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Little Town Blues

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Little Town Blues

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Jeannette Brown

B.S. Texas A&M University - Commerce, 1970
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Prologue

Ellen crossed the flagstone patio stepping carefully. Except for the opening to the triple garage, the back of the estate was shielded from the alleyway by a wall of shrubbery. A set of wooden french doors broke the facade of the mansion's back wall. She bent down to lift one end of the stiff, brown doormat, sending shockwaves of dust shimmering into the evening light and uncovering a colony of doodlebugs. She closed her eyes and fanned the air in front of her face. A spider scurried away.

Last December, a woman dressed as a character out of Dickens had greeted Ellen at the front door, ushering her and others holding five-dollar tickets into the holiday-decorated house, gesturing toward hot chocolate and churros in the open kitchen/dining area. While the mostly female crowd marveled at the huge chandelier and a 16-foot Christmas tree, and speculated about the owners' absence, Ellen lingered alone in a room full of books, a private library.

But in the summer, Ellen returned to the estate to regain the silence and solace she had originally felt in the library. Furtive looks over her shoulder revealed no movement, no watching eyes, just the wrought-iron patio furniture sans cushions and the pale stone back wall. No hiding places for a key. A small window allowed Ellen to peer into the kitchen, so clean and uncluttered, it could be an appliance showroom. She ran her hand along the windowsill, feeling nothing but grime. Where would she hide a key if not under the flowerpot or under the mat? She'd hide it over. Over the window, no, over the door, yes. Then it was in her hand, grubby from the spider webs and the Texas dust but still golden in the evening light. Eureka.

Chapter 1

As she did every Saturday morning at The Talk of the Town hair salon, Ellen Monroe shellacked Mrs. Dunlap's bouffant helmet so it would last an entire week and loudly chatted with the semi-deaf Mrs. Miller who was in the shop to get her every-other-week roots job. Mrs. Miller favored a bright red hue, the new blue for elderly ladies.

This week's gossip was not especially salacious. Barbra McKinsey was in the hospital with either a brain tumor or brain cancer. Edith Walsh filed for divorce, but since she hadn't seen her husband in more than seven years, that was hardly earth shattering. "What we need is a good, old-fashioned scandal," said Mary Jo, beautician and owner of The Talk salon.

Ellen spent most of the day distracted, dispirited by the dullness of what should have been an enjoyable finalé to a week of hard work. Between clients, she thumbed through *People* and *Star* and *US*, but the gossip about "Brangelina" didn't hold her attention. Withdrawal from her secret life was as burdensome as its danger had been, but the mention of a scandal reinforced her decision to quit her risky behavior.

The Talk of the Town beauty shop was located in the center of Limestone, close enough for Ellen to walk to work. But she would have been caked with sweat and dust before she got there and it was too close to drive to without feeling ridiculous, so she had bought a Vespa. Her husband, Billy, and his friends made fun of her "mosquito," her "midget motorcycle," and accused her of seeing too many foreign movies. But she was proud that she had tracked it down in

Houston, via her friend, Yolanda, and the Internet. It was not plastic like the new ones, but metal, painted baby blue. And she didn't have to look at anyone's back when she rode.

The salon faced north, its storefront windows allowing daylight to augment the sconces between three full-length mirrors. Antique cabinets and boxy, swivel chairs delineated three styling stations, although the owner, Mary Jo, and Ellen were the only hairdressers. A ceiling fan tried to keep the air circulating, but as the summer's heat rose, the air turned sluggish. In the 1960s, the salon had been painted purple, but sunlight had faded the exposed walls to an almost tasteful shade of mauve. An unused manicure table sat against the front window, allowing the sun to solidify the leftover polish.

Saturday, after work, Ellen squandered some of her tub time by having a smoke on her front porch petting Max, the neighbor cat. The heat from the aluminum lawn chair seared through her clothing, but it did not distract her. She was thinking about real estate prices in Limestone — population 5,000 give or take a few births and deaths. A quaint village in the Texas Hill Country, the town clung to its German origins by celebrating Wursthfest and serving potato pancakes in its restaurants and piping polka music into its quilt shops and craft boutiques. Tourists came year-round to pretend they were in a foreign land and to purchase knick-knacks from the "old country." More than one visitor, smitten with the town's ambiance, bought property for a vacation home, inflating both property values and taxes. Today, Mary Jo's client, a real estate agent, had ticked off addresses and prices of property for sale. One tiny, dingy, ratty house a block over was listed for \$150,000. Chickens would be offended to live in it.

Ellen tried to convince herself that her rental house was not so bad. If it were in L.A., it might be described as a bungalow, though she wasn't sure exactly what that was. The front door

opened into an entryway, which led into the bath. To the right were the living room and kitchen; on the left two bedrooms. The back bedroom could have been a nursery; now it held Ellen's bookshelf filled with college textbooks and second-hand novels, and a rocking chair, along with an ancient PC she used for emails and reading the *Journeywoman* newsletter to get tips on packing for Tibet and Morocco and other destinations she might never visit. There was no dining room, but the kitchen was big enough for a table and chairs. The rent was about right for the level of material and workmanship, which was low-slung and shabby, but the landlord threatened to seriously jump the rent if he installed central heat and air. Ellen had not so much decorated as accumulated things from garage sales, Pier One, and benefits for the fire department. The house was comfortable in a brown-and-yellow cushiony way, with gardenia-scented candles and sandalwood incense.

Ellen's cigarette was almost burned to the filter when she saw that Billy had fixed the step. Sweet William. She would have to remember to thank him. He had picked up last night's Lone Star cans from beneath the oak tree and, judging from a colorful stack of cardboard carriers, had iced down the cooler with beer and Cokes for tonight.

Ellen went inside to boil water for potatoes. She hoped Yolanda would arrive early. It had been a while since they had talked, and she was worried about her best friend whose marriage constantly teetered on the edge of collapse. Yolanda was a saint for staying with her maniac of a husband for the sake of their two kids. Ellen turned on the ceiling fan to stir the hot air and steam from the boiling water. *Should have started those before the smoke.* She cut onions, sliced hard-boiled eggs, and set out the mustard and relish for potato salad.

The roar of Billy's motorcycle signaled his arrival. Outside, charcoal was dumped into the grill. Billy had very specific standards concerning the temperature and the timing of the meat, and

the secret ingredients for his BBQ sauce. She smiled and opened the screen door to let him in.

“Nice work on those front steps.”

He took a bow from the waist, a challenge because of his belly. He was wearing clean, blue coveralls with the sleeves ripped out for better ventilation. His brown hair was damp with sweat and he was employing his personal styling technique: running his fingers through a section of hair and giving it a wiggle. She used to tease him about ruining her professional reputation, but the joke grew tiresome. At least he submitted to her haircuts.

She knew it wasn't a good time for a serious discussion, but she was bursting with a marvelous idea. She had the atlas open on the kitchen table to Texas, which was chopped into several sections and spread across a double page. "Let's go to Taos."

Billy looked as if she had suggested Mars. "That's in Arizona? Or Utah?" He smiled as if he were kidding her.

She pulled him toward the maps. "See, Sweets, it's about a twelve hour drive from here." Ellen pointed across the map in a northwest direction from Limestone to the edge of Texas. She flipped the book over to New Mexico and continued the line. "You'll love it. Taos." The word rolled off her tongue. Taos. "There's a Pueblo Indian village, and lots of art and artists, and D.H. Lawrence's house. His wife had his ashes mixed with cement and put into a monument there. And Kit Carson lived around Taos. He has a museum there."

Billy cocked his head.

"The frontiersman. Fur trader. Some kind of scout, I think. Ring a bell?" Ellen was sure Kit would cinch the deal for her. She wanted to start this conversation slowly, letting the idea take hold in Billy's brain, trying not to give away her excitement. She could not let him see how important this trip was to her.

She had read about Taos, "an artists' colony," in a travel magazine someone left at the salon. The confluence of Indian, Mexican, and Anglo cultures would be fascinating, a great smash-up of art and mythology. She put both fists to her mouth to staunch her excitement.

Billy sat at the table and peered at the map. "What else have you got?"

He had taken the bait, but she still had to set the hook. "Well, just south of Taos is Santa Fe. It has a historic Palace of the Governors where local Indians sit out on the sidewalk sell their arts and crafts."

Billy stared into space.

She was desperate. "Ten Thousand Waves. It's a Japanese Health Spa."

He rose and walked to the kitchen door, his hand on the knob.

"Hiking and rafting and Bandelier National Monument Park." It was a good thing she had searched the Internet because selling Billy on a trip, any trip took ingenuity and cunning. His defense was always—as with most people—a lack of time and money. But she had her tip money, and he could take a week of vacation from the garage without every vehicle in Limestone falling apart.

He was listening again. "Twelve hours. Is that bike hours or pickup hours?"

Ellen closed the atlas. "Do you want a beer or something?" Without waiting for an answer, she opened the fridge and handed him a Lone Star longneck. "Since when do you buy bottles?" She poured herself a glass of orange juice and took a sip. Orange juice was a morning beverage, even as, especially as, a mimosa or tequila sunrise or a screwdriver, but she considered it a vitamin drink. "In the pickup, I guess. That would be a really long bike trip, a long trip in general because we couldn't go as far each day as we would in the pickup." Her five-day plan would turn into eight or nine, which Billy would never agree to.

He sat back at the table and absentmindedly thumbed through the atlas. "Why take a trip if we don't go on the bike? Why would you drive all that way locked in a box where you can't smell the cedar trees and feel the weather change with the altitude?"

"We can trailer the bike and use it to for sightseeing when we get there. Or, you can ride part of the day, I'll drive the pickup and we can meet up at some point." If they were both on the bike, she'd be limited to one change of clothes and a hairbrush.

Billy picked up the remote and turned on the television, zipping up and down the channel options, obviously not interested in golf or NASCAR or anything else.

"Is that the end of our vacation discussion? Because we haven't decided anything." Ellen hit the "off" button on the television. The quiet surprised her. Billy was silent for so long, she assumed he was angry.

"Let's think about it." He gave her a peck on the cheek and went outside.

Ellen checked the clock to see how long the potatoes had been boiling.

When Billy came back in, Ellen hoped it was to agree to her Taos plan.

"It's going to be another hot night. Maybe we should get one of those fans that spits mist into the air. That would cool things down. What do you think?"

She thought she would scream. Mist fans were an investment in a future of Saturday nights filled with heat and potato salad and predictability. The very idea of it made her want to get a tattoo and change her name to Carman del Fuego. "Well, Sweets, the summer is almost over."

"Exactly. They're probably on sale."

"Let's think about it for a few days. Check the ads in tomorrow's paper."

"Sure thing. But we'd have to factor in the cost of gas if we drive to Austin or San Antonio to see whether it's really cheaper than James & Son."

"We could go next Saturday. Make it a date. Drive to Austin, shop for misters, have dinner, see a movie."

Billy took a bandana from his back pocket and wiped his forehead. "Maybe we could just buy local. While we're at it, we could buy our potato salad from the grocery and not fire up the kitchen."

Ellen moved closer to him and put her hands on his chest. "Really, how about next Saturday? Wouldn't you like to add a little spice to our lives, do something different?"

Billy tickled her under her chin. "We're spicy enough for me." He turned to go back outside. "Maybe you read too many magazines." The screen door slammed lightly.

Ellen was pretty sure that Billy, who did not read books or go to movies, had no idea that "Maybe you read too many magazines" was a line from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* when the country husband comes to drag the elegant, sophisticated Audrey Hepburn back to live in the sticks. Not that Ellen identified with Audrey or anything, but it was still an odd observation, coming from Billy.

After a twenty-minute soak in the tub, Ellen rubbed on sunscreen, then put on a long, loose, pale-green cotton dress. She looked at it in the mirror from several angles, trying to gauge its transparency. It was decent. Wayne Bradley would make lewd remarks no matter what she had on, and it was just too hot to worry about him. The wide-brim sunhat would keep her from squinting for the next three hours. She took her bottle of wine from the fridge and went into the heat outside.

Margaret and Royce were the first to arrive, he on his huge BMW and she on her smaller, blue Harley. Margaret was personable, which was one of the reasons for the success of her dude ranch—the Rockin' M—just outside of town. She wore her silver hair pulled back in a ranch

woman's ponytail, straight and plain as its namesake. Royce, too, dealt with the public—and tourists—in his antique shop on the square. They had been dating since March and seemed to enjoy each other, even though she was fifteen years older. Ellen assumed that a common interest, such as motorcycles or the hospitality/retail trade, could carry a relationship for a good while.

Ellen hugged Margaret "hello" and walked her into the house to put her salad and homemade dressing in the fridge. "How's the dude ranch business?"

Margaret shrugged. "We're booked, but it's hard to keep people entertained. No one wants to ride the trails or learn to cook chuck wagon meals in this heat. We're reduced to watching John Wayne oaters on the big screen television."

"Is the river still running? I've been thinking about taking fly-fishing lessons from you."

"You'll have to wait a few months. The river is just a series of puddles. Maybe we'll get rain soon and it will run. Short of that, you'll have to go to Wyoming or someplace else way north to fish."

Remembering that Margaret traveled during the slow, winter months at the dude ranch, Ellen said, "Have you ever been to Taos?"

"Now that is some good fly-fishing. Just north of town, almost into Colorado. Rainbow trout as big as your arm, big enough to eat except it's catch-and-release," Margaret said. She turned to leave, "That might budge Billy out of the house for a change." She paused. "By the way, is Wayne coming tonight?"

Ellen thought a minute. "I assumed so. Why?"

"It's just that, well, I hate to say anything, but he's been making me uncomfortable lately."

"How so?" Ellen said.

"It's just little things like standing too close or looking at me over the top of his glasses as if we share some secret, or winking at me. Last week, he was whispering something in my ear and he stuck his tongue in. Disgusting." Margaret shivered.

"He has been a little oilier in the last few week. It could be the seven-year-itch, except he and Deb have only been married about three years."

"It's probably nothing." Margaret went outside.

When Ellen came out, the others had set the lawn chairs in a circle around the ice chests and were fanning themselves and grouching about the heat, as if it were something new.

"Not enough deodorant in the world to keep me dry."

"I own about four dozen tee-shirts and I swear I can wear every one of them and end up naked by wash day."

"How long would it take us to ride these bikes to Alaska?"

Ellen moved to the side yard and looked toward her secret house. If she were a mystical shape-shifter, she could turn herself into a crow or a falcon and travel to . . . she couldn't even imagine the place. Perhaps somewhere solitary, an iceberg. Or someplace urban and lively. The roar of an approaching vehicle brought her back to Saturday night in Limestone. Deb and Wayne Bradley had arrived in his enormous, black Suburban instead of his bike. Deb's dark hair was streaked with a wide platinum highlight, which gave her a skunk-like appearance.

In a larger town, it might be possible to find friends through common interests, but in Limestone people bonded because of their otherness, their "outsider" status, like the Hoity-Toitys—two couples who went to the Santa Fe Opera every year, and the Romper Room gang—four couples suspected of hosting sex toy parties. And those were just the rumors discussed in The Talk of the Town. Who knew what the clients at the Cut 'n Curl speculated about. The

Saturday night motorcycle riders in Ellen's yard were not so much outsiders as just people with noisy transportation. Granted, it did not take much to be an outsider in Limestone. Not attending the high school football games or church would do it.

Ellen took the bag of pre-buttered garlic bread from Deb. Out of earshot from the others, Ellen said, "So Deb, how's it going? Everything okay at the shop? Are you and Wayne doing okay?"

"Why? Did somebody say something?" Deb looked uneasy.

"No, no I was just being sociable. This heat is just making everyone crazy."

One by one, they opened beers and sank into lawn chairs. Billy lit the citronella candles, although their smell was as annoying as the buzzing and biting mosquitoes. Ellen never mentioned this, just as she never wondered aloud how many Saturday nights they had done this exact same thing with these exact same people, how many gallons of potato salad she had made and how many vats of homemade peach ice cream they had cranked. Would her guests be scandalized if she ignored them, went inside, and read a novel set in a foreign country? How could she be so content and so antsy at the same time? She wondered if she could be entering peri-menopause at thirty-three.

"Royce, how's the antique business?" Deb owned a quilting store on the square and was constantly concerned about the rise and fall of tourism in Limestone.

Royce took a long swig on his beer and held the frosted bottle against his forehead. "August is August. Tourists drag themselves in and out of the shops, but the only thing they buy is an Icee at the Seven-Eleven."

"Wayne, why do you think you and I aren't smart enough, after all this time, to close up and get out of Texas during August?" Deb fanned herself with a paper plate.

“Because, Lovey,” Wayne said, “I can’t take a month off and you aren’t going anywhere without me.” Wayne commuted into Austin every day to work for the lottery commission. He and Deb had each been married before, and he was a little possessive of his new wife. “Besides, in August, your three teenagers need new school clothes and dental check-ups and motherly love.”

“Well, couldn’t we just send them to your ex-wife? She’d hardly notice three more, as noisy as your kids are.”

Ellen wondered whether Deb had had a drink or two before they left home. There was an edginess to her tonight, a hardness. Maybe it was just the heat. Usually the beer ran out before anyone got quarrelsome.

Wayne stood and walked toward the ice chest. "Oh, like your Derek didn't show up for football practice still drunk from the night before." He shook the ice from the bottle.

Margaret and Royce looked at each other, rolling their eyes. Grasshoppers chirped and jumped in the dry grass, stirring the dust. Ellen cringed and backed her chair away from the circle a bit in case things got physical. That would be a first, but with this heat, she wouldn't rule out anything.

"I heard a rumor that your little Susie Q. lost something important over the summer. Left it in the backseat of some car." Deb said as she flicked away an imaginary gnat.

Wayne's face turned red. "Sharon. You know her name is Sharon. And she is still a virgin, not for lack of drunken Derek's trying."

"If you were home more often, maybe you could be a role model for him." Deb leaned forward, glaring at Wayne. "Maybe instead of coming home late and drunk, you could—"

"Now, now, you two." Billy stood between Deb and Wayne, his arms out like a referee at a prizefight, spatula in one hand. "Let's all just relax and have a good time. Deb, maybe you could help Ellen in the kitchen."

As if on cue, Ellen rose to go into the house, but Deb did not follow. She just tilted her nose up into the air and resumed fanning herself with the paper plate. Frowning, Wayne walked away and began to scratch the label off his beer with his thumbnail.

August in Texas. Someone poetic like Tennessee Williams might have called the evening "sultry," but in Limestone, it was merely hot and dry. Dust hung in the air, lining nostrils and throats. Sundown—and its slight cooling—would not come for hours.

In a few weeks, high school football would begin. Friday night after Friday night watching the Mighty Roadrunners, who had lost every game Ellen had ever been to until last season, when four husky freshmen had nearly taken the team to district. Billy was crazy about it; Ellen tolerated it. But tonight it was still summer.

Finally, Yolanda and Hank arrived on his cherry red Ducati, she looking none too excited about an evening among friends. Ellen walked toward the driveway to meet her. Yolanda's yellow sundress set off her dark eyes and olive skin, but she looked distracted instead of her usual vivacious self.

"Bad day?" Ellen lightly touched Yolanda's shoulder.

"*Mierda*. Bad life is more like it. I'll be glad when school starts and I have my own world again."

Ellen laughed. "I'm pretty sure the other teachers and the kids don't feel that way." Yolanda didn't even smile. "You don't, either. What's going on?"

Hank walked toward the clot of people in the front yard, but Yolanda took a few steps toward the street, away from the others. "It's the usual. Hank is being weird. No, he's weirder than usual. I want school to start just so I'll have something else to think about. So I'll be out of his way." Her arms were crossed tightly on her chest.

"Okay, but for tonight, let's eat, drink, and be ridiculous. I'll share my wine with you. Want me to give you a trim? How about a radical 'do?" Everyone knew Ellen carried her Sassoon shears in her purse. "Oh, better watch out for Deb. She's grown fangs."

Ellen gathered towels and her scissors from the house, and positioned a lawn chair so that Yolanda would be in the shade. She suggested several possibilities, "long, short or medium?"

Yolanda just shrugged.

Ellen tried small talk. "Have you finished your lesson plans?" "Did Hank buy tickets to any of the Cowboy or Texan football games?" "Uncross your legs." "How are the kids?" "Don't you just love autumn, when the light turns gold along with the leaves?" "Lean your head back and close your eyes while I get these bangs straight." "Think there'll be more tourists when it cools off?"

Yolanda added nothing to the conversation, except when she asked, "Do you ever think about running away, just disappearing?"

Taken off guard, Ellen said, "Well who doesn't? I bet even Billy, sweet satisfied Billy, has at least one escape fantasy. Tilt your head down."

An escape fantasy for Billy was laughable. Her grandfather would have described him as, "Happy as a pig in mud." He was a self-contained sack of happiness. He had his job at the garage, his motorcycle, friends, and his prized possession: Ellen. It was obvious that he adored her, had from the moment they met five years ago at First Friday. On the first Friday of each month,

Limestone's merchants stayed open late and served wine, hoping to open the purses and pockets of shoppers a little wider. Billy and Ellen had encountered each other in front of Royce's Antiques & Things, both stunned by the enormous ugliness of a pink and purple armoire. They had laughed, sipped wine, and never looked back.

Ellen wielded the scissors and thought about life's ironies. "Isn't it odd how the characteristics that were so attractive in a man—stability, focus, dependability, predictability—can eventually become character flaws or at the least, irritants?"

Yolanda flicked her hand in the air. "The bastards are Jekyll and Hyde."

When Ellen was finished, Yolanda didn't even raise the mirror to view her new look: a retro-reverse shag that took off five years if she bothered to smile.

At the end of the evening, Ellen declared it a success. Even after hours in the heat, the food was tasty with no hint of ptomaine. A low cloud blocked the sun long enough to cool the air; the stack of CDs actually included some of Ellen's favorites; Deb's kids who were babysitting Yolanda's kids only called a couple of times asking permission to eat sweets or run under the sprinkler; and everyone—even Deb—seemed to enjoy themselves and each other.

While they were gathering up paper plates and empty beer cans, a drunken, grinning Wayne grabbed Margaret's butt. She looked stunned, then recovered. "You son of a bitch." She slapped his face hard enough to leave her handprint. "Just keep the bike between your legs and leave the women alone."

Secretly, Ellen enjoyed in Margaret's reaction. Maybe Wayne needed a good slap now and then to remind him that he was no longer a college stud or a young playboy. He needed to be reminded that he was married with children.

Waving goodbye to Ellen, Yolanda steered Hank to the passenger end of their bike, fired up the engine, and drove away.

"Be careful," Ellen called. Yolanda hardly ever drove Hank's bike. "Don't let that thing get away from you."

Ellen was in the kitchen washing utensils when Billy brought in the serving bowls. She said, "I saw you and Hank talking over by the garage. He looked angry."

Billy shook his head. "He's always angry about something these days. Tonight, it was just Yolanda taking too long to get ready. Nothing to worry about."

On Sunday, Ellen and Billy slept late. After they drank a pot of coffee and read the newspaper at the kitchen table, Billy said, "Hon, do you want to ride over to San Antonio with me? There's a bike show and swap meet."

She gathered the sections of newspaper and put them in the recycling bin, smearing the ink from her fingertips onto her tee shirt "Why am I just now hearing about this? Should I make a second pot?"

"Not for me," he said. "I wasn't gonna go, but last night, Royce said they'd have Cushmans. Remember those from way back, practically antiques?"

As Ellen ground the coffee beans, she imagined the hot, dry wind hitting her face at sixty miles an hour, the sun bearing down, burning her back, the dirt and grit of the arena, the steam from holding on to Billy's sweaty body. "You are so sweet. But if it's all the same to you, I'll just stay here and do laundry. Maybe read a little."

He put his hands around her waist. "You sure? We could work in a trip to I-HOP."

