through a rack of magazines.

"Are you going or aren't you?" Alma asked.

"Did Louise really call?"

Alma looked squinted at Megan over her reading glasses. "She called."

"Are you trying to play match maker or something?" Megan asked.

"I'm just trying to make sure that pup doesn't piddle on you or on the floor," she said.

"Then I guess I'd better be going," Megan said.

"Guess so." Alma lifted an envelope up for Megan to see, licked her finger and ostensibly remoistened another loose stamp.

Megan started toward the door.

"Megan," Alma called after her. "There are schools in Brainard."

Megan laughed. "You must spend your entire life arranging things."

"Keeps me out of trouble," Alma answered.

"Yes, but drops everyone else into it," Megan said.

*

The dog nuzzled into itself and fell asleep on the front seat. It had been weeks since the last snow and although the nights were still bitter cold, the sun burned high in the sky and the roads were slushy. Alma was probably right about the ice. It could be dangerous.

In the distance, a few yards from the turn-off to Round Lake, Megan noticed a car stopped on the side of the road. She slowed. Through the sun's glare on the windshield, she couldn't make out the couple standing next it, but there was an attitude about them that pleased her. They must have stopped to enjoy the day. The woman leaned against the car, one knee bent, her other leg supporting her weight. Her head moved back and forth with conversation. The man bent

toward the woman, one hand level with the woman's shoulder, pressed against the car, the other in his pocket. They looked like two teenagers against the brick schoolyard wall, she flirting subtly, he eagerly absorbing every word.

Megan continued slowly, hoping to turn onto the Round Lake road without disturbing them, but suddenly the puppy jumped from sleep and started barking, a high pitched puppy bark. The man turned toward her car. He dropped his arm, stood back.

"Quiet," Megan said to the dog.

The dog braced itself against the passenger door, its tiny paws scraped the glass, its barking breath fogged the window.

The blinker arrow clicked and flashed, off-beat from each other. As she started to turn the sun disappeared behind the shade of a tall evergreen and Megan caught a glimpse of white-blond hair, a slash of red lip, the comfortable crease of brown suede jacket. Ellen. With Ben!

The dog dashed back and forth between Megan and the window.

"Please," she whispered to it.

The car glided into its turn. Ben's shadow jogging along side the car brought the barking to a whimper. He knocked on the window.

"Megan, for Pete's sake. Stop the car," he said.

She crushed the brake pedal to the floor. The puppy squealed. She rolled down the window.

"Lenny had to go home," Megan said in a rush. "Alma asked me bring back the dog and to tell you how ridiculous it was for you to go fishing this time of year. But you're not fishing are you?"

He petted the dog to silence. "Not at this very moment, I'm not. Actually, I'm giving a friend of yours directions."

Ellen came up beside him. "Hi sweetie," she said and leaned in the window. She brushed the hair from her face. "The sun was so bright I wasn't sure it was you."

The left-turn signal continued to tick. The puppy licked Ben's hand.

"Why did you need directions?" Megan asked. She turned the signal off; her heart beat louder in her ears.

"Oh, there's a small cottage back in here that sells fresh honey and pot pourri. I left the city in such a hurry that I didn't have time to bring you something. I spotted Ben - you've met Ben haven't you? - driving up here and honked him off the road." She reached into the car and touched Megan's arm. "How are you?"

"Fine," Megan said. Of course, Ellen would know Ben. She'd come to the cabin for years, but Ben had never mentioned her and for some reason Megan neglected to ask him about Ellen. Megan got out of the car. Ellen smiled at her across the top.

"Tell me you're not angry, please. I wanted to surprise you"

The puppy squealed with delight when Ben picked him up.

"Don't be silly." Megan felt foolish standing so stiffly with the car between them.

Ben came around to Megan and spoke softly in her ear. "Thanks for the warning about the ice, but I checked it out. Don't let the sun deceive you. Things will be frozen for a while yet."

Why had she insinuated something more between Ben and Ellen than an accidental meeting?

"Well, this fool's going to catch some dinner," he said to the two of them. "I'm sure you two have plenty to talk about." Ben draped the pup over his shoulder and walked back to his truck.

"Interesting man," Ellen said.

"Yes, he is," Megan responded.

Ellen bounded around the car. "Holy shit! I've missed you," she said and pulled Megan into her arms. Megan smelled Chanel and leather - city smells.

Ellen released Megan to arm's length, ruffled her hair and grabbed her again. "Do they have a pizza parlor yet in this ghost town?" she asked. She bumped Megan with her hip.