Tempting her with waffles: he had reached a new low. “Gosh, Billy, you sure know how to woo a girl, but no.” He dropped his arms and backed away, looking dejected. She tried to feel guilty, but she could not. Not when she had the gift of a free afternoon. The aroma of fresh coffee filled the kitchen as she sat down to work the crossword and drink her fourth cup. Nine down: 13 letters, home maintenance. Housecleaning.

Housecleaning. *Housekeeping*. Darn. She had left her book at Eureka. Surely, that was a legitimate excuse to return just one last time. It would be her first daylight visit to her dream house. She dressed in dust-colored cotton shorts, a clean tee, and moccasins, topped off with a straw hat. Around two o’clock, hoping the neighbors were all at the city pool or napping, she moved slowly down the alley. Two o’clock was an insane time to be outdoors. Even the cur tied to a clothesline was too heat-wasted to growl. She was concentrating on the plot of *Housekeeping* when she stopped walking. She had the eerie sensation that she was about to make a big mistake. Going to Eureka on a Sunday afternoon would be pressing her luck, the way illicit lovers took more and bigger risks until finally they got caught. Feeling a little silly, she turned and went back down the alley. On the way home, she considered her options: go to the pool, nap, read, peruse hairstyle magazines, visit Yolanda, drive to the mall in Austin, or call her mother to talk about her soap operas and Ellen's disappeared dad. Nothing sounded like fun. If she was going to be desolate, she might as well take the laundry to the Wash ‘n Fold.

Ellen couldn't remember seeing a washer/dryer at Eureka, but she was sure a jumbo/turbo version was hidden somewhere beyond a set of tasteful cabinet doors. It was just as well she hadn't found the appliances. She might be tempted to do laundry there, which would be a travesty, like taking dirty clothes to the Taj Mahal. She sacked up Billy's greasy overalls, a book, and her

cell phone and headed for the Laundromat, walking. It was only two blocks, which gave her time to compose her side of a phone call to her mother.

When the suds were boiling up against the washer's glass front, Ellen speed-dialed her mother in Galveston.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Sugar. How are you?"

"Fine. And you?"

"I'm good. How's Billy? Are you two having a good Sunday? Are you going for a drive on that dangerous vehicle?"

"Billy is on the 'dangerous vehicle.' I'm doing the wash."

Deviating from the pleasant conversation Ellen had mentally scripted, her mother began a harangue about married couples and Ellen's duty and how easy it was to lose a husband. Ellen pictured a quarter rolling under a washing machine, lost, never to be found. It was hard to keep from giggling. Her mother then segued into her inevitable lament about Ellen's father leaving, etc. Ellen sat the phone in her lap and flipped the book open to her marker. Just once, she wished her mother could say aloud the name of her dead child, Ellen's sister and ever-present shadow.

Chapter 2

At dusk on Friday, Billy and the guys were gathering in her front yard. The dry, brown grass crackled under Ellen's sandals as she walked from her house toward a Hill Country sunset. Although she'd rarely been out of Texas, she was sure no other place else had sunsets like this, a turmoil of reds and purples and yellows in 180 degrees of sky. Turning north, she walked two blocks through alleys shadowed by dusty shrubs and low brush, leaves curled closed against the fiery August air. The yellow cur growled at her.

Ducking through a hedge of crepe myrtles, Ellen entered the backyard of the elegant stone and stucco home. She stood on tiptoe to reach the key on top of the doorframe, unlocked the french doors, and opened them quietly, listening for the sound of someone home. Silence. She'd done it again. Slipping out of her flip-flops, she felt the coolness of the tile flooring sting her feet. She stopped to listen, but only picked up on a hum from either the fridge or the AC, which must be set on 68. The air was so chilly, it was uncomfortable, especially in contrast to the furnace of summer heat blasting outside. The unseasonal cold, combined with the illicitness of her visit sent chills up her spine.

She shivered from the excitement of danger. This was a jailable offense. If she got caught, she'd lose everything: her self-respect, her clientele, her license, and possibly Billy. Silently, she swore again that tonight would be her last visit. Perhaps there was a 12-step program for people like her.

Walking softly, she began her secret ritual. First, to the stainless steel-clad fridge where she kept a bottle of pinot grigio tucked out of sight behind the jars of mustard and ketchup and pickles. She chose a crystal wineglass from the cabinet, poured it half-full, and walked into the

master bedroom with its pine furniture. Sitting in a cushioned rocker with her bare feet propped up on the quilt, she sipped her wine and remembered her encounter with the king-size bed. On her third visit to the house, she had flung the pillows—square ones, round ones, bolsters—to the floor and pulled back the quilt. The sheets were red, a rust red, silky and cold. She had stripped off her clothes and slithered in between the sheets, ignoring the dust and sweat from her walk over. Stretching her arms into the T position, she tried to reach both edges, but there was much room to spare. Later, she realized that she had napped for almost an hour. She remade the bed, hoping there was no pattern to the way the pillows had been stacked.

That was the night she named the house. After considering “Nirvana,” “Xanadu,” “Utopia” and other clichés evoking Eden, Ellen decided on “Eureka.” After all, she had discovered the house and its library last winter. It had not required Sherlock Holmes to discover the key.

This was a vacation house for its owners. Ellen loved the idea of owning two houses, two sofas, two refrigerators, two microwave ovens, two chests of drawers full of underwear and nightgowns. The location of the house, on the eastern edge of Texas' most rugged country, justified the rustic décor. From the window, bordered by curtains made of Navajo blankets, Ellen saw dirt and scrub brush, tumbleweeds, the horizon, and tomorrow.

When her cold, frosty wine glass was almost empty, Ellen moved into the library, the first she'd ever seen in a private home. She'd seen many homes with shelves full of books, but this was a *room* full of books. And it was the first library she'd ever seen anywhere with books arranged not by author or subject or color or height. The books were every which way, standing up and lying down, in and among family photos and pottery jars and board games and scented candles

and binoculars and metal bookends shaped like buffalo. Abundance. That was the only word for being so casual about possessions.

After her first couple of visits to the house, Ellen avoided looking at the jumble of family photos in the bookshelves, but initially, she'd seen that the owners were an attractive, fortyish husband and wife, with two little girls: one a toddler and the other about six years old.

She had no right to be in this house, but Ellen imagined that if the family arrived some Friday evening and discovered her, they would not be upset and call the police and have her arrested. No, they would be grateful that she was caring for their wonderful second home so that if there were a power failure or a water pipe rupture, she could alert someone. In fact, she was doing the family a favor by sneaking in to spend time at their house.

This was Ellen's playhouse. Here, she was different. Here, she could imagine that she didn't live in a burg, that Billy would go with her to the movies once in a while, that they might have a baby, that she could do something to improve the world beside just make a few people a little more attractive. In this house, she could hope that her life might become exciting, that something unpredictable might happen. Here, she was a citizen of the world. This house had power.

In the library, Ellen reached for *Housekeeping*, which she'd been reading every Friday evening for weeks. The good thing about summer was that she didn't need to turn on lights, signaling the neighbors that an intruder was about. That would have required her to convince Police Chief Alexander that she was housesitting, even though she didn't know the owners' names or where they lived. Maybe later tonight, she would poke around and see if she could find a bill or something with their name, even though this would be, should be her last visit.

Ellen didn't notice that the sun had set until she couldn't make out the words on page 87. She put the book back in its place between a dictionary and *Bullfinch's Mythology* and finished her rounds. The vast living area looked as it always did: Indian blankets, cowhide rug, leather loveseats and Eames chair, floor lamps made of rope and antlers and, of course, the gigantic chandelier. Framed prints of Ansel Adams' moon photographs lined one wall. Despite the child-size table piled with Legos, Ellen was sure the room was the work of a professional decorator. Through the window, the edge of the streetlight showed that everything was tidy in the front yard; all the logs in the split-rail fence were aloft and aligned. After her first visit, she stopped checking the cavernous second floor: the media room, nanny bedroom and two empty rooms felt like afterthoughts. The downstairs guest bedroom was undisturbed. Ellen avoided the children's room. Even though it was decorated for little girls, it always felt chilly and unused. Something about the room unnerved her. Finally, she locked the back door and slipped the key into place over the doorsill. If it were *her* house, she would hide the key someplace a burglar wouldn't look first.

The alley had cooled and the dust had settled. She took her time walking. At home, the yard was vacant except for a couple of empty beer cans under the oak tree. She could hear the television, but she supposed Billy was asleep in front of it. Max, the neighbor's black cat, came by for some petting while Ellen smoked a cigarette on the front porch.

Billy didn't work Saturdays so when Ellen rose at 7 a.m., she tried to be quiet, moving around the kitchen, filling her chipped bowl with cereal, pouring milk into her non-crystal glass, drinking coffee from the mug with the James & Son Hardware logo. While she ate, she scanned the lifestyle section of the Austin paper and worked the crossword.

In the bathroom, she held a limp hank of hair toward the medicine cabinet mirror. Four inches of chemically ruined strands striped in maroon, orange, blue and green were attached to her scalp by two inches of healthy hair. At the shop, she and Mary Jo pretended that neither of them had hair-alteration-addiction. “It’s promotional,” Mary Jo rationalized. “Our customers trust that we have tried these new treatments and new styles. They can see what their results will be by looking at us.” Truth was, Ellen had convinced none of her customers that Jell-O colored hair would enhance their lives. In her heart, she knew that altering the color of her hair was one of the few exciting yet innocuous things that can happen in a small town. Most of the others—breast enhancement, nose reduction, fatal disease, an illicit affair and its resulting divorce—were more permanent. Some—like breaking and entering—were downright dangerous.

Tonight would be exactly like last night under the oak tree—drink beer, re-cap the week, complain about the weather—except that wives were included. Even though many people find comfort in the uniformity of days, the predictability of tomorrow, Ellen was not one of them.

Chapter 3

Around the end of summer, Ellen and Billy usually conducted their annual talk about having a baby. She knew she should just go ahead and tell him what the doctor said after she miscarried, that she probably couldn't have children, but the truth would break his heart. Each year she went through the motions of yearning for children, counter-balanced by legitimate-sounding reasons why they should wait. For this year's discussion, she would use last Wednesday night: she baby-sat for Yolanda's children, seven and nine, while Yolanda attended a teachers' meeting. The heavy air indoors and out made the children snarly and whiney. Ellen would say she wanted to get that night out of her head so she could be objective about the prospects of parenting. That might buy her a couple of months.

Wednesday, right after lunch, a tourist came into The Talk. Tourists often visited the salon looking for a new hairstyle as part of the vacation persona they discovered in the freedom of being away from home and their usual selves. Often, they discovered their super curly, red-haired selves. Even more enticing was the fact that in Limestone, these experiments were at least sixty to one hundred dollars cheaper than urban salon prices. This particular tourist had a thick head of chestnut hair, all one length, with such a unique cut that, when she turned her head, all her hair moved together in an undulating wedge. Ellen was awed but intimidated, fairly sure that she couldn't follow the line if the woman wanted a trim. "May I help you?" Ellen thought the woman looked familiar, like a relative not seen since childhood or someone dreamt of. Or, maybe she was a second tier movie star or television personality; there was often a movie or commercial being filmed in the nearby, picturesque hill country.

“Thank you. I was wondering whether you carry the Keune line of hair products. I’m out of shampoo.” Her voice was soft. When she lifted her hand to touch her pearl earring, the reflection of her enormous marquise diamond threw rainbows across the salon.

Ellen had seen Keune products at a styling show in Houston. She thought it was Swedish or Danish. “No, Ma’am. I’m sorry. But we do have the Aveda line. Their shampoo is made of all natural ingredients.” The woman bought the smallest bottle available, explaining that she would be going home soon. She checked her manicure while Ellen ran the \$14.56 charge through the credit card machine.

Friday morning, Ellen got to the Talk of the Town a little after eight so she could cut strips of foil, the key to a professional highlights application. The aromas and odors of beautifying shampoos, sprays, rinses, perms, hair masks, setting lotions, de-frizzers, curling potions, straighteners, strengtheners and other chemicals welcomed her.

Mary Jo's current coif was copied from Betty Boop—short black ringlets—but anyone who looked closely could see deep blue undertones in the back, with hints of scarlet around her gently sagging, heart-shaped face. She was already shampooing her first customer. "Good morning, Ellen. It's another fine day in Limestone, just like yesterday and the day before."

Ellen laughed. "You're right. The days are running together for me." But she was very aware that today was Friday, the first Friday all summer that she would not go to the frosty, frigid Eureka. She had the urge to confide in Mary Jo, who would no doubt congratulate her for trying to quit her dangerous escapade, but if the water stopped splashing in the sink and the client overheard, it wouldn't be fifteen minutes before the whole town found out.

The day passed slowly. The only distraction was a wayward horsefly that buzzed through the door as Ellen's 1:30 left. She bandied the flyswatter about the salon until the fly got so tired it crawled under the fridge in the stockroom where it would die of heat or starvation. By mid-afternoon the temperature in the salon rose past the air conditioner's capacity, causing Mary Jo and Ellen to move in slow motion, and cranking up the pungency of the sprays and dyes.

Ellen's three o'clock cancelled at two-thirty: Charlotte Ryder's son had collapsed during football practice and she was on her way to the hospital. She promised to call later with an update. Ellen took a book out of her cabinet and settled in to read, but the novel couldn't compete with the conversation between Mary Jo and her client, Jackie, who was to be married for the second time tomorrow night. Ellen flipped through a hairstyling magazine so she could eavesdrop.

Jackie wanted to wear her hair down, but Mary Jo was holding out for an updo. "There's just something about the lightness and elegance of a french twist, say, or a swirl of curls on a woman your age. It'll make your neck look longer, too."

Ellen's glance fell on a series of photos updating Grace Kelly's trademark french twist. She stood and held the magazine in front of Jackie. "Like this?"

Jackie waved the magazine and Ellen away. "I've spent eight months letting this mop grow out, so I'm wearing it down. It'll look better with my wreath of laurel leaves."

"Down it is." Mary Jo did not like being made to go against her better judgment and in matters of hair, she always had the better judgment. "I was at a wedding last week where the bride wore a laurel wreath. It looked okay. What about the rest of it? Flowers? Food?"

Evidently, Jackie couldn't believe her good fortune at being asked. She gyrated from the neck down as Mary Jo divided her hair into sections and secured them with duckbill clips. "Oh,

it's going to be so fabulous. I'm using *Fete Por Tu*. Janelle Ledbetter is my bridal consultant. She says everything has to reflect Lester and me. Our music selections, our choice of flowers, the whole thing is about us coming together. So, we picked songs from her list and she burned us a CD. I'll come down the aisle to "The Wedding Song," you know, 'wherever more than one of you ta da ta da, there is love.' Remember that? That's when Lester will turn and see me in my gown and his eyes will roll back in his head and he won't believe his good luck in marrying such a gorgeous woman."

Ellen laughed, but Mary Jo stopped mid-way through winding a curler in the back. "What about your bridesmaids? What are they wearing and carrying?"

Jackie's smile ran all the way across her face. "You'll never believe it. Janelle found us these darling yellow dresses, strapless taffeta. My daughter Linda is carrying a bouquet of kale, and—"

"Kale?" interrupted Ellen, "like the vegetable, kale?"

"Yes," Jackie beamed as if she had invented electricity. "Isn't that fun? Kale. It was Janelle's idea. My youngest daughter, Betty, will carry chives. You know, the tops have real pretty blossoms. And Angie, that's my best friend, she's from Missouri, she'll have carrot tops. The bouquets are all filled out with baby's breath and tied with yellow and green ribbons. It's going to knock Limestone off its feet."

"I thought it was in Austin."

"Of course it is. It's at that park across from the courthouse. Under the gazebo. Ouch! That's too tight."

"Sorry." Mary Jo loosened the curler and reset the clip to hold it in place.

Ellen noticed that Mary Jo was drawing her bottom lip up over her top teeth. She did that when she wanted to say something she shouldn't. "And your dress?" Ellen asked, volunteering to carry the conversational ball for a while.

"Oh, Janelle found the cutest Vera Wang knockoff, a Vera Whang, for about half the cost of the real thing. It's simple, white, strapless, to the floor. I keep thinking about that Dixie Chicks' song, 'I shouldn't be wearing white and you can't afford no ring.' Of course, with two daughters in the wedding, I shouldn't be wearing white, but I feel like I have a second chance with Lester. Like I'm starting life over. I'll get it right this time."

"I know just what you mean." Mary Jo's bottom lip was back where it should be. "I felt like that when I married Harold. And I felt like it a second time after we divorced and married each other again. After that, I decided that the only people who get to start life over are amnesiacs. The rest of us just have to live with our past, pimples and all."

All three of them heard Mary Jo's stomach growl. She dug around in the top drawer of the receptionist's table until she found a peppermint. "Lunch." The paper crackled as she unwrapped the candy. Ellen thought back over the last few weeks, trying to remember the last time her co-worker had taken a noon break or eaten a lunch more substantial than a banana.

Mary Jo put Jackie under the dryer and turned it to high, filling the salon with white noise. Then she leaned over Ellen's shoulder, pretending to look at something in the magazine. "Last Friday, that wedding I went to in Austin, former client's step-daughter? Same thing exactly. In the same gazebo. *Fete Por Tu*. Janelle Ledbetter. That stupid song and those yellow dresses. Kale and chives and carrots. I assumed when the ceremony was over, they'd throw them into a pot and we'd have vegetable soup for the wedding dinner. I think that company should change its name to *Deja Vu*."

“You’re sweet not to spill the beans. Especially now that it’s too late to change anything.”

"Brides have a right to all the illusions they can imagine." Mary Jo shrugged. "She’s forty-two and it’s her big day. If she thinks that she and Lester are kale, so be it."

When the phone rang, it was Charlotte Ryder announcing that her son “only” had a concussion and would be fine. Could Ellen squeeze her in tomorrow?

"Sure, tomorrow's fine. Saturday at three." But tonight was Friday night.

Ellen sat in her recliner reading, but couldn't concentrate. Voices from the side yard—Billy and the guys laughing and talking—distracted her. This time last week, she was in Eureka for her final visit. It was an addiction she had to quit sometime, so why not tonight? When football season opened, she might become interested in the Roadrunners' win-loss stats, possibly forgetting that she had ever lived a double life.

She pulled herself out of the chair and looked into the fridge, seeing nothing. She wasn't hungry, couldn't remember why she was standing there in the first place. The bedroom should have been an option, but the overhead light was too dim for reading. Maybe next week she'd buy a reading lamp. Why hadn't she done that before? In the bathroom, she refolded a towel. *Just one more time. What would it hurt? Who would know?* She could read a few more pages in her book and ensure that everything was back in its place. She could remove the wine bottle and make sure she had rinsed out her wine glass. She really needed a proper ending—she hated the word "closure"—for her affair with the mansion.

Her sandals were by the front door. She eased onto the porch. The guys were laughing and clicking beer cans, oblivious to her as she slipped toward the alley.

Her fingertips touched the key in its hiding place brushed free of dirt and dust from her frequent visits. Eureka was frigid as usual. Three steps into the house, Ellen stopped. Something wasn't right. She stood still to listen, attuned for the slightest disturbance. Her body was electric with adrenaline. She put her hand on the doorknob, ready to leave, but nothing moved, there were no sounds. *Do what you always do.* Trying to calm herself, she walked into the kitchen and reached into the fridge for the wine. There should be half a bottle left, but it was gone. She checked the trashcan. It was empty.

Ellen moved through the house like a Comanche, not even disturbing the air. Everything looked as it had when she left last Friday night. The bed was made, her book was sitting on its shelf, the photos were all in place. Still, Ellen knew someone had been in the house. Nothing in the living area was disturbed; she couldn't visualize exactly how the little girls' room had looked, so she assumed that all was in place. Then she remembered the tourist at the salon last Wednesday. Checking the master bath, she opened closets and cabinets until she found the stash of hair products: all Keune except for a small bottle of Aveda shampoo. The great haircut owned Eureka. The great haircut was the lucky bitch with two of everything and probably didn't even appreciate it. The great haircut had drunk her wine.

In all the time Ellen had been visiting, she had never faced the possibility of the owners actually using the house. Summers in Limestone were so hot, most people who had second (or third) homes here came in the fall and spring, when the weather was temperate and the festivals and fairs in Limestone and neighboring counties celebrated chili, bluebonnets, folk music, Oktober, and whatever else they could find to party around. Curious about the woman's visit, Ellen opened a door in the wall of cabinets lining one side of living area and began noisily opening and closing the small interior drawers, rattling the paper clips, the stapler, and other

office supplies inside them, acting as if she owned the place, which was totally unlike the night she began reading *Housekeeping*. Smitten with a sentence in the book she wanted to remember without leaving a trace of her presence, she had written, “The disaster took place midway through a moonless night” on her arm and replaced the pen in the exact position she had found it. Later, at home, she had copied the line into her journal. Gradually, she understood that most people who have material wealth do not memorize the placement of books or pens or paper clips or pillows. She, too, had become casual about their possessions, moving the comfortable library chair closer to the window, jostling the cushions, leaving her wine glass by the kitchen sink. She became careless with the house and its furnishings, as if they were her own. She did return the book to the same place each time, but that was just her personal ritual before leaving.

Ellen had selected the book because it was such a slim volume nestled between an enormous dictionary and *Bullfinch’s Mythology*. She assumed it was one of those fusty, old lady books written around the turn of some century instructing young housewives in the methods of cleaning pots, pressing trousers and growing tomatoes. Her assumption was wrong, but now she was hooked. Initially, the book’s main attraction was its alluring climate and geography: mountains, glacier lakes, cold winds, and lots of water. With the air conditioning so low, Ellen could get chilled, wrap an afghan across her legs and shiver with the townspeople of Fingerbone. Reading it at home or the shop would have ruined the icy aura, the thrill of the secret. It often took two readings of a paragraph to fully enjoy the word rhythms and look up the occasional definition, but Ellen was in no hurry to finish the book. It was like being in college again.

Today, however, Ellen could not reach for the book until she finished her search. On the end table she came across a photo of the woman with the great haircut. That’s why she had looked familiar in the salon. Ellen must have seen that photo a thousand times.

Ellen continued snooping. She found an envelope addressed to Mr. & Mrs. Avery Spencer in Dallas. Dallas was at least a five-hour drive. Perhaps that's why the owners rarely visited. Inside was a yellowed Christmas card with a family photo; the return address was Wyoming. A small, leather-bound book labeled "Notes" had mostly blank pages with a few entries handwritten in black ink. Ellen returned it to its drawer after seeing that they were mostly lists: milk, Dove bars, red wine vinegar. She did not mean to intrude on private lives, she just wanted to find a little basic information about the people to whom she was ceding possession of the house.

Another drawer held a stack of photos showing the Spencer children in little swimsuits, playing in the front yard of a log cabin while someone outside the photo showered them with water from a garden hose. Except for being a couple of years apart, the girls could have been twins. Golden hair, joyous faces showed a silly, unselfconscious playfulness. Ellen was overcome a memory of two little girls, laughing as they splashed around in a blue plastic pool.

She entered the girls' room. Air conditioning and blackout curtains kept the room dark and chilly. Raising the shade allowed the evening light to fall on twin beds covered with Raggedy Anns and Andys. A toy-box overflowed with stuffed clowns and animals, Legos, tutus, and board games. The closet held several matching outfits in two sizes and colors. When she was a little girl, her closet had looked similar. On the chest-of-drawers sat two photos. The frames were bark, the name "Tina" was spelled out in twigs over the photo of the older girl; "Missy" was the younger one. The room seemed abandoned, as if the little girls had grown up and moved away years ago. Ellen pulled down the shade and left.

Tina and Missy were the children of Avery Spencer and his wife, residents of Dallas. Ellen wanted more. What was the wife's name? How long had they owned the house? Why didn't they spend more time at their Limestone house? She went back to the wall of cabinets. At the

bottom was a round wastebasket holding a wad of mail, mostly circulars from the local grocery store. The Spencers probably had the utility bills sent to their Dallas address. Ellen flipped through the four-color ads for eggs and milk and the black-and-white ones for missing children, all addressed to "Resident," until she came to an envelope addressed to Avery Spencer; the return address was American Dream Home, offices in Limestone and San Antonio. The envelope was empty. Ellen stuffed it back into the trashcan.

So, she wondered, what were the Spencers doing this fine Friday night? In Dallas, they could be anywhere doing anything air-conditioned. Were the four of them at Chuck E. Cheese's or were the little girls at home with a nanny while Avery and Mrs. Spencer partied with friends at the country club? Ellen was pretty sure they weren't standing around getting greasy from motorcycles and mayonnaise. They probably weren't going to spend tomorrow night doing the same thing they had done since time began. She slammed the cabinet door so hard it bounced.

Ellen picked up her book, changed her mind, and put it back. She slowly worked her way through the house to the back door, blowing a final "goodbye" kiss in the direction of the library.

Outside, she replaced the key over the doorsill knowing that, should there be a plausible excuse, she would have a way back into her secret world.

Chapter 4

Ellen awoke at 3:30 a.m. on Saturday. After rolling in quarter-turns for an hour, getting more awake with each rotation, she got out of bed, careful not to wake Billy. She pulled a terry-cloth robe over her tee-shirt and opened the front door. The window units were set on medium and the temperature outside seemed about the same, but steamier. Closing the door, she went into the living room and sank into in her blue, lady-size recliner, kicking the footrest toward the television. After saying a little prayer of thanks for cable TV and its four hundred stations, she clicked the remote. Let the urbanites look down their noses at yokels like her. The secret was that even rubes in small towns have access to foreign movie channels, cooking shows, travel shows, decorating shows, and announcers who all sound like they are from no place in particular. Little towns have libraries, video rental stores, book clubs, people who travel the world, and family secrets. Limestone even had liquor stores. In Ellen's experience, the main criteria separating urban from rural were a plethora of good restaurants and liquor-by-the-drink. Unlike Limestone, many small towns even contained mysterious men who provided fodder for real or imaginary affairs.

She scanned the weekly TV listings, hoping to find some ridiculous movie like *Sex and the City* or *Valley of the Dolls*, but they were not showing this week. She settled for the last half of *Tall in the Saddle*.

The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee awakened her at 6:50. Billy was making breakfast, banging pots and pans more loudly than scrambled eggs and bacon called for. The biscuits were hot out of the hot oven. The only cool, refreshing element of breakfast was a sweating glass of

frothy milk. Ellen decided that after breakfast, she'd pack half a cantaloupe, a banana, and five strawberries to take for lunch. She'd top it off with a glass of cold orange juice from Dave's Deli.

“Morning, Hon. How was your night in the chair?”

“It wasn't the whole night, just from three on. I slept here because we need a new couch, one with three cushions. With two, your butt just sinks in between and torques your spine to hell.” She opened the fridge door and inhaled the chill, getting her body as far inside as she could.

Billy divided the eggs onto two plates, making a screeching sound with the spatula. “You could a just come back to bed,” he said, counting out three pieces of bacon for each plate.

“Sure, and I could just toss and turn, or I could turn on the light and read, or I could practice the tuba if I had one.” As she scraped the warm eggs onto her fork, she thought about the sofa in the living area of Eureka. It was roomy, big as a daybed. She needed a couch like that. And while she was at it, she needed a chandelier, too, but with the eight-foot ceiling of their rental house, maybe she didn't need one 16-feet tall.

Ellen was cranky from the lack of sleep. It was a relief to go to work, even if it was Saturday.

Riding the Vespa always elated her. The light was still golden from the dawn, not yet the white glare the sun would cast by noon. At 15-miles-per-hour, there was a warm, dry breeze on her face as she rode through the sleepy streets. Ellen didn't notice the yellow school bus pull away from the Mobil station and into her path.

It wasn't really a close call, but Ellen turned the Vespa too sharply to the right and lost control. The scooter pitched to one side, landing Ellen face-up in a gravel driveway, listening to the buzz of the Vespa's engine until it died out. Closing her eyes, she saw another school bus, this one with a hole in the roof allowing icy rain to fall onto her and the other little children writhing

and wailing because of the rain and the cold and the squealing brakes, and crashing and crushing metal.

When someone asked, "Are you okay?" she opened her eyes to the deep blue of the sky and the fluffy puffs of clouds. She might just lie there all day to watch the clouds scoot by, but the man standing over her looked so concerned, she couldn't let him worry about her. "I'm fine. It's just a little spill."

"Do you need a ride? Want me to take your scooter somewhere to be fixed?"

He helped her up and waited while she brushed the dirt and gravel from her clothes. She stood the Vespa up and examined it, finding only a small gash near the front headlight. The engine hummed when she turned the key. "It's fine, thanks."

The man walked back to the school bus and waved to her from the driver's seat. Ellen smiled and waved back. As soon as the bus was out of sight, she realized she was shaking too hard to drive. Turning off the engine, she gave herself a minute to calm down. Neither Billy nor Mary Jo nor Yolanda—no one—needed to know about this mishap, because that's all it was. Not a wreck, not nearly a wreck. It was just her over-reaction to an empty yellow school bus driving around before the school year had even begun. That should be against the law.

It was 8:30 and most of the shops around the square didn't open till ten. The majority of tourists wouldn't rouse until almost noon. But the shopkeepers and diner cooks were up. So was Mary Jo. She had Alice Parton under the dryer and was shampooing the blue/black dye out of Wilma Nance's hair. Mary Jo's complexion was puffy and dull. Perhaps she, too, had gotten up at three a.m. to watch black-and-white Westerns on television.

Ellen put her purse in the drawer of the antique dresser by her chair. "Morning, Mary Jo." The air conditioner had not quite kicked in against the night's heat.

“Mornin’, Kiddo. How was your Friday night?” Mary Jo sounded so chipper she must have slept through the night.

Ellen grinned. “Same as usual.”

Misinterpreting the look, Mary Jo said, “Well, must have been a good night for married ladies.”

Wilma Nance popped her head out of the sink. “Oh, you don’t have to be a married lady to have a good time in Limestone. Like that Williams woman. She doesn’t even bother to *act* decent. Just leaves the front door open waiting for whichever John or Joe she’s seeing this week.”

Ellen was intrigued. She loved hearing gossip, especially if it might be true. It was exciting to think that something illicit might be happening in Limestone. They were all living vicariously.

Wrapping a towel around Wilma’s wet hair and escorting her to the styling chair, Mary Jo cooed, “I hadn’t heard.”

“Yes, that Reba Williams, ever since her husband ran off with that dishwasher-blond bank teller, she’s just lost all self respect. You’d think she’d move away, start over. But no, she’s just anybody’s floozy. I’m not going to mention names, but she’s taken up with a married man.”

“Well, if it’s Billy, I’d like to know so I can go home and shoot him.” They were all laughing as Ellen’s first customer came in. Mrs. Miller was about seventy-five years old with thin, but fast-growing hair. Every other Saturday, Ellen dyed the white roots red-orange. Mrs. Miller was losing her hearing, so no one had to be circumspect, but her arrival seemed to take the bile out of Wilma’s rant and she turned the subject to real estate. “Have you seen those lots for sale out by the sewage treatment plant? One-hundred-thousand-dollars. Now, mind you, that is

not for a house. It's not for a couple of acres. It buys you a naked lot." Her indignation filled the shop like hair spray fumes.

Ellen couldn't imagine anyone wanting to live on Old Robinson Road at any price. It wasn't even paved; if the road dust didn't drive you indoors, the odor would. But the road and the price might appeal to the Houston folks who could easily afford the lot, the house, and the electricity to seal themselves indoors with central air-conditioning.

Shampooing Mrs. Miller, Ellen became aware of the warm water and the thin wet hair floating, swirling around her fingers. She gently massaged the elderly woman's scalp, caressing the skull, thin and fragile as eggshell. Mrs. Miller motioned for Ellen to come closer. Ellen bent toward her as the woman whispered loudly, "I have to cancel my standing appointment. I'm so sorry."

The woman had come in every other Saturday since before Ellen had been hired. "Now, Mrs. Miller, whatever the problem is, it can be fixed. Do you need a ride? Do you need to change your appointment time? What is it?"

The woman drew a deep breath and said, "I'm in trouble with the iris."

"Trouble with the iris? Is that like aphids in the roses?"

Mrs. Miller looked impatient and swatted Ellen away. She sat up as Ellen wrapped a towel around her wet hair. "I said, the I. R. S. It seems that Mr. Miller failed to file our tax forms for several years, and now the government is garnishing our income." Everyone in the salon pretended not to be listening. "So I can't afford my beauty treatment. I have to sacrifice for the error of his ways." Her filmy blue eyes closed against her suffering as she dramatically touched the back of her hand to her forehead.

Ellen could imagine the older woman in a month, red tint grown out half-way, white hair nearer the scalp. That would be a deeper kind of suffering. Ellen decided that after Mrs. Miller was dried and set, she would walk her to her car and explain the salon's new "senior citizen discount" and payment plan.

When Ellen faced the mirror, she could see her own unfortunate hair, the lines beginning to show around her eyes and smile, and what looked like baby fat on her five-eight frame. This summer had brought too much potato salad and too much sun. Moisturizer and sunscreen could only do so much. Maybe in a month or two, when it was cooler, she might be inspired to take long, brisk walks. She looked past her image in the mirror, through the reflection of the plate glass windows into the street. Traffic was picking up, mostly tourists browsing the antiques and homemade knick-knacks. Once in a while, Ellen wished she had the craft gene so she could stay home to paint bluebonnet landscapes on hand saws or weave rags into rugs instead of beautifying the ladies and a few of the men of Limestone.

Mary Jo added a second coat of hairspray to Wilma's updo said, "Of course, the big news is 'we wuz robbed.' "

"What? The salon? Who'd be dumb enough to think you have money in here? Or maybe they stole all the old, solidified nail polish?" Ellen thought of the bright-eyed, eighteen-year-old checkout clerks at the grocery, their chipped fingernails always painted garish colors, but then, they didn't have Jell-O-colored hair.

"Not us. The whole town." Mary Jo pointed the end of her rattail comb toward City Hall. "All of us. The City did an audit after Jane Lucas resigned as City Secretary and moved to California or wherever. Well, they found out she wrote herself a few extra checks, to the tune of three hundred thousand dollars plus change. They'll never get it back."

Alice Parton, pulled out from under the dryer and chimed in, “I’m betting she spent the whole thing on plastic surgery, body part by body part. It was so subtle, we couldn’t tell. Although I did wonder where her triple chin went last winter.” She stood and began to unsnap her way out of the black plastic cape.

“She never was pretty,” Mary Jo said. She and Jane Lucas were both local girls. “Where would she get ideas like that? I mean, you don’t see me getting nose jobs and eye lifts. An occasional change of hair color doesn’t count.”

“It had to be a man. To get him or to keep him. That’s about the only thing that makes women really stupid. Sucks our brains right out.” Alice sounded as if she spoke from experience.

"That's God's truth." Wilma slipped her cash under the mirror on Mary Jo's work shelf. "Beats anything I ever saw. Well, see you next Saturday if I'm still kickin'."

Ellen thought about \$300,000 and what it would buy. A house. All the air conditioning anyone would ever need. Trips around the world. Freedom. “You’re right Mary Jo. Let’s just keep coloring our hair for excitement and put our money in the bank.”

“That reminds me, Ellen, I want your opinion on something.” Mary Jo’s comb stopped mid-air above Alice’s head. “What do you think about us having a manicurist? Now a days they’re called nail technicians, but anyway, what do you think?”

Ellen wondered where the idea came from. “Did someone apply?”

“No, Kiddo. I thought this up all by myself. I just see a lot of tourist ladies running around here with fake nails. You know they come in once in a while with emergencies. Camping and river rafting are hell on fingernails. Anyway, it would be more money for the shop, and an added service for our customers, and, best of all, there would be somebody new in Limestone.”

“Let me help with that ad,” Ellen laughed while she rinsed off the perm curlers.

“ ‘Bucolic Hill Country town needs nail job. Set own rates.’ ”

Mary Jo said, “Write that down. I’ll call it in to the Austin paper. But first, here is your bar joke for the day. A duck walks into a bar and asks the bartender, ‘Hey bartender, you got any duck food?’ The bartender says ‘no.’ The next day the duck walks into the same bar and asks the bartender, ‘Hey bartender, you got any duck food?’ The bartender says ‘No! If you ask me again I’m gonna pluck your feathers and nail you to the wall!’ The next day the ducks walks into the bar and says, ‘Hey bartender, you got any nails?’ The bartender says ‘No.’ So the duck says ‘You got any duck food?’ ”

Ellen ate her lunch in the storeroom, which, furnished with a dorm-size fridge, a microwave, a tiny table and one chair, doubled as a break-room. The sink was stained from every manner of chemical, and the shelves held backup supplies of perms, dyes, shampoos, conditioners, latex gloves, plastic frosting caps, brushes, combs, and disinfectant, all of which were kept sealed to preserve their purity or so they did not stink up the joint until they were opened for use. The temperature in the backroom was cooler than the salon where storefront windows magnified the sun's heat. As Ellen drank her orange juice and ate her fruit, she longed for something more than tonight's usual supper. She called Yolanda at home, hoping Hank wouldn't answer.

“*Hola, que pasa,*” said the female voice. Thank god.

“It’s me.” Ellen closed her eyes and imagined the main room of the roadhouse twenty miles south. Just about dusk, a band—probably the Peyote Pigs—would tune up and men and women in boots and sneakers would kick sawdust into the air, but not high enough to spoil the scents and tastes of an all-fried, all-fat menu of burgers and enchiladas and, as a sop to the

vegetarians, broccoli steamed too long to hold its head up. “Let’s go to the Sagebrush tonight. We’ll eat too much and then dance it off.”

“*Chica*, don’t you know it’s Saturday? We are scheduled for your yard as usual.”

“Can’t you smell the dust and grease calling you, Landa? Can’t you hear the fiddle trying to outdo the guitar?” Ellen opened her eyes and stared at a swath of green across the bottom of the break room sink. “We’re old. We’re predictable. Our men no longer dance with us or anyone else. Well, Billy doesn’t.”

“And Hank? That *pendejo* dances with every chili pepper but me.” Yolanda sounded more sad than mad. “But what about Margaret and Deb? Should we invite them?”

“Not this time. We’ll be mysteriously missing, so it will be a hot time around the campfire back home. You can drive or ride the back of my Vespa.”

Yolanda laughed. “I’ll pick you up at eight. And wear that low-cut, red thing you wore to the Forth of July picnic. The one Billy told you to burn. I’ll be able to keep track of you.”

Ellen was spraying Mrs. Dunlap’s bouffant helmet of hair when she realized she would have to explain to Billy. She practiced: *I’m just bored. With our friends. With the same old Saturday night dinner. I need to dance. I feel old.* She didn’t think she could say out loud: *I feel trapped.*

As it turned out, the conversation wasn’t that hard. She said, “Billy, Yolanda and I are going out for dinner tonight, okay?” and he said, “Okay. Do you want to take the pick-up?” She was lucky to have such a trusting and understanding husband. Then she was furious that he trusted her so much, that she was without mystery, that he was complacent. Did he not care what she did, where she went and with whom? Was he without temptation and assumed she was, too? She could hardly wait to hear how it went when Yolanda told Hank about their plans.

Chapter 5

As soon as Yolanda drove up, Ellen could see how it went with Hank. Yolanda's bottom lip was swollen. Bits of dried blood clung to the side. Ellen got into the car. "Is this the first time?"

"No, he's been hitting me for a couple of months now. Usually it's where no one can see. My hair covers it or I wear sleeves." Yolanda held her chin high. She was steely-eyed as she backed the car out of the drive.

"You can't let him get away with this. Call the hotline. Austin has a women's shelter. You can take the kids, too." Ellen had never liked Hank. After a few beers, he would yell at Yolanda that she was a bad mother, a bad lover, or—if he were really drunk—a whore. If the other guys could distract him, he usually left her alone. "You know it's going to get worse."

"I know. I'm trying to decide what to do. At first, I thought it was just the heat or his job or something temporary." Her voice was barely above a whisper. Then she banged her fist on the steering wheel and laughed. "Hey, *chica*, this is our big night out. You're wearing red and I have collagen lips. Let's go have some fun."

The Sagebrush Roadhouse sat back from the highway behind a dirt parking lot. The wrap-around porch hosted *al fresco* dining while the open floor-to-ceiling windows carried the music to the outside diners. Multi-colored lights lined the ceiling.

Ellen was giddy with anticipation as she crossed the threshold and stepped onto the worn hardwood floor. She smiled into the dusky light, which was broken only by hurricane candles in cheap brass holders on the tables. "Let's sit at the bar."

Yolanda nodded. The jukebox was blasting Lou Ann Barton's "You'll Lose a Good Thing." No one was dancing yet; the song was bluesy and the night was just beginning. As they neared the bar, a skinny guy moved to the next barstool, leaving two vacant together. Ellen winked at him and mouthed, "Thank you." Both women ordered lite beers from the blowsy bartender, whose frizzy red hair towered over a rhinestone tiara. "Here you go, ladies," she said, presenting the bottles of beer as if they were trophies. "That'll be five dollars each."

Ellen held the cold bottle to her cheek as she pivoted around on her stool. A table of six young women looked like a sorority meeting, all blonde ponytails and red lipstick; spandex jeans on skinny bodies. Couples at two-tops; a middle-age foursome near the door. Shy cowboys stood between the bandstand and the men's room door, ready to bolt if someone spooked them. She spied none of her customers; most of the patrons probably were from Austin or San Antonio. She didn't spot any dance partner potential. One couple caught her attention: the woman was in her forties and good-looking with natural salt-and-pepper hair in a bouncy cut. The man was young, maybe, just maybe, twenty years old. Mother-and-son, except they were holding hands and laughing; the woman licked her lips and he moved closer. Ellen wondered whether they'd make it through dinner before rushing to the backseat of their car. She envied their passion. She turned to Yolanda. "What are you hungry for?"

Yolanda had been eyeing the crowd, too. "I don't see anything appetizing."

Ellen laughed. "No, I mean, to eat. Want some potato salad, bar-b-que, garlic bread?"

"Not this Saturday night, thanks. Think I'll line my stomach with grease. Then I can have as many beers as I want." When the Queen of Bartenders showed up again, Yolanda ordered french fries, onion rings, and another beer. The Queen smiled knowingly. "I'll run a tab for you, okay? And you, Honey," nodding to Ellen, "what'll it be?"

Ellen ordered a jumbo burger, all the way, fries, and extra napkins. And another beer. Whenever someone came through the front door he blocked the light from outside for a moment, which registered in the mirror behind the bar. Thus, Ellen could keep track of newcomers while concentrating on her food. Ellen loved the taste of greasy, salty fries, which were gone by the time she started on the burger. As was the beer. “*Una mas, por favor.*” Juice from the burger ran down her wrists. She stopped eating to mop the red flow. “I’m eating like a pig.”

“We don’t know anyone here.” White grains of salt dotted Yolanda's swollen lips. “Who’ll tell on us?” Then, to the Queen, “*Dos mas.*”

By the time the Peyote Pigs were setting up, Ellen and Yolanda were in the restroom. Ellen felt a little tipsy, but dancing and sweating would sober her up. Maybe she’d drink a glass of sweet tea before she had another beer. In the harsh light, the restroom mirror reflected her red face and sleepy eyes. Yolanda looked worse than Ellen, but not by much. Then Yolanda’s complexion turned from red to green and she threw up in the middle stall.

Ellen stood laughing. "Wow, three beers and you're hurling? You're way out of practice."

Yolanda wasn't laughing. "I haven't eaten much lately. No appetite. Guess I didn't grease my stomach enough." Then she did laugh. "Give me one more chance."

The Peyote Pigs began the first set with a rousing version of “San Antonio Rose,” thus winning the favor of folks who had driven from the south for an hour. Deciding that her chances for a male partner were slim to none, Ellen planted herself on the dance floor squarely in front of the Pig’s lead singer, a deep-voiced, sincere crooner. He wasn’t especially handsome, but he knew how to flirt with a woman, to make her feel special in the midst of all the young things wearing low cut blouses. Ellen played eyes with him, mouthed the words when he sang “I should have known you'd never make a wife.”

Ellen wondered if she had "made a wife." She was, for the moment, a "Honky Tonk Angel" tiptoeing into the "wild side of life." And she was having a great time of it.

Yolanda concentrated on the drummer, a short, blond man who didn't have much to do on the country'n'western songs, but would become important later when the band switched to rock. After dancing in place for most of the set, Ellen was out of breath and sweating, but no longer beer-headed. The lead Pig was obviously in love with her. He sang to her; she played coy. She was thirsty and hot; there were two more sets to come. At the bar, she and Yolanda ordered, "*Dos mas.*"

The Pigs took a break. His damp breath brushed her ear, "Hey, Crayola-Head, want to go outside for a smoke?"

She turned. "How do you know I smoke?"

He smiled and looked sheepishly at his boots. "Just something I say."

"I'll have a smoke." Ellen winked at Yolanda, picked up her purse and her beer, and followed the singer outside. The back of his shirt was sweaty and the moisture was seeping into his jeans just below his belt. His van was parked in the loading area at the side of the roadhouse, its double doors pointed toward a field of growing cotton. As he opened them, a shock of hot air smelling of old shoes and sour beer escaped. He swept his hand toward the brown shag carpet.

"Have a seat, missy."

"I'm Elizabeth," she said, wishing she had chosen Bambi or Tiffany or Brandi, something stripperish. She sat.

"I'm Doug." Doug sat down.

Ellen was having an adventure. At last, something different, something unpredictable, never experienced. A groupie, at her age. She inhaled slowly, to make it last. She was giddy and

gabby. "So, how long have you been with the Pigs? How long will you be at the Sagebrush? Ever play in Austin?" She had a few more conversational ploys, but Doug put his arm around her and his tongue in her mouth.

She was startled, but pleasantly so. She knew she shouldn't be doing what she was doing, but his kisses tasted like salty sweat and Jack Daniels. She inhaled the steam from his face. He put his hand on her back, under her shirt, his little finger diving under the waistband of her jeans. That felt good, his hand hot like a branding iron on her low back. She vibrated.

They were necking like teenagers. Or maybe like people who aren't married to each other. Was Doug married? Probably. Good, then they would both just be playing around instead of beginning a tangled affair. Her imagination was in over-drive.

Their arms entwined. She was feeling soft and generous when he leaned her back as he kissed her until they were lying across the matted carpet. *This might be the line I shouldn't cross.* She opened her eyes so she could think more clearly. Over Doug's shoulder, the sun had sunk behind the horizon, leaving ribbons of orange and pink. The red interior of the van reflected onto Doug's face, casting him as part of the sunset. Red was the color of neon and stilettos and lipstick, but it was the truly the wrong color for this van, unless he was trying to replicate some version of Hell. In its reflection, Doug looked as if he were having a hot flash. That made Ellen laugh, which came out as a snort and sprayed moisture onto Doug's red face, and put out the fire.

"What the hell?" he asked, rising up on one arm.

"I'm sorry. I just thought of something funny."

"Well, cut it out. We don't have all night." His tongue again. Ellen could faintly hear the throbbing bass of a song from the jukebox, but not the melody. Doug was making moaning noises in the back of his throat, perhaps fake ones to try to hurry her mood, but Ellen was bored. She had

wanted the back-and-forth repartee of flirting, not the blunt attack of a french kiss. Her adventure was a bust, her Pig was a pig.

Ellen pushed against him, trying to sit up. He held her down. He cupped her face tightly in his hand and whispered into her ear, "You've been asking for this all night."

Had she?

"Don't try to back out now." He was kissing her again, while his right hand struggled with the snap on her jeans.