"Hardly," Megan said.

"Then let's go back to the cabin, raid the refridge and get blissfully drunk. How's that sound?"

"Sounds fine," Megan said. But it wasn't fine. She wasn't ready for Ellen. For the inevitable discussions

about her future. She didn't want to talk about Martin. She didn't want to have to deal with anything that reminded her of her 'other' life. And she didn't want Ellen intruding into the little world she'd carved out for herself up here.

Ellen pulled up in front of Megan's car and honked the horn. Megan took a deep breath. It was a cloudless day. The sky endless, the air fresh and crisp, but she couldn't elude the creeping claustrophobia.

Chapter 24

Ellen walked into the cabin ahead of Megan and tossed her jacket on the couch. "The place looks great." She walked around the room. "Television?"

"Ben brought it," Megan said. "He thought I could use some company."

"Do you like him?" Ellen asked. She turned on the television, switched a channel, shut it off.

"I like everyone I've met up here." Megan fought the urge to throw the windows open.

"You never really get to know anyone in the summer. Everything's so transient. I guess winters are different."

"They're cold," Megan said.

"I bet," Ellen said and came across the room. "I missed you." She hugged Megan close. The smell of familiar perfume, the tickle of Ellen's hair on her cheek. Guilt surfaced momentarily. While Megan wrote regularly, she rarely thought about Ellen once Alma slipped the letter into her canvas sack.

"So," Ellen said, "by the looks of you, sending you up here was a great idea."

Megan inched away. "You didn't send me, El."

Ellen started to say something, but must have thought the better of it.

"How about some coffee?" Megan asked.

"Great, I left so early, I didn't have time for breakfast. You look wonderful, Meggie. You really do."

*

Megan stood on the back porch and waited for the coffee to perk. Clouds hung low and weighty in the sky. Ben was right. It wasn't quite spring yet. She didn't turn when the door opened and closed behind her.

"Everything looks so different in winter," Ellen said. A tinge of her warm breath touched Megan's ear.

Ellen, wearing only a thin sweater, wrapped her arms around herself, her teeth chattered.

"Put something on," Megan said.

"I'm fine." Clouds of frosty breath billowed in front of Ellen's face.

Megan looked across the expanse of empty yard covered in crisp, white snow, untouched by footprints or rock salt or car's exhaust.

"You can't see this from my apartment," Ellen said.

Ellen's apartment overlooked the thruway, but Megan had always thought there was a certain architectural beauty to the rise and turn of highway overlapping highway, especially at night when the car's tail lights filled the night like a string of rubies.

"How come you never come up here this time of year?"

Ellen ran her hand through her hair. She shivered. "I never thought about it."

Megan turned to face her. "Weren't you afraid being here would remind me of the summers with Martin?"

"I just thought you needed to get away." Ellen blew into her hands. She walked a few feet away and then back. She seemed to weigh her words, "You're upset I came."

"I don't have any right to be upset, El. This is your cabin."

"Megan, please..."

"Why didn't you call?"

"How? You didn't connect the god-damned phone," Ellen said.

"You could have written. You wrote about every other inane piece of gossip - Sam took Evie to Madison for the game, Sara's having an affair with the assistant principal - by the way, Megan, I'm coming to the lake." The words steamed from Megan's mouth.

Ellen's voice was conciliatory. "You're right. But I missed you and I was worried about you. I can turn around and go home."

This was her best friend. She had no reason to be angry. "You shouldn't have worried."

"I can see that now. Can we go in?" Ellen linked her arm through Megan's. "I'm freezing. I don't know how you stand it."

"I guess it's what you get used to," Megan said.

*

Ellen brought two steaming cups into the living room, wrapped herself in a blanket and settled on the couch. The glowing ash from the fire sizzled. Megan sat across from Ellen, leaned back and closed her eyes. It was so quiet. No owls or wind or scraping branches. Lenny had missed his lesson today. Why hadn't Ben come by?

"Ellen..." Megan was going to ask her what she knew about Ben but Ellen got up and said, "I have to get out of these things." She picked her overnight from the side of the couch and walked down the hall to the bedroom.

Megan went to the window, cleared the fog and peered into the clearing. Faint wisps of air oozed in around the window frame.

Megan walked to the bedroom. Ellen was standing in front of the fireplace brushing her hair.

"I'll light a fire in here tonight," Megan said.