He was wrong. She shoved his shoulder, lifting him away from her. "No, this is not what I wanted. I'm sorry you got the wrong idea, but—"

He smacked her head against the floor and crawled higher across her body so that his chest covered her face. Ellen couldn't get her mouth free to scream, her muffled noises sounded like hog grunts. She kicked at the air, but couldn't get out from under him. When Doug rolled to one side to get at her zipper, her hand was free to reach for her purse. She felt around until she found her shears. With her fist around the metal loops, she jabbed the blade into his thigh, but it hit taut denim and skidded sideways, tearing a small hole in his jeans and drawing blood.

He jumped up. "What the hell?"

Sitting up, then standing, she brandished her scissors. "These cost me \$300. If they're bent, you'll be buying me new ones."

"You tried to stab me."

"You tried to rape me. Let's call it even." Ellen was aware that people were gathering near the van. She didn't want to star in any rumors, so she whispered in Doug's ear, "You are truly a pig, and I'll testify in court for the next woman you attack."

She backed away from the van and spotted Yolanda near the front of the crowd, looking astonished.

Yolanda reached for her. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Ellen nodded as she slung her purse over her shoulder. “Let’s go.” Behind her, the crowd began chattering.

Yolanda looked pale. “Let’s get some coffee.”

Ellen was silent during the ride, trying to remember exactly how she had gotten herself into that situation. Just having fun didn’t warrant an attack. But men thought differently. Maybe she had been married too long to remember *how* differently.

The Pizza Barn was empty except for four middle-school children who were playing with the ice in their drinks, evidently waiting for a parent to pick them up. The freckled waitress offered to make a new pot of decaf.

“Yolanda, did you flirt with the drummer?” Ellen inhaled the smells of basil, garlic, and baking dough. Her burger and fries seemed like dinner from years ago.

“We were talking, you know, and I kept looking out the window. I half expected to see Hank out there in the parking lot, stalking me. He’d love to catch me with another man, he’d probably beat me to death. Anyway, I toned down the flirting, just in case.”

The waitress brought steaming coffees, spoons, and little pods of half-and-half.

“Aren’t you sick of that? Why don’t you leave him?”

Yolanda lit one of Ellen’s cigarettes and leaned back in the booth. “I believe we’ve had this conversation more than once: no money, two kids, and Mr. Machismo’s temper. I might as well have married a Mexican. With a hot-tempered Latino, at least you know what to expect.”

“Right, but now we can add physical abuse to the list. By the way, your lip has returned to normal.”

“Damn. I was liking that.” Yolanda looked at her reflection in the black window, twirling a curl of her new shag. “If Hank keeps hitting me, I might have to let this grow to shoulder length. Let’s talk about you and what happened and what you’re going to do about it.”

Ellen pictured Billy, always smiling, affectionate, reasonable. “I’ll just tell Billy what happened, I’ll tell him the truth, that I went to have a smoke with a guy in the band and he tried to rape me.”

“God, you’re right. Hank would punch me black and blue, but Billy trusts you. Hell, he trusts everyone. He never gets angry, even when some busybody tries to get a rise out of him. You are so lucky.”

Ellen stirred her coffee. “Yeah, lucky me.” She let that hang in the air, measuring the inflection against the possible sarcasm.

Yolanda signaled for a refill. “What were you thinking tonight?”

Ellen stared at the table and shook her head. “I don’t know, ’Landa. Maybe I’m losing it. I’m sad, and I don’t know why. I want something I don’t even know the name of. Hell, I’m practically a burglar.”

The waitress refilled their cups, bringing extra half-and-half. “Hope this don’t keep you up late,” she said sweetly. “Even decaf has some caffeine.”

Yolanda waited until the waitress had moved away. “A burglar? Maybe you read too much. You’ve mixed fiction with reality.”

Ellen wasn’t ready to explain, so she switched topics. “I was so stupid tonight. What was I thinking? I’m married.” She shredded her napkin, making a neat pile like a mouse bed.

The door opened and a man signaled for the pre-teens to come with him. "We owe anything?" he called to the waitress. She waved him off.

"That's it? You're married? The ladies' magazines advise you to see a counselor or take a cruise together. To rekindle the romance, if you aren't married to a *pendejo* like Hank. Is that what you need? Romance, like you're some teenager?" Yolanda blew on her coffee.

"Maybe. Or maybe I need the opposite of romance. Do we ever outgrow our need for excitement? The what ifs? The possibilities, roads not taken? I don't even know what I'm talking about." Ellen stared at her coffee.

"You are just bored and probably lonely. It's the condition of marriage. The cure for that is kids. They take up every minute of your life so you don't have time to feel sorry for yourself."

Her familiar feelings of ambivalence and indecision rose up, but Ellen laughed out loud. "Way to sell a concept, Yolanda. I'll try to get pregnant tonight."

Yolanda looked her in the eye. "Ellen, talk to me straight. You sound depressed. Do you have any meds for that?"

"No, it isn't that bad. It's just a mood. I'll be fine tomorrow."

The waitress had cleaned all the tables except theirs, had emptied the coffee pot, and was leaning against the cash register, examining her nails. Ellen and Yolanda took the hint.

Billy was asleep when Ellen came to bed. She pretended to sleep late Sunday morning, feeling lucky that last night's coffee sloshing against the beer hadn't upset her stomach. The headache she could deal with. After the front door opened and closed, she counted to twenty and got out of bed. Billy's note on the fridge announced that he had gone fishing and would be back mid-afternoon.

Ellen napped most of the day when she wasn't turning the pages of hairstyle magazines, neither seeing the pictures nor focusing on the words.

For dinner, Billy fried fish and potatoes and hush puppies. He gave her the details of each catch, each fish thrown back, whether he'd used real minnows or rubber worms, sad tales of lures forever lost, vivid descriptions of the successful rods and the useless reels, his estimation of the temperature and the humidity, the color of the water, the mosquito count, and the number and estimated IQ of each tourist who floated by on an inner-tube. He never asked about her evening at the Sagebrush.

Chapter 6

It was true. Yolanda's collagen lip had deflated. She peered into the hall mirror, the wall sconce lighting her face from beneath. Her ashen skin and the dark circles under her eyes gave her a ghoulish look. She felt like a ghost, invisible, transparent.

Lifting the sleeve of her blouse, she checked the week-old bruise. It had almost disappeared. And the scab on her chest near her heart was nearly gone. Luckily, when Ellen had given her the new haircut, Hank had not yet yanked out that patch in the back, causing her head to bleed. The rest of her hair hid the raw place. She would have to be careful about shampooing for the next few days.

There was no scar, no mark left after Hank had grabbed her by the shoulders and shaken her like a dirty rug. Was there such a thing as shaken wife syndrome? The symptoms would be rattled brains; disorientation; inability to understand what brought about this situation; an urge to vomit, to hide. And a small but intense rage, simmering on the back burner.

Maybe it *was* partly her fault. After all, Hank used to be gentle, loving, happy. He really did love the children, but he had never been a good drinker, and obviously he was getting worse. It was probably just a matter of time until he started hitting the children. Yolanda sighed. The children. Skinny, boney little kids, Henry only seven and Hannah, nine, but almost the same size as Henry. They would shatter like glass.

Yolanda gave herself a steely look in the mirror: *You'll just have to endure it until they are big enough to defend themselves.* Tomorrow, she would call an insurance agent to take out a policy on herself, making her mother the beneficiary. Concentrating on her plan, she didn't notice movement behind her, but she did feel the electric impact of the fist against her spine.

Chapter 7

Ellen was drowsing in her recliner when screaming babies woke her. The living room was dark except for the color dancing across the television screen. That's where the babies were, dozens of naked babies, sitting, crying for their mothers or milk or diapers. Who knew which? Maybe she was having a baby nightmare. She came out of her dream in a panic. "Sweets? Do you hear babies?"

"Relax, Elly, it's just the TV," Billy answered from his chair, patting her arm. "It's a commercial for Pampers. Aren't they cute when they cry? I just want to pinch their cheeks. The ones on their faces."

"Yeah, cute." Ellen sat up in her chair and finger-combed her hair out of her face. "I'll turn on a light. What time is it?" As she stood, her sweaty thighs slowly, painfully peeled away from the vinyl. She held on to the chair arm until her head and eyes adjusted to standing. It had to be late, she was sleeping so deeply. With the light on, the kitchen clock showed just 10:35, the television showed Jay Leno. "Want some milk?"

"Could you hand me a beer?" Billy adjusted his recliner so that he was sitting up straight and pointed the remote toward the TV. Jay went mute. "El, what do you think? We're not getting any younger, you know."

Ellen's hand paused on the fridge handle. She knew it was futile to pretend ignorance of the subject. This conversation was due, overdue, although she wished it had begun earlier in the evening. She poured herself a glass of pinot grigio, popped the cap from a beer, and used her index finger to flip off the glaring light. "I don't know, Honey. I always thought we'd have our own house before we started a family." *Started a family* sounded more ambiguous, further into

the future than *having a baby*. "We don't have nearly enough for a down payment." She handed Billy his beer and settled onto the couch.

"True." Billy took a slow sip of beer, his tongue licking the remaining foam from his lip. "But we started a family before we got married, and we didn't have a house." The colors from the television flickered across his face.

He was right. Ellen was three months pregnant when they got married and they were both excited about it. They had made sweet plans for bassinets and booties and bottles, mentally decorated a nursery, and talked about starting a college fund. Their name for a girl was Ellenore and for a boy was Willy, although Ellen had not completely signed off on the boy's name. But less than a month after the wedding, she miscarried. The doctors could not give a reason. Ellen had been healthy, had quit drinking as soon as she found out, and had cut down to one cigarette a week. "Just nature's way of discarding imperfection" was the platitude given by the gynecologist, implying that she had been carrying some demonic thing that did not deserve to live.

Later, a gynecologist in Austin discovered that Ellen's uterus was tilted to such a degree that she might never be able to carry a baby to full term. She refused to repeat that diagnosis to Billy, fearing that saying it aloud would make her seem inadequate, an incomplete woman. She preferred to just be evasive during these discussions. Rigorous about taking her birth control pills, she believed that she was making choices in her life. She kept meaning to make an appointment with the gynecologist to see whether a prescription drug or some surgical procedure developed in the years since her miscarriage would increase her chances for a successful pregnancy, but she never got around to making that phone call.

She said, "We were younger and dumber. And things cost less back then." Even with the ceiling fan going, the room smelled like charred meat and stale beer.

"That's nuts. It was only three years ago." Billy didn't raise his voice, but there was an urgency in it.

"I know, but it seems longer than that. We were still in our twenties—barely—and crazy. Remember Nude Camping? Champagne Tubing down the river? Instant Road Trips? Moon Baths? Now it seems like there's a timetable to life. Married by thirty, buy a house within two years, two babies by the time we're thirty-five." And, as with a lot of couples, perhaps divorced by forty. "I just feel like I'm being pressured to do something before I'm ready."

"There's no pressure, Hon. It's just that I'm ready to be a dad. And don't you worry. I'll be the one to get up in the middle of the night and change diapers and heat bottles. I'll know how to burp him, and I'll go with you to the baby doctor for checkups. I'll teach him to play football and baseball, even if she's a girl. Maybe we'll have twins, a mini-Ellen and Billy, Jr."

Ellen gasped. She could feel her heart pumping, could hear the blood rushing past her ears. Twins?

"Elly, what's the matter? Did that scare you?" Billy leaned forward and put his hand on her knee. "Are you worried about getting fat? Or labor? Are you worried about the pain? 'Cause you don't have to be. I'll be there with you. We'll take those classes and I'll do your breathing, too. Or you can have that shot that puts you to sleep until it's over." He laughed, enjoying his scenario. "You can get the shot and take a nap and I'll catch the babies when they shoot out. Right? Then you can have another, longer nap, and when you wake up, I'll have them potty trained." He bent double with the hilarity of it. "Another nap, a Rip Van Winkle one, and they'll be in college. On scholarships of course, because who can put a kid, let alone two, through school these days?"

It always came back to money. Ellen sipped her wine, appreciating its coolness against her warm throat, and wondered which way to go with the conversation: to tell him what the doctor

had said or to pretend to agree that now was the time to try to get pregnant, or to create some excuse to delay the decision for a few more months. She tried telling him the truth. "Maybe we can't have children. Maybe there's something wrong with my body that won't let me carry a baby." His hand was warm on her knee. She fought back the impulse to laugh at the way he looked so sincere, but the reflection of the television jumping around on his face made him look as if he had fleas. She bit her tongue.

"No way, Hon. You're perfect. You'll be great at being pregnant. Remember when my sister was pregnant? She ate whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Her ass got huge and she waddled around patting her stomach, rubbing it like there was a little genie inside. And out popped baby Luke, or as we know him now, the Tiny Terror. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

Ellen rolled her empty wine glass between her palms. "But what if I'm not good at being pregnant? What then?"

"I don't know why you have to imagine things like that. " Billy's voice was low. The hilarity had passed. "It never does any good to think bad thoughts. Anyway, we'll cross that bridge when, and if, we come to it." The muscle of his forearm swelled as crushed his beer can flat with one fist. The sound of the grinding metal bit her nerves.

How could she convince Billy that they were at that bridge? It would obviously take more than a note from her doctor. "Well, just suppose it's true. Would you want to adopt? Would you want a little Chinese daughter or Salvadoran son?"

Billy screwed up his face. "Well, no, Hon, I don't think so. I want little kids that look like us. That's why we'll have our own babies. Mini-Ellen and Billy, Jr. Like us."

She would never admit it, but right now, Ellen was relieved that she could not stay pregnant. Not while she was so antsy and unsettled. Like a flea on a hot griddle, her grandfather would have said. "Like us."

Billy stood and pulled Ellen into him, hugging her close. His breath on her forehead was warm and moist. "Don't worry, you're going to be a wonderful mother."

She relaxed into his hug, his soapy scent calming her. Now she could hear the crickets outside, chirping for the rain to begin.

Billy gave her a gentle swat on the butt with the remote and turned off the television. "Now let's get working on this project."

Chapter 8

Two weeks later, Ellen was sweeping up blonde and auburn and ebony snippets of hair while the brushes and combs sterilized. Mary Jo asked if she could stay late. "Someone I want you to meet."

Ellen was exhausted, ready for a cooling bath and a cold glass of something, but she was also curious. She scooped the leavings into the trash and put the dustpan and the broom in the storage room. After all, there was no reason to hurry home, and maybe Mary Jo was up to something interesting. Settling into her styling chair, she looked around the shop from a client's eye-level, noting the wisps of hair behind the antique dresser and fingerprints on the mirror. Her hand traced a small rip in the beige vinyl armrest. To her right, she noticed that Mary Jo had tidied up the old manicure table at the front window. All the bottles of dried-up nail polish were gone and a green-shaded banker's lamp had been added.

The bell over the door gave a jangle and a fashionably dressed young woman entered.

"Here's your surprise, Ellen." Mary Jo was so beside herself that her voice was quivering. "Meet Crystal, our new nail tech."

Then Ellen's hand was enclosed in two soft, slender hands ending in inch-and-a-half red, white, and blue talons, each with a dainty gold star. Crystal's hair was secure in a gold lamé turban, except for reddish spit curls at each ear. She wore a white eyelet sundress and white ballet slippers. Her freckles and a five o'clock shadow sat lightly over her pale complexion.

Ellen's voice rose an octave. "So glad to meet you?"

"That's all right, Miss Ellen." Crystal's breath floated on a floral cloud, but his voice was deep. "Most people are shocked at first, then they just forget about it." Crystal's teeth were white squares inside coral glossed lips. He gently let go of her hands.

Ellen imagined the stir this would cause in Limestone and couldn't wait for it to begin. "Well, Crystal, I for one am glad you're here. What with the shampooing and perms all day, we hairdressers have the worst hands in the world." Ellen became aware of the lingering odor of Mrs. Roberts' 4:00 perm, but surely Crystal was used to salon smells. "Look at these," she said, nervously waving her hands in the air, "chapped and peeling, looks like they've been chewed off instead of filed. I want to be your first appointment in the morning."

"Thank you for your warm welcome, Miss Ellen," he said, again covering her hands with his warm, silky ones and smiling sweetly. "The pleasure is mine. I just know this is going to be a good move for us all."

Ellen was curious, intrigued, and just plain nosey. "We need to get to know each other. Let's all go get some coffee. Would that be good, Mary Jo? Next door at Dave's? Maybe we could start filling her, uh, his appointment book."

Mary Jo smiled. "That's a fine idea." She began at the back of the shop, closing cabinets and turning off lights. Outside, the air was hot and still. While walking the twenty or so feet down the sidewalk to the front door of the deli, they encountered seven locals, all of whom unsuccessfully pretended not to notice Crystal.

The deli was empty except for Dave, who was wiping down the counter with pungent bleach, overpowering the smell of stale potato chips and raw onions. He took a long look at Crystal without reacting. "Howdy, Ladies. Booth or table?"

They slid into the corner red-vinyl booth patched with duct tape. Ellen sat across from Mary Jo and Crystal, who faced the door. Ellen was suddenly embarrassed by the shabbiness of her favorite deli. Perhaps Mary Jo was, too, because she pulled napkins from the chrome holder and vigorously wiped imaginary stains from the table. It being after six, all three ordered chardonnay.

Ellen was glad to get a shameless look at Crystal while he gave a quick overview of his salon experience: four years in Dallas, five years in Houston, then two years in Abilene. He explained that he had chosen Limestone because he was ready for a small town experience. "At my age, the urban scene has lost its appeal."

Ellen would give anything to be jaded about city life. The theater, bookstores, dance performances, clubs, shopping, art movies. "How could anyone be tired of things changing all the time?"

He gave Ellen an understanding smile. "I'm just ready for a slower pace, and I aspire to better things. Like improving my mind. Does Limestone have a library?"

Mary Jo and Ellen nodded. Ellen decided not to mention that it was only open on Friday afternoons and that most of its books were of the airport variety: Danielle Steele and James Patterson, but no one could blame the librarian for buying from the bestseller lists.

"Is there a book discussion group? I don't care whether it's contemporary or the classics. I mean, I've never read *War and Peace*, so I'm open.

Ellen said. "There was a book club until a few months ago. It has since turned into a Wine and Spades club. They play for money." Ellen was about to delve into Crystal's reading habits when Dave brought their wine, chilled glasses sweating, cold and slippery to the touch. "A toast," said Ellen. "To new blood in Limestone." Their glasses clinked twice.

"Here, here," said Mary Jo, "And to new beginnings."

The thought of new beginnings beguiled Ellen. She wondered whether she could be as brave as Crystal, starting a new job in a new town without knowing anyone. But wasn't that exactly what she did a few years ago when she moved to Limestone? She sat up a little straighter and lifted her chin, remembering her former adventurous self. At the sound of the deli's door opening, she turned to see Jackie Wilson come in.

"Ah, the newlywed shops for supper," Mary Jo teased. "When does the honeymoon end and you start cooking?"

"Shows you," Jackie said. "Lester's grilling. I'm only here to pick up some cole slaw." Openly staring at Crystal, she walked to the booth and offered her hand. "I'm Jackie Wilson. Pleased to meet you." She gave him one of her widest grins as he dried his hands on a napkin.

"Likewise, Miss Jackie." Crystal's talons glittered in the shaking of hands. "Please think of me the next time you'd like to treat yourself to a manicure. Your first visit comes with a free paraffin treatment." He patted her hand and let go, sneaking a peek at her nails, as if to assess the project.

"Have you been doing this a long time?" Jackie seemed in no hurry.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said. "My life's work is holding hands and talking trash."

Jackie retrieved her hand and slid into the booth beside Ellen, signaling to Dave for a glass of wine. "You've done it now, Mary Jo. You'll spoil us rotten." She turned back to Crystal. "I didn't know they still sold turbans. Or did you go to Dorothy Lamour's garage sale?"

Crystal managed to both smile and shoot Jackie a withering look.

Jackie recovered well. "Honey, I want your first appointment tomorrow. Okay?"

"After me," said Ellen. "You're on at nine-thirty."

Jackie gave Crystal a innocent look. "Do you have a place to live yet?" Everyone in town knew Jackie was trying to rent her house after moving in with Lester.

"Oh yes, Ma'am. I spent today moving my accumulations into an apartment over The Painted Pony Antiques. It has twelve-foot ceilings, a splendid view of the square, and I can walk to the salon."

Mary Jo rolled her eyes. "Yes, and you've got Martha Mabley for a landlady. You must have done that by mail, because she only rents to young Christian women. She'll be checking on you. Mostly when you aren't there."

Crystal cradled his half-empty glass between his palms. "You're right. It was all done by email and I left my deposit check in her mail drop." He didn't seem alarmed. "If it doesn't work out, I'll move. It's happened before. Now, point me toward the choicest supermarket in Limestone. I'm going to make tomorrow's lunch for all of us."

As she watched him leave, it occurred to Ellen that, from the back, you'd never guess.

Jackie took Crystal's place in the booth so she could watch the door. "Lester is grilling ribs, so I'm in no hurry. Now, Mary Jo, I'll admit we've all gotten used to having a gay florist in Limestone, but a transvestite manicurist is something else entirely. Are you sure this is going to help your business?"

Mary Jo drank the last of her wine. "You just made an appointment, didn't you? And you're third generation Limestone."

"Well, maybe I'm more open-minded than most people around here."

Ellen laughed. "Actually, those of us with HBO know transvestites from hermaphrodites and other sexual distinctions. They aren't a threat. Besides, the proof will be in your hands, your nails."

"All I know," said Mary Jo, "is that his references were all raves. Furthermore, I gave him an audition and look at these hands. My nails hadn't been done in years and he makes them look like I'm a kept woman. What more do you want?"

"I want to ride my little Vespa home and take a long soak in the tub," said Ellen. "I've got a nail appointment in the morning." Jackie and Mary Jo called to Dave for another round.

Ellen was thinking about Crystal as she ran the water for her bath, wondering what his real name was and how he chose the name Crystal. Ellen wanted to sit down with him as if he were one of the girls and listen to his stories, but not here, not with Billy around. Billy wouldn't make fun of Crystal, but he'd be amused—as if Crystal were more pet than person. Perhaps she and Crystal were kindred spirits. Maybe they would form a two-person book-and-travel club.

She added her tip money to the cash from previous weeks, kept in a zippered Blanco Community Bank bag hidden in a shoebox. Her paycheck went into their joint account, but her tip money was her mad money. Tips weren't big except for the occasional tourist who was so amazed at the low prices, she over-tipped. The bank bag probably held enough for gas money as far as Albuquerque, but she was holding out for Taos.

The old claw-foot tub full of tepid water and gardenia crystals created a tropical island. It was a reverse boat, with the water inside. In some former life, she may have been a dolphin. She was reading a book of short stories when the front door opened and closed.

"Hey, Baby," Billy said through the door. "You in there?"

"Almost through." Ellen pulled the plug and the water swirled down the drain. She reached for the thick blue towel, one of her few extravagances. While drying off, she glimpsed herself in the mirror. Her rainbow hair now seemed like the expression of an adolescent with

emotional problems. The colors did not at all reflect the level of stability, sophistication, and maturity that represented the real Ellen except when she went to roadhouses and drank too much beer.

Tucking the towel around her, she went into the living room, to her purse on the coffee table, and pulled out her shears. Even though it had been weeks, she checked them for blood or scratches from the Sagebrush episode. "Hi, Honey. I'm almost through. Want me to start dinner?" No answer. He was probably outside. She went back to the bathroom and stood between the two mirrors, angled so she could see both the front and the back of her head. No matter how many times she cut her hair, her mind always went back to the initial crime: she had been four years old when she used her round-tip scissors to cut the curl from her forehead. As punishment, her mother had made her wear bangs until she was twelve.

Now she cut off the colors, one tress at a time. Snip, there went her childishness, snip, there went impulsiveness, snip, snip, snip, her Sassoon shears opening and closing like a crane's beak as she slowly watched herself return to adulthood. She wished she knew the name of the hairdresser who snipped the perfect wedge into the hair of Eureka's owner.

Her new cut was perfect: wispy, jaunty, and somewhat rakish. It had see-through bangs and curly tips. But it was brown. Tomorrow, after the manicure, Mary Jo could add some highlights. What a busy, self-indulgent day she would have.

She put on one of Billy's tee-shirts and was staring into the fridge when he came in the back door, his hands and clothes greasy with motor oil that attracted the dust in the air. She'd have to soak those awhile before she put them in the laundry bin.

"Hey, Hon. What if I clean up and grill some pork chops? You can bake a couple of potatoes."

"What if you grill a couple of chicken breasts, let them cool, and we'll have a chicken Caesar salad?"

He leaned in to kiss her forehead, keeping the rest of his body from smudging her. "You're the chef. And your hair looks great. Very flattering. Did Mary Jo do that?"

Ellen laughed. "You'll never understand that with enough mirrors you, too, could see the back of your head." She ruffled his hair. "Hurry and clean up so I can tell you about Limestone's newest resident."

Ellen retrieved the anchovy paste, lettuce, sunflower seeds and other ingredients for her version of a Caesar. She could live on salads all the way into November, when winter's chill would invite dinners of stew, chili, or meatloaf. Then Billy could grill steaks, running from the outside grill into the kitchen and back again to keep warm. Someday, they'd have an indoor Jenn-Air like the one at Eureka so he could stay toasty while he cooked.

Ellen set forks, knives, napkins, and the chipped blue-edged pottery bowls on the table and turned off the overhead light so the room would seem cooler. She set a beer by Billy's bowl and poured herself a glass of tea.

By the time Billy had showered and grilled, he'd forgotten Ellen's tease about the newcomer, which was fortunate because she had something else on her mind. "Billy, do you know that Hank hits Yolanda?" She avoided the word "beats," not yet knowing whether that was accurate.

"No, but it doesn't surprise me. Is it bad?"

"What's your definition of bad? A bruised arm? A black eye? Teeth knocked out? A visit to the ER?" Exasperation overcame tact. "How can you be friends with someone who beats his wife?"

Billy put his fork down. "Now El, that's just nuts. I'm not responsible for him. All of my friends have flaws. Yours, too." He used his napkin to mop the sweat from his forehead.

"Flaws? Assault is against the law, maybe a felony if he does enough damage. I wonder if their kids are aware." Ellen sipped her tea and tried to calm herself. The clock ticked loudly. The fridge buzzed. She could hear Billy chewing.

Even though she had let the chicken cool in the fridge for a few minutes, it was still warm enough to wilt the lettuce and melt the Parmesan flakes. It looked appetizing, but Ellen couldn't taste it.

"He *has* been differently lately. No sense of humor, no fun." Billy got another beer from the fridge and popped the top. "I assumed he was worried about work or money or something. Want me to talk to him?"

"If you think it would do any good. I'm trying to get Yolanda to go to a shelter. That would make him furious, but at least she'd be safe." Ellen pushed her food away.

"Are you going to eat that?" Billy scraped her salad into his bowl. "Let me talk to him. At least I can find out what's wrong. Maybe it's something that will blow over soon."

Ellen enjoyed washing dishes. The warm, soapy water moving back and forth across the plates and bowls and swishing through the fork tines always soothed her. Looking through the window without seeing the cracked ocher paint on Mrs. Ezell's house, she imagined herself handing a scrap of paper with Hank's address and the zippered Blanco Community Bank bag to a short, stocky hit man in a bulky jacket. Such a simple solution for everyone, including Hank who must be in a lot of pain. But of course, that would be illegal and Ellen had no intention of going to prison. Her world was small enough already.

After drying the dishes, she took her time smoking a cigarette on the side porch where it was shady. Max the cat came by to visit. Maybe the guy could just break Hank's kneecaps as a warning.

Ellen and Billy watched television because dark didn't come until around nine-thirty or ten and they both felt guilty going to bed in the daylight. During *Piers Morgan*, they moved closer together on the couch, he leaning against her, her leg over his, his arm around her, until they were entwined. They made tender love while Piers interviewed a Kardashian.

Chapter 9

Ellen was surprised the next morning when she looked in the bathroom mirror and saw her mono-colored, elfin hair-do before she remembered cutting it, which reminded her about highlights and her nail appointment with Crystal. She dressed in a pink top and pink slacks because pink looked good with her fair complexion and brown hair. And, too, it might prevent her from choosing some gaudy purple polish.

It was Friday, one of the last Fridays before football started. Soon she would be spending Friday evenings at Roadrunner Stadium, no longer sneaking into someone's house where she might get caught or perhaps the police might be called and she might end up in handcuffs and get her picture on the front page of the Limestone *Bi-Weekly Herald*.

Such a beautiful crisp morning to be riding the Vespa to work. The bright blue sky was pocked with cotton-ball clouds and the morning dew kept the dust from rising into the air. Ellen was only half-conscious of the rarified day because her attention had arrived at work before her body. She was wondering whether Charlotte Ryder's son had recovered from his concussion and if Mrs. Miller could afford to keep her appointment tomorrow. The woman was so frail. Ellen admired the elderly women of Limestone, widows mostly, who cared about their appearance and still took an interest in the affairs—literally and figuratively—of the town.

She arrived at The Talk and parked her Vespa beside Mary Jo's ratty old Buick. Clouds were gathering overhead, but Ellen knew better than to hope for rain.

Inside the salon, the air-conditioning was humming, and by afternoon all of Limestone would be, too. The manicure table was positioned near the front window so Crystal could take advantage of the outside light. His arrival explained why Mary Jo had had the windows washed

two days ago. Crystal's red hair (a surprisingly subdued hue for a salon employee) was in an up-do with the spit curls framing his oval face. He was wearing white silk Capri pants with a long-sleeved, black jersey top. His hightops were black, as was his eye shadow. He had not shaved. "Morning, Miss Ellen. Your new do is majestic. You look like a princess or a real young Susan Sarandon."

Mary Jo fluffed Ellen's bangs. "Let's just tip those ends maroon and they'll look like fire jumping in the air. You did a real good job, Kiddo, especially in the back."

Ellen stored her purse in the bottom drawer of her cabinet. "No, I don't think so." She had changed her mind about the highlights. "This is a no-maintenance 'do. I don't need to blow it dry. I don't need hot oil treatments or mask conditioners. I'm simplifying my life." Mary Jo looked a little hurt, so Ellen added, "Not that I don't value your opinion."

Crystal led Ellen to the manicure table. "The lotion is warming and bliss awaits." His hand swept across a swarm of tiny bottles. "Do you feel more inclined toward the reds, the oranges, the brown, the pinks, or the pearl tones?"

Ellen laughed. This was going to be fun. Not just the manicure, but being around someone irreverent and happy to be alive. She took a seat and first picked a pretty though purplish color before she read the name: Bruised Lips. *How sick!* She sat the bottle of polish on the table too hard. "Let's try that one." Lady Lilac. Purple seemed inevitable.

Crystal began his ministrations, putting Ellen's left hand in the warm lotion and filing the nails on her right hand. The aroma of the pink soaking lotion reminded Ellen of cinnamon and apples, autumn. She relaxed and was getting woozy until she became aware of being watched. Right outside the window, five or six people were staring in at her. Well, no. They were staring at

Crystal. Ellen was too polite to stare back, but she thought she recognized a couple of merchants from down the block. She sat up straighter.

"Don't pay them any mind, Dearie," said Crystal. "It'll all be over in about a week. Maybe two. It always happens. I'm a big event, a curiosity, then like that," he snapped his fingers, "I'm the girl next door no one notices."

Ellen couldn't imagine that ever happening, but she had to defer to his experience. "I work in front of that window every day and never think a thing about it," she said. "But now I feel like I'm on television. Maybe we should do a reality show. 'Bored Housewives of Limestone Visit the Salon.' "

Crystal was amused. "No, ma'am. We can't give away our beauty secrets." He lifted her left hand and took careful aim with the orange stick.

Mary Jo was having a hard time trimming Lucy Ferguson's pageboy because the phone kept ringing. Every woman in Limestone suddenly realized she needed a haircut or a manicure. The ones who did their own nails or got their hair done at the Cut 'n Curl across the square had just run out of shampoo or hair spray and stopped in for supplies. Transactions took much longer than usual what with each and every woman being undecided about which brand she used or which size she needed and digging in the bottom of her purse for small change, all the time looking sideways at Crystal. They voted with their mouths: a smile of approval, a frown of disapproval, or a moue that seemed to reserve judgment until there was more evidence, or in this case, more experience with the newcomer. Rosalie Ferris, one of the more brazen, came over to talk with Ellen as if they were good friends continuing a recent conversation. Staring at Crystal, Rosalie said, "That nice husband of yours fixed my car while I waited and I was so—oh, you must be the new manicurist. Where are you from, California?"

"Central Texas, Ma'am, just like you."

"Well, you're hardly just like *my* people." Rosalie lifted her nose three inches into the air and turned toward the door. "Thank the good Lord I can do my own nails." She slammed the door, rattling it in its frame, her overwhelming White Diamonds perfume trailing behind.

"Touché," said Mary Jo to Crystal, laughing. "You can afford to spin that one off because your appointment book is full for the next two weeks."

Crystal nodded, then turned to Ellen. "Very interesting, this line." He held her right palm toward the ceiling and rubbed his index finger across its middle. "I read palms, you know."

Ellen waited, wondering whether he read the past or the future.

"I can read the past or the future. Want to try me?"

Ellen nodded. "Even though I don't really believe in that stuff."

Crystal, ignoring Ellen's skepticism, spoke in a low, intimate voice. "Your hand is very unusual. Your lifeline is long; you'll live to be an old lady. But there's another line, almost a shadow line right beside it."

Ellen shivered. She spent whole days without thinking about her little sister, Sue Ellen. They were Irish twins—born in the same year. The pediatric nurse had named Lou Ellen while her mother was anesthetized and her father was out of town. Eleven months later, their father signed "Sue Ellen" to her little sister's birth certificate. When they were seven and six, the yellow school bus had taken them on a field trip to the Houston *Chronicle*. They would be mini-reporters, asking questions and taking notes. Their reports were to be published in the school paper. It was the worst kind of February day, gray through every window. Inside the cold and damp bus, the vinyl seats were icy; rain pinged off the metal roof. Twenty-three children flitted about, unhampered by seatbelts. Under the round-roofed bus, their tamped excitement hummed

like the inside of a beehive. A cold and cranky Lou Ellen refused to share her Hersey's Kisses with Sue Ellen, who had eaten all of her own. Lou Ellen moved across the aisle to the left side of the bus to escape from her sister, who was crying into her arm atop the seat in front of her, whimpering about how much she loved Louie, how she would share with Louie if *she* still had any Kisses.

"The shadow line is so short, it looks like the lifeline of someone who died as a child." Crystal jarred Ellen back into the present, but just for the moment.

Lou Ellen had first experienced the crash in slow motion, as she would for the rest of her life. She hadn't seen the tow truck that crashed into the right side of the bus. Metal slammed into metal, screeching and whining. Windows shattered, raining tiny bits of broken glass into the bus, onto her face and hands. Unanchored seats slid back and forth as if inside a pinball machine, pitching her and her wooly-coated classmates to the ceiling and back. The twisted, gaping metal of the bus was wrong-side-out so that inside, the bus was a sunny yellow. Cold rain poured in, pooling with blood, echoing the screams of children merging with the sirens of ambulances. Lou Ellen's head smacked the side of the bus, but she would not remember what caused her headache or the blue knot. Finally, the sideways movement of the bus stopped and gravity regained its hold. Lou Ellen began pushing through glass shards, schoolbooks, and upturned seats, looking for her sister.

Sue was upside down between two seats, one of the railings pressed into her neck. Lou sat beside her during the ambulance ride to the hospital, holding her hand and listening to her unconscious mumblings. Sue was given a bed and wired to tubes and plugs and machines with flickering lights. Lou lay unwired in the bed beside her for observation. Sue died during the night while Lou slept.

Lou Ellen had tried to explain to her parents about the candy and to apologize for not taking care of her sister, for losing Sue, but her parents appeared not to see her or each other. Lou Ellen understood that if she had shared her candy instead of moving across the aisle, she would be with Sue Ellen. Then she would be as important to their mother as Sue had become. After the accident, Lou Ellen's mom had called her Sue about half the time. At first, being seven, Lou Ellen had corrected her, but she eventually came to understand that that was her mother's way of keeping Sue alive while mourning her. Lou Ellen helped her mother by submerging Lou and blending the Ellens. She became both of them. She became Ellen.

Ellen fought back tears and tried to steady her trembling hands.

"Girl," said Crystal, "You don't have to tell me a thing. I'll finish this reading some other time, because I can tell you have a terrific future."

When all ten nails were shiny with lilac, Ellen thanked Crystal and went into the back room for a good cry. It happened every so often, a random word or gesture could rekindle the memory. She would flash back to the accident, as vivid now as the day it happened, and her protective emotions scattered, allowing the tears to flow. It was a periodic and temporary letting go of guilt and sorrow and loss. When the sobs subsided into deep breaths, she flailed the air with her wet fingernails until she thought it was safe to reenter the salon and trim poor bald Roy Watkins' moustache and eyebrows.

The ladies of Limestone who came to The Talk around noon were rewarded by a buffet with three of Crystal's original recipe salads and a cheese plate. He obliged those who asked for the secret to his dessert, an Apple-Pecan-Medley, and suggested compatible entrees. Alma Johnson invited him to join the Study Club, mentioning that it included a potluck supper the first

Thursday night of the month. Crystal said he would consider it and let her know. The chatter of excited voices filled the salon with energy and comradery.

Ellen, too, felt the vibe. "I've changed by mind, Mary Jo. Let's light up the magenta fire tips on my new 'do. I feel like pure electricity."

When Ellen arrived home, she went to the bedroom and opened the bottom drawer of the dresser. Under the insulated underwear and flannel pajamas that were totally unnecessary in Limestone lay the yellow sweater. Ellen pulled it from under the other garments and shook it out. It was a tiny yellow cardigan sweater, just the right size to fit a six-year-old. It was buttonless. Its little pearly buttons had been yanked off when the medics ripped the sweater from Sue Ellen after the wreck. Ellen had stolen it just as she and her parents were leaving the hospital room where Sue Ellen and her sister had lain side by side for the last time. Now she put the sweater to her face, but after all those years, it had lost Sue Ellen's scent.

Sue Ellen had been the impish, laughing daughter. Now she was the forever baby daughter. Lou Ellen had watched her in amazement, trying to learn how to laugh so easily, to be that curious, to be unafraid. Of course, that did not always work to Sue's advantage. When Sue Ellen was three, all the neighborhood kids gathered at the edge of the street to watch the big red ants scurrying around their ant bed. Some ants were carrying food into the hole in the ground, but others just wandered around in a hurry. The kids were all mesmerized by the sight, speculating on which ant would go where, when Sue Ellen stomped her fat, bare baby foot right in the middle of the ants. How daring. And then the stings made her wail, so one of the bigger boys picked her up and carried her home to their mother for iodine and kisses.

With that mix of fearlessness and bad judgment, her little sister could have grown up to be a rock star or the lead in a sit-com that Ellen would be forced to watch out of sisterly loyalty. More probably, Sue Ellen would have been an eminent scientist at a university, with a handsome husband and several well-mannered, yet engaging children. Due to her world travels and mountain climbing, she would have remained slender, even though she was a gourmet cook and a wine connoisseur. Had she lived, Sue Ellen would have gone places and done things. She would have *lived*.

Ellen was keenly aware of the absence of Sue Ellen Peterson. She folded the yellow sweater and snuggled it back under the clothing she would pack if she and Billy ever decided to take up alpine skiing.

She made a peanut-butter-and-grape-jelly sandwich and listened to the anchor announce the national news at 5:30 while she eyed her glamorous nails. They contrasted prettily against the wheat bread with a dab of purple jelly, and they sparkled against her glass of sweet tea. It was not nearly the first time she'd had painted nails, but for some reason, this manicure seemed especially festive and frivolous. She felt jazzy and jumpy and snappy. The only thing to do with all that giddiness was to take it to Eureka. But that was out of the question.

She was about to succumb to *Entertainment Tonight* when Billy came in, dirty and astounded to find the bathtub available. She lied, saying she had bathed earlier. During his long hello kiss, he caught sight of her nails. "That reminds me, why didn't you tell me about your new co-worker?"

Ellen was surprised. "I didn't tell you last night? I remember saying I'd tell you about Limestone's newest resident." Fumes of gasoline and motor oil floated around her. "Guess I don't have to now. What did you hear?"

"Just that he's no threat to our marriage. That he dresses a little peculiarly but gives great nails." Billy was stripping in the living room, throwing his overalls into the bathroom. "Am I right?"

"He and I haven't discussed his sexual orientation. You never know. But Crystal—that's his name—is delightfully peculiar. And a great addition to Limestone. I don't think he rides a motorcycle, but we might invite him over some Saturday night for Bar-be-que."

"Right." Billy laughed hard enough to make his bare stomach jiggle. "Maybe he could do Hank's nails between beers." He went into the bathroom and turned on the water, leaving the door open.

He called out, "Hey, Baby. Remember we were talking about taking a vacation?"

Ellen grinned in anticipation. Surely he was about to agree to Taos. "Yes, I remember." He was making a lot of racket sloshing around in the water. She rounded the corner into the bathroom and sat on the clothes hamper so he wouldn't have to raise his voice.

"I had a great idea. Look in the atlas and find Carlsbad. It's close enough for a bike ride, so we can take one day to get there, spend one day, and take one day to come back."

She was stunned in the face of his counter offer. She found the atlas lying beside the couch and turned to New Mexico again. Carlsbad looked to be about seven or eight hours away from Limestone. "How do you know about Carlsbad?" She couldn't remember him ever mentioning visiting there, and they certainly hadn't gone there together.

"See, that's the perfect distance for a bike trip."

Sure, if you want to arrive at your destination with a sunburn, frazzled hair and an odorous body, with just enough energy left for a bath and bed. "What's there to do in Carlsbad?"

Of course she could find out on the Internet, but she wanted to know why he was so jazzed about it.

The water swirled and slurped going down the drain.

"I was talking to Jody, down at the garage, and he told me all about when he went there a few years ago." Billy emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his hips, drying off with the free end. "Jody said it was unbelievable. It's got caverns you can go down into, walk around in. And at dusk, thousands of Mexican free-tail bats fly out over your head on their way to feed somewhere. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

He probably didn't want her honest opinion. "But you can see bats fly in Austin just an hour away. They come out from under the Congress Avenue Bridge. Haven't you ever done that?"

He was taken aback. "But it's not the same thing. Carlsbad has caverns. Big caves."

"I know what a cavern is. What else is there to do?" The possibility of Taos was becoming remote. In her mind the purple mountains, sage mesas and sunset afterglows were blurring into one mud-colored vista.

He patted her hand. "Lots of stuff. You're gonna love this. It's got a lake. We can rent jet skis. And Jody said they have paintball games. Of course, that's not your cup of tea, and we may not be there long enough to do everything. What do you say? Don't you think Carlsbad is a good compromise?"

No, it wasn't a compromise. It was a sacrifice of everything she had dreamed of. For a split second, she imagined boarding a plane in Austin by herself. She would land in Taos, or as close as she could get, probably Albuquerque or Santa Fe, and rent a car, maybe sleep in it if the

plane fare ate most of her tip money. But the image fizzled out as her reality check reminded her that Billy would be appalled if she even suggested separate vacations.

She didn't want to cry in front of him. "I'm going out for a while." Maybe she'd walk around the block, maybe two blocks. She might walk all the way over to Yolanda's and see what she and the kids were doing tonight. "Are the guys coming over?"

"We're meeting at Wayne's. Deb's taking the kids to the mall in Austin," Billy yelled over the slamming of the fridge door. "We're going to speculate about the Mighty Roadrunners' opening game. Can you hardly wait?"

Billy hadn't noticed her new maroon highlights, but then he'd seen so many changes in her cuts and color, anything subtle no longer registered with him. Ellen put on clean underwear, a clean tee-shirt and shorts, and left the house. The sky was still cloudy. Maybe it would rain. She threw a rock toward the cur just to give him some exercise, but he was too lethargic to react.

Without deciding to, Ellen walked to Eureka. What a glorious present it was to have enjoyed this secret, safe, dangerous place. Opening the french doors, she swore that tonight really, truly was her final visit. Even if football season weren't starting, spending time in someone else's house was just too risky. But she would miss it hugely. Moving through the kitchen, she took a left, to the master bedroom and began her inspection. In the library, the living area, back to the kitchen, everything was as she had left it.

The master bath was in the interior of the house—no windows—and she flipped eight switches to turn on all the lights, enough wattage to land an airplane at midnight. She stripped off her clothes, trying not to look at the wall-to-wall mirrors or the mirrored ceiling. The shower faucets were a mass of gears and pulleys, but after almost scalding her arm, she figured out the hot from the cold. The giant sunflower showerhead sprayed water in a wide pattern onto the

Italian tile floor almost as big as her bedroom. Bending her head into the force of the water, Ellen tried to remember the last time she had taken a shower. It must have been in that hotel in Houston; she'd been at a styling seminar.

She froze at the first sound of the *ping*!

She held her breath.

Then she heard a dull *plink, plink, plink*!

She had company. She'd finally been caught. When she pushed her hair out of her face and the water out of her eyes, she scanned the bathroom. Nothing. Nobody. Then she looked around the shower until she spotted a can of shaving cream that had tipped off the ledge and rolled across the tile. She breathed slowly, determined to not let anything ruin her enjoyment of this huge damn shower.

The water was separating her hair, matting her hair, pounding on her eyelids, landing on her lips, the very sweetness of it all sliding down her stomach and thighs, splashing onto her toes. Maybe she had been a salmon, not a raccoon or a dolphin, in a former life. The soap and the shampoo were scented with lavender, and soon the shower walls and floor were sudsy. Drawing patterns in the soap on the wall, she wondered how, since the water did not cool down like a bath, she would decide when to leave. But, as with a bath, the fingertips of a thousand-year-old woman indicated that the shower should end. She quickly rinsed the suds from the walls and dried off with the thickest, widest, longest towel imaginable.

From the master closet, Ellen chose a dark blue, ankle-length kimono. She might be a size larger than the mistress of the house, but who was looking? When she walked, the silk slid over her body like feathers. She felt exotic. Maybe she would perform a slow erotic dance beneath the mirror on the bathroom ceiling. Maybe not.

She slithered into the library and picked up her book without opening it. Was this really her last night in Eureka? It should be. She had no business breaking and entering, if that's what it would be called even though she used the key. Taking a shower and wearing the owner's clothing pushed the limits of burglar decorum, but after all, this was probably her last night at Eureka.

Of course, there would be roughly a dozen Friday night football games; half of those would be out of town. Maybe, if she stayed away from Eureka for a month or six weeks, she might reward herself with one more visit. She knew she sounded like a drug addict, but she didn't care.

Now that she could concentrate, she opened the book, catching sight of her palm and its lifelines. Sue Ellen was always with her, but had once again moved from conscious thought to a shadow, an Other who traveled in Ellen's being. They were no longer separate. She could imagine a grown-up Sue Ellen, almost knowing what she'd look like but not how she would laugh or dress or what kind of man—or woman—she would be attracted to. Ellen tried to imagine having her sister back, calling her on the phone to talk about skipping football games, sharing clothes, conspiring against their mother when she became too inquisitive. Ellen could not bear to think about the thousand other things that would be different if Sue were still alive, so she read and reread the same page until she caught up with the story again.

Almost two hours passed before Ellen looked at the clock. She shelved the book, hung up the silky kimono, found her own clothes and hurried out. On the way home, Ellen remembered that football season meant fall, with all its festivals and crisp air and possible visits to Eureka by its owners. They would put food in the fridge and rearrange the bed pillows and leave soap scum in the shower and just generally make themselves at home. She overcame her dark thoughts of envy and jealousy by concentrating on the deep blue sky and bright stars.