"Fine," Ellen said. She took a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans out of the suitcase and walked over to the dresser.

Megan sat down on the bed and smoothed the wrinkles from Ellen's shirt. "Some of your things are in the bottom drawer," she said.

Ellen opened the drawer and pulled out a cable knit sweater. "I wondered where this went."

Megan took a deep breath. "You didn't even notice that I moved the dresser. That I found the fireplace."

"I guess it didn't matter." She sat down on the bed. "What's up? You've been digging at me since I walked in the door."

Megan ignored her. "Actually, I didn't find the fireplace. Ben did." Megan said.

Ellen got off the bed and walked to the dresser. She leaned against it, one knee bent, her arms crossed across her chest. "Do you want to talk about Ben?"

A queasy feeling settled in her stomach. Ellen and Ben this morning. The way they stood against the car. More than casual acquaintances. "Yes, I want to talk about Ben."

"Can we do this over some wine?"

Megan followed her into the living room. "Why do you need wine for a simple conversation?"

Ellen searched through a drawer for a corkscrew.

"What did you do, El. Call him on the phone. Tell him to watch out for a white Toyota. That'll be my friend Megan, poor thing. She's been through some rough times. You can count on her to be so befuddled she'll never ask why you're taking an interest. Take care of her. Make her forget her husband. And Ben, don't mention you're an artist. I don't want to upset her more."

Ellen walked toward her. "Okay, so I called. I just thought it would be good for you."

Megan held up her hand to keep her away.

Ellen stopped. "I never told Ben to keep it a secret that we knew each other or that he was artist. I was just

trying to be a friend. You hid yourself away in that house for months and then you hightailed it up here. I was worried about you."

Megan paced in front of the bookshelf. "Why didn't I see it? He knew this place so well. The bedroom fireplace. The liquor underneath the stove. I feel so stupid..." She stopped in front of the bookshelf, picked up the carved deer and ran her finger across its back. She held it out toward Ellen, but Ellen looked away.

"Animal sculptures aren't exactly your style," Megan said. "Did you know that Ben does the same kind of work?"

"What do you want me to say? That Ben gave me the deer?" She leaned against the couch. "Fine, he gave it to me."

Megan put the deer on the shelf and turned slowly back to Ellen. "You slept with him didn't you?"

"Have you kept a record all these years of who I slept with? What difference does it make?"

"Because I've been sleeping with him, god dammit!"

Ellen started toward Megan but stepped back. She turned the corkscrew around and around in her hands.

"Megan, this isn't important, really."

"When? Last summer? Last week?"

Ellen shook her head.

"When's the last time?" Megan's voice scratched along her throat.

"Two years ago."

"Did you love him?"

"No!"

"What if I'd fallen in love with him?"

"And so what if you did? Are you so prissy and pure that you'd never fall in love with someone whose slept with someone else."

"Not my best friend," Megan said.

"He wasn't my lover. It was for fun. We were just friends. You're carrying this too far, Megan."

"You should have told me."

"Sure. I want you to contact a friend of mine. So I slept with him a few times. Doesn't matter. I'm a good sharer."

"Well, I'm not."

"No, I guess you're not," Ellen said.

Snow poured from the sky, lush and heavy, in thick diagonal sheets, turning the dark to light. The words hung in the room. Why had she let this tear at her all afternoon when she had known the moment she'd seen the two of them by the car?

Ellen started to laugh.

"There's nothing funny about it," Megan said.

Ellen tried to cover her mouth.

"I'm serious," Megan said.

"Listen to us. We sound like we walked out of a soap opera," Ellen said.

Megan didn't want to let go of her anger, but it was working loose inside her. There was something funny about this, like kids fighting viciously over a toy that was forgotten minutes afterward.

Ellen slumped backward onto the couch and pulled the blanket over her head, rolling now with laughter. Megan pulled the blanket away.

"What is it?"

Ellen gasped out the words. "I guess this is the most intimate thing we've ever shared," she said.

"I'm pissed, El. Don't think for one lousy minute that I'm not." Laughter bubbled at the edge of her voice.

"I know," Ellen gulped. "And I'm sorry. I really am. I just can't help it." Ellen calmed herself. "Isn't it better this way? Imagine if he'd found you on his own. And you slept with him. And later found out that he and I had a relationship. You'd have felt horrible. You wouldn't have been able to live with yourself." She started to laugh again. "Look what I saved you from."