Billy was in his recliner, waiting for the local news to come on, when she arrived. "I was worried about you. You okay? Where've you been?"

"Just out, walking around."

"You know, Ellen, the way you wander around the neighborhood on Friday nights, people might mistake you for some poor homeless woman with a good haircut."

"Not a problem. I'm incognito." She sat down beside him and snuggled in. "There are several houses for sale over toward Second Street. What if we looked at the smaller ones? They probably wouldn't need much of a down payment." Mary Jo's real estate agent client had mentioned a sell-off in that neighborhood. "What do you think?" She hoped he'd say no so she wouldn't have to let go of her vacation savings and her Taos dreams.

"We'll see," he said, nuzzling her hair. "You smell good. Is that new?"

He assumed that the lavender shampoo was sitting on the shelf of their bathroom, that she—maybe he—would smell that way every day for months. On such small hooks are the guilty snagged.

Ellen pulled away. "We'll see? That's an answer?"

"Yes, that's an answer for now. Of course, if you want a house so there'll be room for a baby, then hell, yes, we'll see. We'll see tomorrow."

The conversation had taken an unexpected, unfortunate turn. Ellen tried to catch Billy's enthusiasm. Skipping over nine months of pregnancy and a possibly painful labor, Ellen imagined having a little girl. A sweet, laughing, impish daughter that Billy would adore the way her father had adored Sue. The three of them would form a family and they would all be better people for having each other. But what if something tragic happened? She turned her head to shake away the whole scenario, reminding herself that a baby could not strengthen a weak marriage.

She could have one child or a dozen, but no child would ever replace Sue Ellen.

Chapter 10

The next morning, riding her Vespa, Ellen leaned forward in a hurry to get to the salon. It was Saturday and she would see Mary Jo and Crystal and all her clients, some of whom had worn the same style for twenty years and some who changed their hair for any mood or whimsy. Although she didn't know why, she was even looking forward to tonight's salad and steak soiree with Billy at the grill and everyone whining about the heat.

Crystal was already at the shop, sweeping, even though he'd swept last night before they left. He was wearing a silky, purple caftan that swayed with the motion of the broom and looked lovely with his not-quite-maroon hair. He had shaved, but not closely. Mary Jo was wearing a sunny yellow outfit, but the circles under eyes indicated a sleepless night.

"You look less than your best," said Ellen, then embarrassed, added, "How was that for tact?"

"Kiddo, those charm school lessons are paying off." Mary Jo looked in the mirror and ran her fingers through her ringlets. "Actually, I look like hell, but I only admit that because there's no customers in here. Do you think these dark blue tones are too subtle? I'm toying with the idea of something more colorful. Anyway, here is today's bar joke. A sandwich walks into a bar, orders a drink, and the bartender says, 'Hey, Pal, we don't serve food in here.' "

Everyone laughed, acknowledging that Mary Jo had changed the subject.

Ellen's first client, Mrs. Miller, came in to get her white roots dyed red, as usual. Later Mrs. Dunlap would come in to get her hair sculpted into a great round helmet that would last all

week. For today, the consistency and predictability of life in the shop comforted Ellen. It was her life outside the shop that needed more pizzazz.

At lunch, Ellen took her stack of tips down the block to the Blanco Community Bank and came out with three twenties and a five. She went two doors down and turned in at James & Son Hardware, a fabulous store that carried the usual supply of nails, screws, electrical conduit, barbed wire fencing, wire cutters, hammers and other tools, lawnmowers and yard tractors, but also bird feeders and canoes, skillets and pans and ice cream freezers and terra cotta pots arrayed on turn-of-the-last-century wooden racks lit by 40-watt bulbs that highlighted the century-old dust motes hanging in the air. The hardwood floors creaked underfoot, and the whole place smelled like 1935. In the far right corner, the James family stocked tents and other camping gear.

They offered a plain, two-person tent for \$150, but it would be a tight squeeze—size-wise—for her and Billy. She was claustrophobic just imagining the two of them lying side by side with no room for Billy to fling his arm over his head or for her to turn on her side and stick her knee out of the covers. The James family had been optimistic enough to stock a fancy, roomy dome tent priced at \$2,000. Maybe they were imagining some tourist losing his tent in a flashflood along the river and needing a quick replacement. But there on the bottom shelf was a nice yellow tent for \$360. It looked roomy enough for her and Billy in their sleeping bags and a couple of duffel bags.

Jimmy James must have seen her go cross-eyed over the sleeping bags. He came over to help. Did she want down-filled? Men's or women's? What temperature range would she be encountering? Was she backpacking because if she were, she'd need the lightest weight. Any children going along on the trip?

"Blue. I want a blue sleeping bag. That one. How much for that one?" It was only \$150, which Jimmy assured her was a bargain.

"How about this one for your husband?"

"That won't do. He's not shaped like a mummy. Do you have something for someone who's healthy, well, he's hearty, too. And he's hefty, He needs a lot of room." She settled on the red rectangle, priced at \$225.

The total came to \$735 plus tax. By Ellen's calculations, she had just bought seven nights of vacation, saving probably \$200-\$300 in motel bills. Jimmy took her \$65 as a down payment and agreed to put her purchases on layaway with three months to pay it out. Because she had spent—theoretically—over five hundred dollars, Jimmy threw in a "headlight" which, when strapped to a camper's head, freed his or her hands for cooking and tent pitching. Ellen decided to think about cooking pots and camp stoves some other time. She put the headlight in her purse and strolled back to the salon, astonished that she had just spent almost a thousand dollars without consulting Billy. In fact, he had yet to sign off on her version of their vacation plans.

Mary Jo was towel-drying Katy Witherspoon who had bleached her hair at home the day before and was astounded that it had turned so very orange. "Before I can do anything with the color," said Mary Jo, "I'm going to give you a deep-conditioning treatment. One with protein. You'll be sitting under the dryer in this shower cap for thirty-five minutes, so I hope you're not in a hurry." The clear gel from the tube of treatment snaked into Mary Jo's hands and she rubbed it into the orange hair somewhat fiendishly.

Although Ellen agreed with the prescription, she thought Mary Jo sounded a little harsh. Maybe she was just trying to discourage Katy from any more home experiments. Any hairdresser worth her weight in crimpers hated cleaning up other people's messes.

Crystal was between clients, tidying up his table and anything else that looked out of place to him. "So," said Ellen. "It's Saturday night in Limestone. Have you got big plans?" She knew not to invite him home tonight, not until she could gauge how the gang reacted to Crystal's merely being in town.

"I do have plans, thank you for asking. Miss Jackie and her Lester invited me to dinner. They told me not to bring anything, but I'll be making my Hot Damn Guacamole with four kinds of peppers."

Ellen was surprised at the small pang of jealousy that zinged through her heart. Had she thought that Crystal was her property? That he would just molder alone in his apartment until she was ready to introduce him to Limestone society, such as it was? No matter. Crystal wouldn't have that great a time looking at Jackie's wedding pictures and listening to honeymoon stories. Or would he?

When Katy was seated under the dryer, Mary Jo gave her a little shove and set the dryer on "high." She turned, smiling to Crystal and Ellen. "It wasn't so long ago you couldn't buy four kinds of peppers in Limestone. For years, all we had was Dickie's Market. The only fresh vegetables he stocked were potatoes and carrots, and they cost three times more than they would in Austin. Now we have real supermarkets on both ends of town and peppers and mushrooms and arugula, which I've never bought but do take note. Poor Dickie had to retire early, but he probably can afford it after robbing us for years." Mary Jo sounded like her old self. Perhaps nothing was wrong after all. "Speaking of money, Crystal, have your clients ever given you stock market suggestions?"

Crystal looked pensive, then said, "No Miss Mary Jo, I don't believe that has ever happened to me."

Mary Jo perused the appointment book absentmindedly. "Me neither, but I keep hoping. Have you ever heard of Eugene Lacost?"

"Is he one of your clients?"

Mary Jo laughed. "No, he's dead and buried in a New Orleans cemetery. He and his mother are stored in a crypt so fancy it's the best one on the cemetery tour. And he paid for it with money from stock investments. You see, his clients were wealthy women who passed on the stock market gossip they heard from their husbands. Eugene bought and sold according to his clients' insider dope and made a killing. I keep waiting for that kind of client." She paced by the windows. "What do you think has happened to Eva Nicar? It's not like her to be late."

"If I just had a few more tourists who over-tip thinking they've taken me for a ride, I could easily fund our Taos trip." Ellen was still astonished at her James & Son expenditures. "Come to think of it, Janice Mullens is my four-thirty. She always tips exactly seven percent, no matter how much better I make her look."

"Well, I've never had stock tips or even outlandish manicure tips, but a female client did once upgrade my car." Crystal paused to align his bottles of polish. "She traded me her two-year-old Caddie convertible for my eight-year-old faded-green Chevy because she was convinced her boyfriend had transported a body in the trunk. I never saw or smelled anything except my good fortune."

The bell over the door rang as Janice and Eva both entered and began discussing the weather.

Ellen rode home, wondering why none of their friends had a house big enough and air-conditioned enough to entertain eight people. Maybe next Saturday they could go out to Margaret's dude ranch where a big, shady breezeway linked the big house to the cookhouse. It was the perfect place to watch the sun set and the cactus grow.

Ellen's stomach twitched as if she were about to start her period. Right on time. She wondered whether Mary Jo still had periods, still had PMS. That might explain her moods and lack of appetite.

Billy met her at the door, waving an envelope "Hey, Baby! We won!" He picked her up and danced her around even though he was still greasy and smelly from work.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're getting a real bike." He set her down and gave her a big, sloppy kiss. "Remember a few weeks ago when I went to that bike show in San Antonio? You didn't want to go with me and eat at IHOP? They raffled off a Lady Harley. I bought three chances and one of them won."

Ellen was stunned. Of all the things she wanted, needed, yearned for, dreamed of and lusted after, a motorcycle wasn't even on the list. "What's it worth? Could we just take the money?" Cash for a fabulous Taos vacation.

Billy's eyes grew large as if he might cry. "What?" His voice broke. "You don't want it? That's nuts. I *won* it for you, Baby."

"Sure, sure I want it," she lied. "I'm just a little surprised. I mean, I didn't even know about the raffle." She sat her purse on the table and sank into the couch. "What's a Lady Harley and when do we get it?"

Billy followed her, scanning the letter. "We can pick it up tomorrow. We'll trailer it back. I don't want you riding it on the Interstate until you're used to the bike. If you practice enough and get your license, you can ride it to Carlsbad."

They could have that discussion later. "What's the 'Lady' about?" Ellen knew she was looking a gift horse down the throat.

Billy sighed, waiting for patience. "This one's a Harley, but smaller and lightweight. You should see it. It's custom painted, black with red lipstick kisses all over it."

She leaned back into the couch and laughed. "That's a relief. For a moment there, I was afraid I'd have to ride sidesaddle." Hoping she hadn't sounded sarcastic, she added, "You are so sweet. Thank you for my prize." She kissed him and mussed his hair. "Last one in the tub is a toad."

Billy graciously offered to be the toad, considering he had gotten grease all over her and her pretty pink cotton shift. Working her alchemy with the bath scents and incense until the bathroom smelled like the first floor of Neiman-Marcus, she sank under water up to her ears, wishing she still smoked in the house, trying to think of something cool and wispy to wear tonight. She actually was looking forward to seeing the gang. Not so many Saturday nights ago, she was getting drunk and playing with danger. Knowing that tonight would be predictable, in the company of people she trusted, she felt safe. Yet, for one tiny second, she hoped for an anomaly, something odd or out of place about the evening. She just hoped it wasn't Yolanda who was odd or out of place.

"Oh yeah, Hon," Billy said through the bathroom door. "I got the Peyote Pigs' new CD. We can play it tonight."

Ellen froze. Breathe. Billy knows nothing about the Sagebrush episode. Coincidences to happen, and this is merely one of those.

She chose blue linen slacks and a white linen shirt, noting how pressed and starched they were and imagining how butt-sprung they'd be in an hour. Sunscreen, a hat, and she was ready.

The gang arrived, their energy tamped down by the heat. The news was not earthshaking: Margaret had hired a new cowboy named Lightin' whose movements were just the opposite; Royce had finally sold that overwrought purple armoire that Billy threatened to buy for Ellen each year on their anniversary; Deb railed against the price of school supplies. In whispers, Yolanda assured Ellen that Hank had not hit her this week. She had no idea why. Then the anomaly that Ellen had hoped for arrived in the worst form: Yolanda was afraid she might be pregnant. She shushed away Ellen's questions and concerns as if to say, *forget it*.

They all agreed that, after darkness had settled over the evening, the air had taken on an autumnal cool. They also agreed to pile into Wayne and Deb's Suburban tomorrow for the drive to San Antonio to pick up the Lady Harley.

Ellen refused to believe that Yolanda was really pregnant until there was some proof, such as a sonogram. No need to worry, no need to even think about it. Instead, she would think about Margaret's daughter who was six months pregnant and ordered to bed until she delivered the baby, but was able to keep working on her degree by taking online classes.

Ellen was fascinated by the concept: online. She could finish the final semester of coursework she lacked to get her degree. In her pajamas. After work and on Sundays. In their back bedroom, her study. This information, this idea, made her woozy with possibilities.

She left Billy in his recliner watching Saturday Night Live. The Fall semester was probably about to start any day now, so it was urgent that she not wait until morning to find out

how and when to begin class. Hot, stale air mugged her as she opened the door to the study. They kept the door closed to cut down on the air conditioning, and she hadn't been in here for several weeks. She left the door open, raised the window, and switched on her computer. While it warmed up and connected with the internet, she turned on a lamp and waved her arms around, attempting to hurry the cool air into the room and assisting the hot air out through the window. Finally, all the blinking orange lights turned a steady green and the blitz of atonal noises ceased. She typed in the URL for the University of Texas, whose website offered up a list of courses that made her hyperventilate with eagerness: Art Appreciation, Plays by Women, 20th Century Poetry and Poets, Design Communication, Creative Writing, Philosophy, American Literature, Economics, Comparative Literature, Elementary Spanish. All at her fingertips.

She clicked on the section that listed System Requirements. "Cable broadband is preferred. Color video display, 16-bit. Sound card plus speakers. Some classes may have other requirements." As quickly as she had become ecstatic, she became devastated. Her computer was so old it was probably the prototype, Beta for the original PC. It was a huge, boxy antique. She had dial-up Internet. She assumed she had speakers, but didn't know what a sound card was. How could she ever hope to take online classes?

The solution was simple: she would buy a new computer. She'd get one of those weightless, silver slivers of a laptop, thin as a sheet of paper, that could fit into her purse or a jazzy book bag. She could do her lessons at the salon or in a tent. If only she hadn't just spent her mad money on sleeping bags.

Ellen was surprisingly impressed with her new bike. She might learn to love it after all, even though the paint job was over the top: luscious red lips on metallic midnight black paint. The bike was petite, compared to the twenty or so other bikes on the glossy showroom floor.

The dealer insisted on photos of Ellen on the bike for promotional purposes, including store posters and newspaper ads. Ellen was vain enough to be relieved she had cut the crayon colors from her hair, but felt silly posing on the bike as directed by the photographer. "Tilt your head to the left, throw your fist in the air, arch your back, more, more." He didn't say, "Point those tits," but that was the effect. She managed to lose the arch seconds before each shot. Between her legs, the bike felt sturdy and substantial, the opposite of her dainty Vespa. The dealer visibly deflated when she christened her new Hog "Miss Piggy."

When Billy finally grasp the extent of the advertising campaign—across Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and parts of Arizona—he panicked. "Everybody will know you, know us. Anybody can find out where we live. We'll be exposed." Wayne pointed out that, except for two motorcycles, Billy and Ellen did not have anything worth stealing. He glossed over that tactless remark by pointing out that if Ellen did not perform her contractual duties, she would not be taking the Lady Harley home. Ellen had mixed feelings about the whole thing, but Billy decided they could keep the prize as long as Ellen used her maiden name in the advertising.

On the trip back to Limestone, Ellen kept sneaking glances in the rearview mirror to ensure the bike was still upright on the trailer. She kept imaging herself to be a fearless biker, hair flying in the wind, except she would be wearing her new, serious matching helmet, black with red lips and fake red braids flying in the wind.

Wayne insisted on pulling the trophy throughout Limestone, up and down streets not remotely on the way to Ellen's house. On a hot Sunday afternoon, few townspeople were out to

witness the mini-parade, just Sam Kincaid washing his '65 Mustang in his driveway. He stared at the strangely colored bike, then waved as he recognized the people inside the Suburban.

When Wayne turned onto Cactus Drive, it took Ellen a few seconds to recognize Eureka because she rarely saw it from the street. The rail fence encircling the front yard was the giveaway. All the rails were in place, the lawn uncommonly green and freshly mown, the shrubbery was shapely, but there was something odd about the scene, something alien in the yard: a metallic red-white-and-blue sign for American Dream Real Estate. As the Suburban continued down Cactus Drive, Ellen turned all the way around in her seat to catch a better look at the For Sale sign with a little hanging attachment that said, "Coming Soon" as if it were announcing a movie or a new restaurant. The sign was out of sight before she could make out the agent's name or phone number.

Chapter 11

On Monday morning, the impending loss of Eureka—and her inability to stop it—fell heavily on Ellen. She prayed that no one would buy the house for years and years. After she said Amen and was sure God was listening to someone else, she considered damaging the house in some way, making it unattractive to potential buyers. Then she was sorry, realizing how unchristian that thought was. Besides, she loved that house; it would be like kicking her own dog if she had one. She quickly prayed that God would please at least let her have one more visit before the house sold.

Ellen considered the big-concept words she had forgotten of late: heartbreak, devastation, misery, bleakness, hopelessness.

When she was twelve, she had walked too close to the edge of a cliff. The ground gave and she had fallen, rolling, twisting, turning, scratched and scuffed by brush, bruised by rocks, still rolling, wondering if she would ever reach the bottom. When she finally stopping tumbling, she hurt so badly, she wished she were still in motion. Now she was again at the bottom of a dark, unnamable pit, and she didn't know how she had gotten there. She would be fine, she assured herself, as soon as some other distraction—a trip to Taos, online classes—diverted her attention from the loss of Eureka.

Ellen was trying to decide what to do with her day off, choosing from last week's list and the week before: laundry, drive to the mall and/or Whole Foods and/or BookPeople in Austin, read, see what Yolanda was doing on her final free days before school started or just stare out the window and imagine a dark, icy glacier lake right outside. Her primary goal was to avoid housework. She added one more option: go online to research Taos and price laptops.

Although the television was on, Ellen was not really paying attention to it when music from a Hawaiian cruise commercial gave her the most outrageous idea she'd ever had.

For the rest of the day Ellen waltzed in and out of rooms, making imaginary packing lists: sandals, shorts, sundresses, then she got more specific. She would hardly need a thing, just her journal, maybe a book of crossword puzzles, new ink cartridges for her pen, and a robe. Not a fat, fuzzy robe against over-air-conditioning, but something daring so that when she looked into a mirror, she would see a glamorous woman on a glamorous vacation. If mules were still available, she'd find some with a blue powder puff on the toe and a little heel that made a snapping noise with every step. Ellen laughed. She was not the least bit Garbo, but here was her chance to try out a new personality for a week.

Somehow she managed to do the laundry and the grocery shopping, and finished the housecleaning in a daze. When Billy came home, the house smelled like limes and lemons, and Ellen was humming a tune she had just invented.

Tuesday, on her way to the salon, Ellen steered her Vespa by Eureka. In her shock, she had forgotten the name of the real estate agency. Now she hooted in disgust; how could she forget the clichéd red/white/and/blue American Dream Real Estate. Sure enough, there was a tiny American flag in the upper right corner. The agent's name was Margie.

When Ellen got to the salon, Mary Jo was giving a permanent, stinking up the whole room again. "Mary Jo, remember when we went on the Christmas Home tour, where all the houses were tricked out for the holidays? Five houses for five dollars?"

"Well, barely. I've had a little more excitement since then."

"Remember that house—a mansion, really—that had the books? The one with the giant chandelier and the whole room full of books?" Ellen had to be careful not to give herself away. She took her time placing her purse in the cabinet and aligning the combs with the brushes on her tray.

"Kiddo, you need to get out more. But, yeah, who could forget that?"

"It's for sale. What do you think it would cost?" Ellen crossed her fingers for a low number.

Mary Jo snorted. "How would I know? I live in a trailer I won from my last ex-husband, which is worth about forty-three dollars. Who's got the listing?"

"Margie. American Dream Real Estate. Is she your Thursday Margie?"

"One and the same. Margie Adams, three o'clock on Thursday, trim, wash and blow-dry. Her number's there in my book."

Margie sounded like she was next door, even though she said she was halfway to San Antonio. She'd gotten the listing three days ago. The price was \$899,000, but that was flexible. "Now, Honey. Here's the kicker: everything conveys: the furniture, linens, the silverware, the jar of mustard in the refrigerator, everything. The owner is also considering throwing in an SUV, a practically new Tahoe. It's a boat, but it rides like a magic carpet."

"Are the books included, too?"

"Books? Oh, sure, that library. Well, I suppose so. Books, too. See, the owners are in a hurry."

Ellen stopped listening. Even if the owners were in a great hurry, they probably wouldn't lower the price all the way down to a used Vespa, a Lady Harley, and a bank bag full of tips.

"You know, Honey—"

Ellen was listening again, watching herself mouth words in the mirror.

"The house isn't technically for sale. Not yet. It's more of a 'coming soon' sale. I put my sign in the yard and show it to my clients, but I won't list it on MLS for two weeks. That way, I have a chance to make the whole commission. You see what I mean?"

"Right. That's very clever of you, Margie." The bell over the door rang and Ellen waved to first shampoo-and-set of the day.

"You betcha. You must make way more in tips than I ever imagined if you're thinking about buying that house. Or maybe your husband makes good money. Is that it?"

Ellen swallowed hard before she could say, "No, we aren't in the market. I was just curious. It's such a nice place. Do you know why the sellers are in a hurry?"

"Oh sure. Same ole, same ole. Any more than that and I'd be divulging a client's personal information. Client/agent privilege, you know?"

Darn. With her luck, the buyer would live there full-time. Ellen could taste bile rising in the back of her throat. "Maybe they're moving to someplace cold and icy. Lucky little girls."

"Oh? Do you know the family?"

Damn. "No, I, well then, but, oh, yes, I just remember the photos from the Christmas tour."

"Well, Honey, if you win the lottery, give me a call and it's yours."

Chapter 12

"It's for you, Kiddo," Mary Jo said, handing the portable phone to Ellen. She grinned, tipping Ellen to the possibility that it was more than just a rescheduling call.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Lou Ellen? Is that you?"

Suddenly, Ellen felt tired, no, she felt exhausted. Too exhausted to talk right now. "Hi, Aunt Stella. How are you?"

"I'm sorry to call you at the office, I mean, the shop. I left a message on your cell phone."

Right, the cell phone she so rarely charged or checked for messages, it was almost useless.

"But I just wondered if you had talked to your mother lately?"

Ellen caught her breath. Something must be wrong. She hadn't called her mother on Sunday as she usually did, but they didn't talk *every* Sunday. "What is it? Is she okay? Do I need to leave right now?" Ellen reached toward the bottom drawer of the cabinet for her purse.

"Goodness, Lou Ellen. I didn't mean to upset you. She's fine. I just thought you two always talked on Sunday." She said this sarcastically, probably pleased to find out that Ellen, like Stella's own two sons, did not call home weekly.

Ellen's defenses went up. "We don't talk *every* Sunday. Sometimes she's on a cruise or I'm tubing down the Guadalupe. We don't talk every week if one of us is doing something." She was sure her voice sounded like a rubber band stretched too tightly.