Megan came close to Ellen. Ellen's laughter faded. Megan touched the bottom of Ellen's hair. "It's so even. Not one strand longer than the next. I've always admired that about you."

"There's a lot I admire about you, Megan." Ellen took Megan's hand. "Did you fall in love with him?"

"I don't think so. I don't know."

"It wouldn't be the worst thing if you did." Ellen kissed Megan lightly on the forehead. "If you don't mind, I think I'll head back tonight. I'd be afraid that you'll get mad again and strangle me in my sleep. Besides, you have to have this out with Ben. The sooner the better and I don't think I should be here."

"Why don't you just call him and tell him. You're so good at that."

Ellen held up her hands. "I've done enough meddling. Besides, this is something you need to straighten out in your mind. He didn't sleep with you because I asked him. You did this thing together. Now stay in it or get out of it together."

She didn't dissuade Ellen from leaving. After the front door closed, she shut her eyes, leaned against the window and waited for the car's engine to fade. She turned off the lights and walked around the darkened house before she crawled between the cold bedroom sheets.

Chapter 25

"Baking a cake?" Alma asked as Megan unloaded flour, cocoa and eggs onto the counter.

"Brownies. Louise is in Winnipeg and I'm having sugar withdrawal." Megan replied.

Alma took a pencil from her wiry curls and made a quick note on a paper bag. "I hear everything's settled with Lenny's school. You've been a good friend, Megan," She squinted toward the front of the store. "Another week and the tulips will be sprouting. I guess you'll be going home soon."

"I don't know. Why?" After Ellen had left Megan had pulled her suitcase from the closet. It still lay empty on the bed.

"You seem like the planting type and the joy in planting is being around to see things blossom." Alma smiled and seemed to lose herself for a moment in her own words. "Oh, before I forget. Randall fixed the sight on that old rifle you found." She reached under the counter for it. "What do you need this for anyway?"

"I promised Lenny I'd learn to shoot the damn thing."

"Just make sure you don't hit anything you might have use for later on," Alma said.

"Don't worry. I'm a terrible a shot," Megan laughed.

*

Megan sat on the porch while the brownies cooled. She liked the feel of the adirondak chair. It was heavy, rooted, unlike the flimsy lawn furniture back home. She tucked the rifle under her arm, accustoming herself to its weight. She had no idea that a weapon gave such a feeling of control. With this gun she could be defender of the house, provider of food, preserver of honor. Those frontier women had given their daughters the wrong tools: instead of needles and thread and aprons and spatulas, they should have given them guns, and bigger ones than their husband's.

Megan leaned forward and sighted down the muzzle into the woods. An evergreen branch, heavy with pine cones, magnified into view.

"Are you ever going to learn to shoot that thing?" Lenny asked. He scrambled up the steps and sat next to her.

"When you're ready to teach me." She handed the rifle and the box of shells to Lenny.

He held the rifle between his legs and loaded it. "Mama said you're going to leave soon."

"This isn't my cabin, Lenny. You can't stay forever in a place that's not yours."

"Can't you pay rent or something?"

"I could, but I need a house of my own."

"Will you buy one up here?" The shells clicked into place.

"Maybe. But if not, I can come up in the summer and visit."

"I work in the summer."

"Will you be too busy to spend time with me?"

He smiled. "Of course not." He jumped up. "Got any empty cans?"

*

Lenny set up a row of cans and drew a line in the snow about a yard from the porch. "Stand behind that line," he said.

The cans reflected the sunlight. Megan's eyes teared just looking at them.

"Make sure the safety's off," he said.

"How many times have you done this?"

"A lot, with my dad," he said.

She pulled hard on the trigger, but it wouldn't give. Damn rusty old gun. She realigned her feet, tucked the barrel tight under her arm and squeezed as hard as she could. She heard the shot before she felt it and the next thing she knew she was flat on her bottom, the rifle several feet away.

Lenny rocked with laughter.

"Jesus," she said. "I could have killed something." She got up and dusted the snow from her jeans.

"If there was anything out there, you scared it plumb away by now," he said.

Megan reached for the gun. She was surprised at how bruised her shoulder felt. She shot again. This time she

stayed on her feet, but her whole body shifted with the backlash.

"Aren't the cans supposed to be on a table?" she asked.

"We don't have a table. Come on. Dig those feet in. Aim for the Olympics." Lenny cheered from the porch.

She let out another shot. A puff of snow burst into the air.

"You hit one," Lenny whooped and bounded down the steps into the clearing.

Megan shaded her eyes. One can lay on its side. But she hadn't heard that 'ping' she was certain she'd hear.

Lenny trudged back, the empty can of corn in his hands. "Must have been an ice-chip," he said and showed her the undamaged label.

"I don't think I'm too good at this." She put her arm around him and they walked back to the porch. They sat side by side, the rifle behind them.

"Do you think the deer will come back after all that noise?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm sorry we didn't think about that."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"About what?" A cardinal flew out of the woods and settled on one of the cans and pecked ravenously at some vegetable remnants.

"About learning to shoot that dumb gun. I don't think you should go home unless you've hit at least one can."

"Well that alone might keep me here forever," she said and ruffled his hair.

*

Ben got out of the pickup, walked to the porch and sat down on the top step, his back to her. "Been sitting out here long?"

"Not long," Megan said.

She leaned back and looked into the cloudless sky. There had been a few minutes after Ellen left, before she fell asleep and this morning in the shower, when she'd planned this conversation, but now all the words drifted away.

He was quiet for a minute, then he stood up. "How about a walk?"

"I could do with a little exercise," she said.

They walked through the clearing and into the woods. The snow was thawing and dead branches and pine cones crunched beneath their feet. Birds fluttered from tree to tree, pecking at new buds, testing their weight on the more delicate branches. The air was filled with a melting rush. It was almost as if the earth were at a slant and all the ice dripping from the trees, cutting through old snow, skimming in thin rivulets along the ground still too frozen to absorb it gravitated toward the lake. And Megan and Ben along with it.

By the time they reached the lake, their jackets were unzipped and they were both out of breath.

Megan laughed. "We're getting old."

"Not old, just a bit tired," Ben said. "Are we going to be able to make it back?"

"I have no doubt," she said. The sun was beginning to set and it glowed a neon orange around the rims of the clouds. "It's so beautiful," Megan said. She walked over mounds of slushy snow toward the edge of the lake. The sun refracted now in streamers of light around the clouds and seemed to bend as it hit the horizon and stretch across the lake toward her. "I wonder what it must be like to have an artist's eyes. To never see a simple rock or bit of ice, to have the power to take this sunset and transform it." She reached down for a handful of snow. "It must be like being high all the time. Everything magnified. Doesn't it hurt to see like that?"

"Are you trying to understand Martin or me?" Ben asked.

"Both," she said.

Ben folded her hand over the snow and pressed hard.

"Now open your hand," he said.

When she did, a small round snow ball rested in her palm.

"Everyone has the power to change things. You should know that." He took the snow ball from her hand and skimmed it across the lake. He took her hand between his to warm it. "I see the same things you see. The sun setting. The cardinal flashing between the trees. The lake turning from

grey to silver. The rainbow scales on a perch. It's what happens when I blink my eye that makes me what I am - what happens to the red of that bird when it's caught between that instant of darkness and my imagination."

He took her hand in his and tucked it in his pocket. "But with my eyes closed or open I'm just a man. With responsibilities and failings."

A flock of birds swept across the lake.

She eased her hand out of his pocket. "You should have told me about Ellen," she said finally. "I'm not all that fragile. We might even have laughed about it."

"Fragile? You're one tough lady. That's what I liked about you from the first. I like things solid, hard woods, things that hold up under my hands."

Megan smiled.

"From that first moment I saw you - on this lake - feisty..."

"Crazy," Megan said.

"Never crazy. Angry." He bent down and sifted some snow through his hands. "Megan, I didn't come by this morning because I wanted you to sort things through. You see, Ellen called days after I'd found you at the lake and by then..." He stood up and leaned over her, barely touching her lips with his. His lips were warm. He kissed her again. "I'm not Martin. Don't be afraid of me," he whispered.

"I'm not afraid of you." She stroked his cheek. "I'm afraid of me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go back home. Finalize things. I have a job waiting."

The sun rested on the horizon burning the lake until it glowed. An aching sound filled the air and the lake shifted before her eyes, the ground shuddered slightly and then the water seemed to swell up so that the ice floated like old cream on coffee before it fell back into place, shattering.

"Will you come back?"

"I don't know," Megan said.

"Well, I'll be down in the city in a few weeks," he said. "Do you think you'll be difficult to get in touch with?"

"I have to find a place, get settled," she said.

Ben kissed her cheek. "Sun's almost down. I guess we should start back."

"In a minute." Megan faced the lake and closed her eyes. The last rays of sun were strong and warm on her face.