"Don't get all huffy. Nothing's wrong. Bella is talking about a family reunion. Of course, we're such a small family, we could just rent a couple of rooms at a Motel Six. But no, she's talking about renting a resort somewhere down your way. She said you could research it for us."

"I'd be glad to." Ellen imagined a pair of dull, rusty scissors making a deep, lateral slice into her wrist. She could think of nothing worse than a reunion with Stella and her family. Stella's husband, Charles, or Chas as he called himself, sold sporting goods at Cabela's and talked incessantly. He was an expert on fly fishing, deep-sea fishing, skiing—snow and water—hiking, back packing, wind surfing, rock climbing, kayaking, and lately, ice fishing in Alaska. Not that he engaged in any of these sports. No, if he were an active sportsman, he would have lively adventure stories to tell. Instead, he was short and fat and out of breath at the slightest exertion, so he didn't tell interesting stories; he told weird facts about the temperature of trout in the Snake River or the frequency of lighting strikes on top of Mt. Everest. Who cares? facts like eels live in freshwater but reproduce in saltwater, that flying fish leap out of the water at a speed of 40 miles per hour. Apropos of nothing. Facts to make you snore. Stella and Charles had two sons: Pete and Repeat. No, that had been her grandfather's joke. Their two sons were Pete and Earl. Pete was in his mid-forties and lived in Florida where he ran an assisted living facility and was married to Nadine. And, although her mother gave her periodic family updates, Ellen couldn't remember what sizes and types of children they had. Earl was in his late twenties. Aunt Stella called him her "midlife surprise." Earl was a spoiled screw-up whose conversation ran the gamut of "me, me, me, and me."

"When were you two thinking of holding this event? I mean, not soon, not until it cools off a little, right?" Lots of things could happen between now and say, November.

"Well, we hadn't decided. It's so hard to find a good time, what with the football games and Thanksgiving and Petey having to attend the funeral of each and every one of his clients who passes away."

Ellen took courage from her assumption that this event would never happen. It was just a fantasy shared by two sisters nostalgic for the old country and big families. "Let's try it from the other end. I'll call a couple of the resorts near here and find out when they have vacancies. Okay?"

"Good idea. Such a smart girl my Bella has."

Ellen couldn't tell whether she was being sarcastic or genuine.

She was between clients, slumped in her chair, flipping through a *People* magazine she might have already read, because if she had seen one photo of Brad Pitt, she'd seen a thousand. Often, there would be small photos of Jennifer and Angelina inserted into the background, as if Brad were carrying a "good" Jen angel on one shoulder and a "bad" Angie devil on the other. She had tried more than once to read a novel or at least a book of short stories at work, but she found she concentrated too hard, ignoring a ringing phone or the arrival of a client. The photo captions in *People* and *Star* were perfect reading material in the salon.

Outside the plate-glass window, tourists milled about, window-shopping, pointing toward the quaint courthouse anchored in the square. That's probably what Stella and Bella had in mind: less reunion and more shopping and eating. Maybe they should just come to Limestone. They'd only need four or five rooms, maybe a suite so they could watch television and eat together. Heck, they would all fit into Eureka. She mentally assigned everyone a room: she and Billy in the master, of course; Bella in the guest room; Stella and Chas in the girls' room with the twin beds, and Earl way off upstairs in any room he chose. The living area was big enough for everyone to visit and play games or whatever they wanted to do. She would, however, close the door to the library. That would be forbidden territory. She caught herself just as she was about to begin making a grocery list.

Ellen lowered the magazine to smile and nod as Jackie Wilson entered the salon wearing a hot pink pantsuit, her hair limp and too long for her rectangular face.

Jackie squirmed into Mary Jo's chair without waiting for an invitation. "Hey, Crystal. How's it hanging?" Jackie blushed at the possible *faux pas*, as if she didn't really understand whether Crystal was male or female. "I mean, how's the nail business?"

Crystal had told Ellen about the evening at Jackie and Lester's, looking at wedding photos, discussing various aspects of the beauty business, and the inevitable lamenting of the Texas drought, now in its fourth year. They also had brought him up to speed on local politics. Ellen had a feeling Crystal was leaving something out.

"Things are fine as wine, Miss Jackie."

Mary Jo draped the black plastic cape around Jackie. "What'll it be today? Looks like those roots could use a touch up. Trim, too?" She separated locks of hair, peering at the scalp.

Jackie was puffed up as if she were about to burst. She flipped her hand in a little wave that indicated "the works." "Isn't this a fine day, Mary Jo? Isn't God in his heaven and all's right with the world?"

"I suppose he's got to be somewhere." Mary Jo looked skeptical. "What's so fine about today?"

"I don't know," Jackie flipped her little wave again. "Maybe it's just that we got through one more damned August and now we can get on with autumn."

Glass scraped glass as Crystal stacked his soaking dishes and took them into the storage room. Every time Jackie came in, Crystal had an errand to run or volunteered to go pick up lunch or found some other excuse to leave. Now he was in the back room, running water to wash his bowls and humming something slow and sad.

While Mary Jo went to mix the color formula, Ellen engaged Jackie in mundane conversation, beginning with the drought and Lester's cattle. "Is he going to sell?"

"He can't. The market is in the toilet, he would take too much of a loss. He's going to sit tight and pray for rain. He's started going to church."

Ellen had no knowledge of Lester's religious beliefs. She only knew him enough to recognize him on the street. The subject of drought disposed of, Ellen was wondering what else to talk about, when Jackie bent toward her and whispered, "Is she okay?" nodding her head toward the back room. "She doesn't look like herself."

Ellen nodded and mouthed "sure" as Mary Jo came into the room. Actually, Ellen had been wondering the same thing. Mary Jo had dark shadows under her eyes, and the fine lines across her forehead seemed to be etching deeper. And Ellen couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Mary Jo smile, let alone heard her laugh.

Jackie could no longer contain her news. "I went to Austin yesterday to do a little fall shopping. I am so tired of pastel linen I could just spit if it wouldn't dry up before it left my lips."

Ellen looked down at her pink linen slacks, then to Mary Jo's yellow linen skirt, then to Crystal's pale green linen shift. Collectively, against the faded purple walls, they looked like Easter eggs in a basket.

"Anyway, after I went all the way to Domain—they have a Neiman's, you know—and was coming back south on I-Thirty-five, I decided to treat myself to a seafood lunch, so I stopped in at Pappadeaux's. They have great lunch specials, you know, much cheaper than the same entree at dinner. And such huge portions, I always bring half of it home."

Ellen spaced out, thinking about dinner. Maybe she'd make Mexican omelets, use up all the leftovers and odds and ends in the fridge. Glancing at her magazine again, she noticed an ad

featuring an adorable plump, pink baby staring up at her. She stood, allowing the magazine to fall to the floor. There were brushes to clean and floors to sweep.

"As the waitress set my lemon sole with a crabmeat-and-oyster topping in front of me, I looked up to see—you'll never guess in a million years—one of Limestone's married men lunching with a woman, not his wife."

Mary Jo stopped daubing color long enough to interject, "It happens. Sometimes it's a business lunch." Her voice held no inflection.

"Not when their heads are so close together you couldn't wedge a divorce petition between them. Besides, he had his arm around her shoulders."

"Sounds like the real thing," Ellen said. "Was she a local?"

"I don't know, I couldn't see her. If the waitress had been a little quicker with my to-go box, I'd have walked over and said "hello" to Wayne Bradley and got a good look. From the back, she was fairly nondescript. Red business dress. Short, dark hair like a lot of women. But Wayne looked just like he always does. Shifty-eyed."

Ah, another Limestone mystery to be solved as soon as the wife got suspicious enough to begin asking questions or hired someone to stalk her husband and take photos. Ellen wondered whether Jackie was aware that Wayne and his wife, Deb, were regulars at her Saturday night front yard potluck dinners. Ellen couldn't really call them friends. Even though Deb's quilting store was less than one block away, they never had lunch together. Wayne worked in Austin, so Ellen never ran into him other than Saturday nights. She wished Jackie had not told her this news, had not somehow given Ellen the responsibility for Deb and her marriage.

Then again, maybe that was Jackie's purpose.

In the back room, the water stopped running and Crystal stopped humming. He appeared, offering to go to Dave's next door and pick up sandwiches. Jackie was meeting Lester for lunch and Mary Jo said she wasn't hungry, so Ellen offered to accompany Crystal. "We may as well get a booth and relax."

As they left the salon, they were not blasted by the heat wave Ellen had steeled herself against. "It's a cold front—the low nineties." Crystal said. "Doesn't this feel good for a change?" The sidewalk seemed more populated than usual, more people daring to walk down the street for lunch or to shop. Fall was coming to Limestone after all.

Dave's was bustling with diners, generating the din of conversation and the clattering of silverware. All the booths and tables were occupied, and a clot of people stood to one side at the counter waiting for their take-out orders. Dave waved to Ellen and Crystal and held up one finger. Sure enough, a couple stood up, the woman gathering her purse and shopping bags while the man counted out money for a tip. Dave waved Ellen to the booth and took their orders. After they had settled in, Ellen asked, "Crystal, does Mary Jo seem okay to you?"

"No, Ma'am, she does not. She looks bad and acts as if she feels bad, too. I can't tell if it's a physical or mental problem. Do you think she's worried about the salon? Or maybe it's her heart? I'm just guessing here."

Ellen tried to remember when Mary Jo had begun to change, whether it had been weeks or days since she had had a sparkle in her eye, a lilt in her voice, interest in the local gossip, or told one of her "two guys go into a bar" jokes. "I don't think it's the salon. We're all three usually busy. No, I think it's something personal, maybe her health." She looked across the table at Crystal who looked quite healthy: alert blue eyes, glowing skin, and erect posture. And, of course, his inviting smile.

"Listening to Jackie's windy stories would make most people ill." Crystal forced a laugh.

"How about this weather?" Dave distributed the sandwiches and iced teas. "A little rain and this could be Eden. Enjoy."

Ellen ignored the interruption. "Lester must be a saint to listen to her long, boring stories day after day. That's a match made in Heaven."

"Excuse me for saying so, but that man is no saint."

Ellen's curiosity was piqued. Perhaps she was about to get the rest of the story. The voices of the other diners were loud, but Ellen lowered her voice anyway. "How do you mean?"

Crystal took his time chewing and swallowing a bite of egg salad sandwich. Then he took a leisurely sip of tea. "I assume that what I am about to disclose to you will go no further?"

Ellen nodded as fast as she could, leaning forward over the table so as to not miss a word.

Crystal leaned forward, too, and spoke in a lowered voice. "The evening I spent with Jackie and Lester was enjoyable enough, and proved to be a fine introduction to Limestone and its foibles. However, toward the end of the evening and several bottles of wine, Miss Jackie excused herself to visit the facilities. And, not to dance around the subject, Lester propositioned me. Well, more specifically, he groped me. I have no idea who or what he featured me to be or exactly what he had in mind, but he did not act like a faithful husband, let alone a newlywed." Crystal leaned back in the booth and took a breath. "There. I've said it. But please do not share this information with Billy or Mary Jo or anyone else. Miss Jackie would be crushed."

Ellen was astounded. Why had Lester married Jackie in the first place? It just proved her darkest theory that only a few people in the world were trustworthy. The challenge was to figure out which ones they were. "She'd be amazed to find herself in the same company with Wayne's

wife. Isn't that just the perfect example of karma? Her glee in telling about Wayne's tryst has circled around to bite her. Except you didn't announce your news in a beauty shop."

"Salon, Ellen, salon. Or beauty establishment. Or House of Beauty. I could go on and on, but my one o'clock probably awaits."

"Mine, too. Help me keep an eye on Mary Jo. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on." Ellen left a dollar for a tip and they walked back to work.

Ellen stretched a strand of Thelma Roberts' wet hair out to the left and let the shears snip at it. Thelma was two weeks overdue for her trim, so there was an extra quarter-inch to cut off and let drop to the floor. She was just back from a month in Lubbock where her granddaughter had birthed her first child and the first great grandchild. Ellen did not want to hear or think about babies, so she listened inattentively as she reminded herself about her plan for tonight's Mexican omelets and tried to cast furtive glances at Mary Jo, who was concentrating on rolling the perm curlers into Cheryl Newman's auburn hair.

Every time she inhaled the fumes of perm solution at The Talk of the Town, Ellen remembered the first perm she ever gave at cosmetology school. After rinsing the solution off, she had gently unwound each curl, letting the hair dangle over her left index finger while she tossed the curler into the sink. Curl after curl, they were unwound until Ellen felt something amiss. She realized the curl of hair was on her finger, but it was no longer connected to the client's head. Over her shoulder, her supervisor whispered, "Don't worry. That's called a 'pocket curl.' Happens all the time. Just slip it in your pocket and don't say nothing." Now she could laugh about it. And she did, frightening Thelma Roberts into silence mid-sentence.

Mary Jo was definitely moving slower than usual. From time to time, she stopped to massage her elbow. When she sat, she massaged her knees. Worse, she was not following the thin trail of news and gossip, injecting her suspicions, probabilities, conjectures and the occasional historical fact into the conversation being bandied about the salon. She was just not herself. She was someone a decade older and substantially less joyous than Mary Jo Winkler, stylist and bon vivant. Ellen was ashamed that she hadn't noticed earlier.

Between clients, Ellen perused the appointment book. Most of the slots were filled for the month ahead. Crystal had quickly developed a devoted clientele who loved his recipes as much as his nail work. Just a month ago, Mary Jo had broached the possibility of offering a complete bridal service if she could find a make-up artist to add to the hair and nail components. She had sounded like a spirited woman excited about the future. That was the Mary Jo who had gone missing.

Ellen hoped the problem was something simple and treatable like arthritis. But if it were so simple, Mary Jo would have treated it. Ellen decided to wait a few days before she sat Mary Jo down for a talk.

"Where is your mind, Ellen?" Thelma was looking at her in the mirror. "You're using them little red curlers. You know that makes my hair too tight. I take the blue ones."

Ellen grimaced. "I was just so fascinated by what you were saying, I completely forgot what I was doing." She began pulling the curlers out as Thelma gave her a self-satisfied smile.

Chapter 13

Mary Jo poured herself a glass of white wine and pulled the box of bills from under the trailer's pissy little "dining table" which didn't begin to describe the tiny, unstable flat surface she was supposed to eat on. As with everything else in her laughable "mobile home," it was designed for midgets and manufactured by misers, but it was hers, debt free, as was her decrepit Buick LeSabre parked outside but shaded from the searing heat by the aluminum carport.

Time was, paying bills was a dreaded chore, deferred until most of them were past due because the money in the bank did not begin to cover the amounts owed. But she had inherited the trailer from her poor,, dead husband Walter and had gotten the beauty shop up and running, so now paying bills and balancing the checkbook were proof of her accomplishments. The very fact of her savings account was beyond her wildest imaginings, and she—from time to time—considered the reckless and wanton idea of investing in the stock market.

Up until Monday, that is. Until Monday, she had been free to stand behind her chair and comb Mrs. Patterson's sparse hair into a blue cloud, listening to the latest gossip while covertly pretending she was getting off a plane in Chicago, on the way to being an audience member of Ellen's show. Or, sometimes, she might loll by the swimming pool at L. A.'s Chateau Marmont, sipping a daiquiri while looking over the top of her sunglasses at Colin Firth a mere two chairs away. Once in a while, she went to New York, to SoHo House for yoga with Christy Turlington. Not for nothing did the shop subscribe to *Star* and *US*.

But that was then and today was after Monday. From now on it would always be After Monday, after she drove to Austin and heard her doctor report her lab results and the possibilities and the probability: lupus. It meant nothing to her. It did not sound fatal, and it wasn't right away.

It was worse. Lupus, which caused her joints to ache as she stood behind clients and smiled, wishing she did not have to lift her elbows and flick her wrists all day long. Lupus made her as tired when she awoke as she was by bedtime. Lupus would eventually, slowly turn her immune system against her. Lupus would choose an organ—kidney, heart, liver—or her skin or bones or some other vital body part, and attack it so that, yes, some day, it might be fatal. But until then, she had years of Lupus to look forward to. So Chicago and Los Angeles and New York and probably Houston were out of the question because she had no insurance. Her mad money was about to become medical money.

If Mary Jo had paid a visit to Madame Fifi on South Hwy 34 and paid fifty-dollars in cash for a crystal ball reading, she would not have gotten a clearer picture of her future. She might indeed, "meet a man from the north," but he would probably be a cardiologist or renalogist or oncologist, depending on the whims of her new Life/Death Coach.

Mary Jo pushed the stack of bills back into the box and stood. She walked through her small living room, to the front widow and pulled back the curtain to get a better view of the vacant Airstream trailer across the way.

Chapter 14

During the week, Ellen had made several quick trips to Eureka, furtively parking the Vespa in the alley's shrubbery, and scurrying in and out. The result was three bottles of pinot grigio and a six-pack of Diet Coke in the fridge, frozen dinners in the freezer, and snacks in the pantry; evidence of her occupancy designed to disappear at the first ring of a doorbell.

Today, Ellen had hiked from her house carrying only a small tote bag. In Eureka's master bedroom, she began to empty it. She draped her new, fabulous teal robe theatrically across the bed. It was her finest purchase in years: soft, silky, the tealest of teal blues, with raglan sleeves and an attached belt that could not trail along the floor or fall into the toilet. In Mrs. Spencer's enormous walk-in closet, she blended two stacks of sweaters into one and shoved her tees and shorts into the bare space. Her extra pair of flip-flops posed next to Mrs. Spencer's dozen pairs, which were not visibly smaller. She hung her purse near the ones Mrs. Spencer evidently didn't need in Dallas. Her pouch of cosmetics fit snugly into a drawer full of designer makeup and skincare products in the master bath.

Ellen was smirking and giggling and full of herself for pulling off the scam of the century. Well, maybe that was an exaggeration, but if anyone in Limestone knew what she was doing, they would howl in indignation. And in surprise. This was so unlike her—good, sweet, dependable Ellen.

Billy had been surprisingly, disappointingly easy to dupe. Ellen had explained her need to get away, to do some shopping and reading and have some "girl time" with Yolanda before the school year began. They would stay in an inexpensive motel in Austin and just relax for a few

days. That would give Hank a little cooling-off time. In fact, the trip sounded like such fun, Ellen was a bit disappointed not to be taking it. Maybe some other time.

Ellen was chagrined at her own glibness and Billy's gullibility. Even though he practically asked for it, lying was something she did not approve of, especially to someone so trusting. If he found out, he would never recover, nor would their relationship. This was the biggest risk she had ever taken, and for what? Ellen wasn't really clear about the answer, but felt sure it would arrive during her stay at Eureka, like a light bulb over her head or a startlingly wise and appropriate passage in a book. The one thing Ellen knew for sure was that this would really, truly, be her farewell visit to Eureka. She had to control this addiction.

Poor Yolanda. She knew nothing about Eureka or the supposed trip to Austin with Ellen; only that she shouldn't call Ellen at home and should try to avoid Billy. Ellen would meet Yolanda for dinner on Friday so they could invent matching descriptions of their meals and shopping in Austin. Yolanda seemed to enjoy the fact that Ellen was having a mysterious adventure.

Where to start? Ah, yes, with atmosphere. The thermostat was set at a frigid 68 degrees; Ellen set it to a more hospitable 72. She had never been in Eureka at ten in the morning. It was a day for firsts. She sank into the library chair and surveyed her terrain. When she woke, her first hour of daytime Eureka was forever gone. She must be more careful. A week could fly by before she knew it, and then she would have nothing. Nothing to look forward to on Fridays. No solitary escape.

Ellen stood and stretched, determined to fill the whole house, to make it hers instead of some foreign castle. She was through being Goldilocks. Now, she was Mistress of the Manor.

She strolled into the living area. The square coffee table held several oversized books about the West and cowboys, along with stacks of photo albums covered with a thin film of red dust. She chose a green leather album with "Italy" stamped in gold on the cover. Within the first three pages, Ellen understood two things: one, these photos were of the Spencers' honeymoon and two, the light really was, as she had always heard, exceptional in Italy. In fact, it looked like melted butter hovering over the Spencers' shoulders in every snapshot. Everything was brighter: the golds and reds and blues were so true as to pierce the eye. And weren't the Spencers beautiful, smiling—maybe laughing—toasting their own good fortune and the ancientness of what, given the prominent duomo, Ellen took to be Florence. Fabulous fabled Florence, which Ellen might or might not see in her lifetime. Normally, she would estimate the odds of her own visit to Europe to be a long shot, but she had already conquered Eureka, and targeted Taos, so why not Europe? Maybe she would live in Paris for a year or two. Who knows what can happen when a woman of a certain age feels her real self kick in? She flipped through a few more albums: the blue one stamped "Switzerland" showed photos of the Spencers in lederhosen; in the orange one, from Morocco, Mr. Spencer was wearing a caftan and Mrs. Spencer was wedged between two camel humps. The light in Marrakesh was more fried egg than butter, but the star of every photo was the enormous azure sky. Ellen made a mental note to search Eureka's library for travel guides.

For her first meal at Eureka, Ellen chose a small package of Fritos, a small can of bean dip, and a diet Coke. Sitting at the kitchen island under the skylight, flipping through shelter magazines killed thirty minutes. Time moved slowly when there was no junk mail to sort, no catalogues to pretend to shop from, no neighborhood cats to pet or plants to water, no clients to shampoo and set.

In the mid-day light, Eureka seemed empty and forbidding, as if it, too, were waiting for something to happen, as if it knew Ellen didn't belong there. To shake the feeling and let Eureka know who was boss, she took her tour of the house more leisurely than usual. This time, she reentered the master closet and learned the hard way that if she went in and pulled the door closed, the light shut off, stranding her in the dark. She opened a few of Mrs. Spencer's shoeboxes (size 7 1/2, rather narrow), felt in the pockets of Mr. Spencer's suit (finding only lint and a dime), and poked around in the lingerie chest. From the labels, it was evident that Mrs. Spencer was more Neiman's than Penny's, and she must have already begun the move. Almost a fourth of the hanging rack was empty. Evidently, not *everything* in the house conveyed.

In the children's room, Ellen forced herself to stand in the unmoving chilly air, looking at the photos of Tina and Missy, little girls innocent of the world's evils and accidents. But in fact, Ellen had no way of knowing whether one of these little girls had met with evil. Were they still alive? Did they ride a bus to school? Sue Ellen's image swam into her consciousness. Little lost lamb. Why did no one protect you? Fragile little girl who never did, never would grow up. Permanently six years old, perpetually tumbling around in the spinning school bus, yellow serrated metal descending toward her.

Ellen cried for a while, letting go of the tension and the sorrow of being eternally separated from her sister. After saying a soft prayer of protection for Sue Ellen and the little Spencer girls, she backed out of the room.

In all her nights of prowling the house, Ellen had never entered the garage. She expected to be stunned by a torrent of hot, stale air, but even the garage was air-conditioned to 68 degrees. The extravagance thrilled her. She spotted a black Chevy Tahoe. Her heart raced at the thought that someone might be in the house with her, but then she remembered Margie mentioning that a

car might convey with the house. The Spencers probably kept it there in case they flew into Austin or San Antonio. Maybe they owned an airplane and used the little landing strip just north of Limestone. The extravagant expense, the foreign vacations, and interesting and exciting life—it was hard not to think of the Spencers as her own personal Scott and Zelda, traipsing around the world with a magnum of champagne in one hand and a credit card in the other.

Her whole house would fit into this three-and-a-half-car garage. With the addition of a toilet and some windows, she could live here. She went inside before the memory of her tiny little world could depress her.

During her trips to Eureka, she had always been respectful and circumspect about prying into the Spencers' lives, but today, Ellen became a huge snoop—curious, prying, deliciously interested in her foster family. Maybe Eureka being on the market, giving perspective buyers the opportunity to poke into closets and corners, had lifted some taboo. Or maybe it was part of her new Eureka personality, more curious and daring than the usually polite and respectful Ellen.

So she did more than just poke her nose into the guest room, which was decorated much like the rest of the house: rustic, Southwestern, expensive in deep blues and rust reds. The curtains and bedspread almost matched, the same colors in different patterns. The room was warm and inviting. She tested the queen-size mattress—medium firm—and looked under the bed. The Hollywood bath, which also opened into the hallway, was comparable to the master bath in square footage and mirrors and towels size. A skylight allowed the sun to bounce off lemon-yellow walls.

The guest closet held winter clothing for the whole family: parkas and wool pants, a basket of mittens and gloves, several sizes of fleece-lined boots, and a woman's coat of some fur Ellen couldn't identify. She tried it on. Fortunately, it was a little small, so she quickly overcame a

fantasy about "borrowing" it for New Year's Eve, which she would probably celebrate at home with the gang, everyone wearing their finest down vests over flannel shirts, drinking beer and eating chips and dip, then going home in time to watch the ball drop over Times Square or fall asleep waiting.

The second extraordinary find of her day—after the Tahoe—was tucked back in the corner of the guest closet, past the fur and fleece. A small, green marble urn evidently held the ashes of one "B.P.S." who had lived for only three years. Ellen was struck by the daintiness of the urn and its turreted lid. If it had been a tombstone, it might have a lamb resting on top. Such a short life, just out of babyhood. Another lost child. The risk of losing a child was reason enough not to have one in the first place.

Ellen fell onto the bed and, for a second time that day, cried for lost children and unfinished lives until her eyes hurt and her sobs quieted. Sue Ellen was very much with her, her presence creating a sense of absence. Sue Ellen would have been thirty-two, younger than Ellen by eleven months, but no doubt wiser. Sue would be able to explain why Ellen felt uneasy, unfinished, unsettled. She could explain the longing for something unnamed and unknowable. But Sue was not here and would never be. The world was for Ellen to decipher for herself. Later. She slept for almost an hour on the guestroom bed.

After Ellen awoke and splashed water on her face, she returned to the library to make a plan for the rest of the afternoon. How could she possibly fill four days here? She took a few minutes just to revel in her victory, her deviousness, her expanded personality. And she resolved to quit bawling. She would write that in her journal to make it stick.

At least once a month, Ellen made a journal entry. Years ago, she had written every day, but at some point, she realized how repetitive her thoughts were. The pros and cons of having

children (the list never varied and the sides were evenly matched). Lists of countries she'd like to visit (this list varied, depending on which travel magazines and newspaper articles she had recently read). Which clients came in that day for what services. Where she and Billy had dinner. Saturday nights. But here she was in Eureka. Surely this was something to write about. She decided to prime her thoughts by reading around in her journal.

Don't be judgmental. That's the thing I learned today: keep your opinions to yourself. If someone asks, you say, "well, we could try this or this," but you never say "this is what you should do" or "that is the worst idea I've ever heard" or "that's a good idea but it would look ridiculous on you." I did that today, told a client what I thought. She was a large woman who wanted a pixie haircut and I told her that her face would look round as the moon. She got out of my chair and left the shop. Later, I thought that maybe it wouldn't have been too bad, that I could have adjusted for jowls. Maybe some day when I'm more experienced, I can adapt cuts and color to the situation.

Billy. She should write about Billy.

It's so true that the things you love in a person are the things you come to grow tired of. Points of irritation. For instance, Billy is even tempered. I used to love that, to think it was a virtue. He calmed my anxiety and eased us through arguments. "It'll be fine." That's practically his mantra. I used to love being soothed. Now it works the opposite way. "It'll be fine." "Oh yeah?" I want to say. "That's what you think!" And then I want to yell something mean like, "You're gonna' die in this moldy town without ever seeing New York," but I don't. It wouldn't distract him from the NFL or NBA. He seems happy enough. I'm the one inching closer and closer to the edge.

Reality was giving Ellen a headache. Television was the obvious answer. She had never watched television in this house, but she assumed it was inside the wall of cabinets in the living area. Sure enough, the folding doors exposed a flat-screen the size of a billboard. A basket of remotes sat nearby. She had never seen so many wires, so many rectangular silver boxes that all seemed to grin at her. God forbid she should try to watch a DVD. Maybe a cable menu

somewhere would tell her what time and on which channel she could find *Ellen* and *The View* and those other daytime shows the women in the shop were always talking about. No watching the cooking channel, though, raising the possibility of a hunger so huge, she would eat her entire stash of food on the first day.

After fifteen minutes of channel surfing, Ellen realized daytime television would not hold her attention. She opened more cabinet doors and discovered a computer. Of course, that was the answer for ennui: the Internet and email, international time wasters. The computer was sleek and compact, perfectly portable and convenient for online classes. If Avery Spencer had such an expensive a computer at his rarely-used vacation home, what must he have at his house and his office in Dallas? He even had cable Internet, ninety times faster than her dial-up at home.

Her email account carried the usual assortment of newsletters, come-ons, and scams. As with the daily snail mail, there was nothing personal. She checked some of her favorite websites—hair.com, fashionistas.com, Zappos, Slate, Book Slut—but nothing held her interest. Aunt Stella's resort search took up half an hour, but that was not really a Eureka use of time. Fooling around on the Internet, she discovered that Avery Spencer never logged out of his email account. In fact, she could open and read his mail. She took a moment to lean back and consider this opportunity, whether it was ethical, maybe a "do unto others" decision. But given the temporariness of the situation, the unlikelihood of the Spencers ever reading her email, and the curiosity about her benefactors, Ellen decided her snooping was reasonable.

Evidently Avery had not checked his mail today. Ellen was not surprised to see that rich people got even more junk email than "normal" people. One from Bloomingdale's advertised their new line of fall coats. If Ellen knew the right code, she could order a coat sent to her at Eureka

using the Spencers' PayPal account. Had she become a completely different person in this house? Would her wickedness never end?

Using his emails, she could actually track Avery Spencer's life: reservations for dinner at Sam & Nick's, a ticket confirmation for a flight to Seattle, and—wow—his credit card account. She just scanned it. She wasn't a hacker. Gas, groceries, Neiman's, the usual. The unusual was a lack of Chuck E. Cheese or Toys-R-Us or Gap-for-Kids charges. Who was clothing and entertaining the little girls?

Ellen pushed the keyboard shelf back into place and closed the door across the computer. She went into the library where her novel with its wiggy aunt and two little girls awaited her.

When she realized she was hungry, she stuck the frozen spinach enchiladas in the microwave and poured a glass of pinot. The kitchen clock said "eight," but it felt like midnight. As eerie as it had seemed this morning, Eureka was beginning to feel like home.

Ellen was Goldilocks again, sleeping around. She had slept in the master bed. Tonight she would try the guest bed. Chances were slim that she would ever spend a full night in either bed in the children's room, the only room where she felt a presence of something. She moved her silky, teal robe to the guest bed, plugged in her phone and charger, brushed her teeth and pulled back the plump blue duvet. Lying in the dark, she savored her first day at Eureka. After a slow start, it had sped by, but she had three more left. True, she hadn't really missed Billy, but that didn't mean anything other than she had been enamored of and distracted by the nooks and crannies of her vacation house.

Chapter 15

It was almost six o'clock in the evening when Crystal, weary, hot and perspiring, climbed the stairs to his apartment atop The Painted Pony Antiques. He had held hands straight through the day with no lunch, no break. Afterward, tourists clogging the supermarket made shopping more chore than pleasure. He was mentally fussing as he made his way up the stairs, too distracted to notice that his key did not unlock the door because it wasn't locked.

Crystal opened the door and panicked, then became disoriented. Someone was standing in his living room. *Was he in the wrong apartment? Was he under attack?* No, that was his floral slipper chair and that was his floor lamp with the Tiffany shade. And the intruder was a woman, a tall, slender, gray-haired woman wearing heels and a navy-blue faux Chanel suit in this heat.

He set his two bags of groceries on the entry table. "May I ask," he began in a quiet, soothing voice, but he was cut off.

"No, you may not," said the woman, equally soothing. "I'm asking the questions and I'm giving the answers, being as I'm Martha Mabley. I own this building."

"Pleased to finally meet you." Crystal put out his right hand, but Martha put hers behind her back. He continued, "What with the emails and the check drops and the key under the mat, we might never have met."

"Obviously that was your plan. And it might have worked if I hadn't recently heard all about you." She was taller than Crystal and appeared to be looking down her aristocratic nose at him.

Glancing past her, Crystal noticed small changes in his furnishings: his replica of Venus de Milo was covered by a doily, his print of Matisse's Goldfish with Nude was on the floor facing the wall. Apparently his landlady considered herself a moral interior designer or anti-art policewoman.

"Won't you have a seat?" He gestured toward his sofa, collaged in six fabrics and surely the finest piece of furniture he owned. "Would you like some tea?"

Martha shook her head and remained standing. "This is not a social call, Crystal or whatever your real name is. The way I see it, you have one choice: move. You could choose to be a man like God made you, but you would have to move anyway because I only rent to Christian women."

Although scenes like this had happened before, Crystal felt weary at the thought of packing, finding another place, and unpacking. All those boxes of books and leaded glass and lacy linens, some of which were still packed up because of his track record as an eccentric, nomadic renter. "I understand, now, that that is your policy. But couldn't we work something out? I'm a good tenant, I pay the rent before it's due. And I have a female appearance." He wasn't about to address the "Christian" criterion.

Martha stretched her bejeweled hand up in the air as if reaching for God's help. "Lord, son. That's the worst part. That's what makes you such a despicable sinner, not even trying to hide your flaw. But I tell you what. You find another place to rent—be out by this weekend—and I'll invite you to join my church. We've healed people worse off than you. And you'll be glad of it."

Crystal narrowed his eyes. "That is so sweet of you. And how long do you think it would take to heal me?"

"Oh, not long." Martha warmed to the topic. She was beaming at him. "Our prayer group focused on one homosexual young man the spring before this and it only took about three months. Of course, he left town soon after that, so we couldn't confirm that it was permanent."

Crystal took Martha's elbow and urged her toward his front door. "I'm looking forward to it, to the cure. I'll get back to you as soon as I'm settled in my new apartment."

He closed the door after her and stared at it without seeing anything. Reminding himself to breathe, he asked: What would Buddha do? At that point, he was buoyed by compassion for poor Ms. Mabley. Bless her ignorant, vicious, callous heart. Anyone so judgmental should not be offering real estate to the public, especially when it was only offered to a small, select segment of the public. He knew just how to help her exit the market. He had helped landlords and landladies like her every time he got evicted. It was simply a matter of tucking a half-dozen shrimp into the curtain rods on moving day. He would be the final tenant to occupy Mrs. Mabley's apartment.

Fortunately, he had bought a copy of the *Limestone Bi-Weekly Herald*. He would begin his search with the classifieds, then put the word out among his clientele. He flipped the doily off Venus and re-hung the Matisse, which made him wonder how far Mabley had gotten into his possessions. First, he checked the tiny space that she had advertised as a second bedroom, but it really was somewhere between a nook and a closet. It held his still-packed boxes of treasures and fragile things that someday he would unbox and display and put to use when he hosted convivial soirees. Perhaps not in Limestone. The nook and its contents seemed intact. Evidently Mabley had not made it that far.

He entered his bedroom and scanned for anything out of place. The bed was still made, its black duvet pulled up over the beige sheets. The framed prints were still turned outward. The Mona Lisa and Cynthia Markert's jazzy women did not offend Mabley's taste.

He opened the second drawer of his black filing cabinet bulging with business receipts, should the IRS ever want to talk about his returns, but also containing personal artifacts. One file in the "T" section contained write-ups and ribbons from his life as a high school track star. His slight build and speed had earned him the appellation of "Greyhound." His wall of trophies was still at his mother's.

The "R" file held a collection of newspapers clippings, each mentioning his name, describing his injuries, his assailants, and their mock trial. He supposed they were still around, somewhere in Kentucky, oafish and carnal as ever.

No, Mabley hadn't had time to rifle through his personal papers before he came home and caught her. That was the thing about women like Mabley. Their behavior continued to surprise him. After the "incident," as his mother referred to it, he had chosen cosmetology school over college athletic scholarships simply because he wanted to be around women, non-aggressive, compassionate, easy-going women. No testosterone-inflated egos with something to prove, usually involving a weapon. Of course he knew better than to believe in stereotypes—he had been labeled gay often enough understand that people thought all gays were alike—yet he was caught unaware when confronted by the meanness of a woman like Mabley.

Not to worry. He would move on and she could keep her stinking apartment. The groceries. He hoped the ice cream had not melted and ruined his newspaper.

Chapter 16

Ellen awoke exhausted, but knowing exactly where she was and what she needed, which reminded her of the one thing she had forgotten. Coffee. What if the Spencers were tea sippers? Worse, caffeine-free tea sippers? She donned her teal robe and crossed her fingers. After a thorough search of the countertops and cabinets, she found the "coffee unit," a built-in system with its own piped in water source described in the shelter magazines as costing \$2,000. Her drowsy brain took way too long to figure out which button to push to grind the beans and which one to push for hot water. One cup or two? Regular or decaf? Latte or espresso? Frothed milk? Cocoa? Eventually, she held a cup of steaming coffee.

After two cups of coffee and on-line news that mostly didn't matter, Ellen went into the master bath to brush her teeth. The Spencers were selling the contents of the house. All the contents. Even the contents of Mrs. Spencer's cosmetics cabinet? Ellen took down Mrs. Spencer's Limited Edition Deluxe-size jar of *Le Mer* facial cream (\$975 in the Neiman's catalogue) and spread it slowly, lovingly across her face. She could almost hear her skin slurping up the moisturizing softness. She massaged it into her forehead, her cheeks, her chin, and down her neck. She applied a second layer to her neck, thinking she saw a few horizontal lines that weren't there last time she looked this closely. She refused to confirm the image via the lighted magnifying mirror. She shook off her fabulous silky teal robe and her tee shirt, and spread the cream across her arms, her breasts, and as far down her back as she could reach, looking over her shoulder in the wall mirror. This was exactly why rich people were more attractive than the rest of us: expensive skin creams and good haircuts. She slathered the cream on her butt cheeks, her thighs, and her shins. Sitting on the edge of the flagstone tub, she gave each foot a triple

treatment. She should make an appointment with Crystal for a pedicure, although there was something biblical about him using that portable pedi-basin. Maybe this afternoon she would look into the lighted magnifying mirror and pluck her eyebrows and sample the various designer cosmetics, try out a more East Coast look using layered eyeshadow. She dressed in clean shorts and a tee for her second day at Spa Eureka.

Drawn back to the computer, she checked a few of her favorite blogs and websites. Eye fatigued, but not ready to push away from the screen, she conducted her quarterly Google search for Christopher Leonardo Peterson. As usual, there were links to Leonardo Dicaprio and Leonardo Lopate, along with those to variations on the name in Facebook, but no Christopher Leonardo Peterson. It was as if her father had never existed, even though he had lived with her and her mother until one wintery day when she was almost nine, he went to work and never came home, never sent a card, never called. Of course, her mother and father must have communicated, at least through lawyers, because they *did* divorce and he *had* paid child support. She had barraged her mother with questions; there were no answers except for the nominal explanation that he could not recover from losing Sue. But he had abandoned Ellen. She would never forgive him.

Her phone played the theme from "Hair." Billy. "Hi, Honey."

In a typically mundane married-peoples' conversation, he asked whether she was shopped out, having a good time, ready to come home. He asked if Yolanda was having a good time, too. She assured him that the bank account was still intact, she was having too good of a time to come home just yet and that yes, Yolanda was enjoying herself, the bruises were fading. She hung up the phone with the conflicted feelings of a rueful con artist. Later, she would wonder whether she heard a slight edge to Billy's voice.

The phone had hardly cooled when it rang again. It was Crystal. "Girl, can you do me a favor? Can you pick up my layaway at By George? It's just a skirt and top. I called and put the last payment on my credit card. Can you please snag it for me?" Ellen had given the same lie at work as an explanation for taking the week off.

She was stumped. Any other time she could zip into Austin and do the deed, but she didn't have the pickup, which Billy may or may not have driven to work today, and the Lady Harley was too imposing just yet to take on the highway. Maybe she and Yolanda could drive to Austin and back tomorrow, making the lie true. Sort of. "Okay, sure. Anything else? Polish? Soaking solution? Gourmet tomatoes?"

"Whatever you find is good by me," Crystal said, laughing.

Ellen read for a while, snacked for lunch, and returned to the womb of the library. Surrounded by books, she could not yet focus on reading. She opened the window curtain to let in the light, less glaring now than it was even two weeks ago. Autumn was coming, bringing its first high school football game. Everyone would pull out the sweaters and coats in anticipation, only to put them back in storage when the daily high reached 85 degrees. Ellen could forecast lightweight cottons in dark colors for the next two months.

She couldn't settle, floating from room to room like an apparition. She opened the cabinet door that shielded the computer. Online again, she noted Avery Spencer's e-dress, and then logged on to her own account. *Dear Mr. Spencer,* she wrote, taking on airs. *Margie Adams of American Dream Real Estate guided me through your wonderful home in Limestone and suggested I contact you for further information. I was wondering whether you bought it or had it built. If you had it built, was it based on your design? It is such a unique place, partially because of the decor, which is perfect for both your architecture and for Limestone. And that stunning*

chandelier! Is your price firm and would you consider financing a portion? Perhaps I should have Margie ask you those last two questions. Anyway, I am enamored of your abode and would adore the opportunity to inhabit it, especially as you are conveying the contents with the house (I'm sure the urn in the guest closet is an exception.). The library is exquisite. Yours, Ellen hesitated for a moment, then typed in *Marilynne Robinson* and pressed "send."

Ellen delved back into the novel, a comedy about loss and longing and abandonment, two little girls in the landscape of insecurity. Maybe she should take the book home with her. Actually, she might pick out a few books to keep, to store in her pitifully small bookcase in her unfurnished back bedroom. No one would know. No one would care. What if the new owner was a non-reader and decided to turn the library into a game room and took all the books to Goodwill, or worse, burned them in the fireplace? She wouldn't be stealing so much as rescuing, helping the books survive.

Ellen toured the shelves, pushing the rolling ladder in place to reach the books near the ceiling, pulling out *Bullfinch's Mythology* and some Ellen Gilchrist and Alice Munro and *Best American Poems*. She shaped them into an altar and topped it with a tiny glass figurine of an Egyptian cat.

Eureka appealed to her baser, darker side, offering many opportunities ranging from misdeeds to outright evil. She was inside her very own Pandora's box. Her mind would not stop mentally caressing the silvery computer, slim as a book of poetry, easily slipped into purse or tote for use on the go. Perfect for use in online classes.

Stop it!

After she had eaten cheese and bread and served herself a second glass of wine, her phone rang. She was rarely this popular, phone-wise. It was Yolanda, hysterical and apologetic. "Chica, I couldn't help it. I saw Billy, but really, he saw me. I'm in the hospital. Last night, Hank got real drunk. He threw me against the wall in the kitchen, my head slammed into the cabinet. I'm bruised all over. My left eye won't open and I have a concussion. Billy heard and came by to check on me this morning."

All the heat evaporated from Ellen's body as if she had walked into a freezer. "Did he ask anything about me or our trip to Austin? Because that's where I told him you and I were going. Damn."

"No, he didn't mention you. We just talked about Hank and what would happen next legally. Really, Ellen, I'm so sorry if I messed things up for you."

Ellen took a long sip of wine. "Don't worry about me. Are you ready to get serious about leaving Hank? What can I do to help you?" Truly concerned about her friend, Ellen put to the back of her mind the fact that when Billy called this morning, he knew that Yolanda was not in Austin with Ellen, that Ellen had lied to him more than once.

"I don't have a plan yet. The kids are with Mom for a few days until I can get on my feet, literally."

Ellen should probably go home, face the music with Billy and make a bed for Yolanda in the back room. But that would be the second place Hank would look for her, after he had terrorized Yolanda's mother. It was an outlandish idea, but Yolanda could hide here at Eureka. It made perfect sense: Hank would never find her. That would give Yolanda a place where she could heal and decide her future. Giving up the fantasy vacation was nothing compared to keeping her friend safe, although with two people in Eureka, the odds of being noticed by the

neighbors doubled. Ellen would have to risk it. "I can come get you on the Vespa, if that won't shake you up too much." Ellen set her glass in the sink and went to find her purse.

Yolanda laughed. "Chica, I have a concussion. My head is a wreck and you want me to ride on your baby bike? No way. Besides, I have to stay here overnight so they can watch me and poke me and raise my blood pressure. Actually, I think they want to know where I am so they can keep Hank away. I'm okay for the night."

Ellen sank into the sofa. Suddenly, Eureka felt huge, like an orphanage without children. "Call me tomorrow morning and we'll make a plan. I know a place you'll be safe. We have options. I love you."

Even though Ellen was stunned, she was not surprised. Hank was a textbook case of battering: doing more harm each time, making Yolanda feel as if it were her fault.

At least Billy went by the hospital. He's so thoughtful that way. If Yolanda needs anything, he'll see that she gets it. That's how sweet and sensitive he is. He's everything a woman wants in a husband. He's affectionate and funny and faithful and steady and handy around the house and has such a sweet disposition. Most importantly, he adores Ellen. Or he did until today, until she broke his trust in her, made a lie of their marriage. She had taken a huge risk and lost.

Ellen went to the kitchen and poured another glass of wine, hoping for inspiration. Maybe she should just walk home and take him in her arms and apologize. But what if he hated her? Worse, what if he was so disappointed in her that he became indifferent? What if she couldn't reach him anymore? There had certainly been ice in his voice this morning when he called. No, she couldn't face him yet.

After searching most of the first floor of Eureka, Ellen retrieved her cell phone from the library table. Billy answered on the fifth ring.

"Hello." Billy's voice was gravely, probably from sleep. She had no idea of the time.

"Hi, Honey. Look, I want to apologize for telling you that Yolanda and I were in Austin."

She could not say the word "lie."

Billy paused. "That's it? That's all you got?"

"I called to say I'm sorry."

"What's the rest of it, Ellen? Are you with a man?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you were going to Austin with Yolanda," Billy's voice was louder. "Yolanda wasn't in Austin. Who was with you?" He was practically screaming at her.

"Billy, listen to me. I wasn't in Austin. I—"

"That does it." His voice was low and steely again. "I'm going to hang up now, Ellen. I don't want to see you or talk to you until you can quit lying to me."

Chapter 17

Ellen's dreams were sweet and she didn't want to leave them, so she curled to her side and tried to remember who had been flying in the airplane beside her and where they were going. As she rose to consciousness, she heard a door close, then voices. She slipped out of the guest bed, straightened the covers, grabbed her robe, and hid in the closet, leaving the door barely ajar so the light would go off, but she could still hear.

Evidently Margie, the real estate agent, was wearing high heels the way her footsteps clacked on the wood floor across the living area toward the kitchen. "You can see the level of detail in the workmanship . . ." Ellen wondered who the client was, if he or she were a serious buyer, if she could escape while they were in the house, and whether she had washed and shelved last night's dishes.

As the voices neared, it became obvious that the client was a man. Ellen slipped into the fur coat with her back to the closet door. They were in the guest room now, the man's voice almost familiar. Margie hawked value-per-square-foot . . . the curtains convey . . . walk-in closets. Quite a spiel. *The girl is good.* Margie pushed the closet door closed, leaving Ellen in the dark again, inhaling a musty, stale odor. Ellen clinched her fists and willed the prospective buyer to find a flaw in Eureka, even though that was impossible.

After counting to 50-hippopotamus, Ellen eased out of the coat and cracked the door a bit. The voices were still in the house, near the master suite. Ellen hesitated, listening closely. The man's voice was familiar but she didn't know why. Wearing her silky robe, she crept through the Hollywood bath to the hallway where Margie had left the door ajar.

Footsteps overhead indicated that Margie and the man were on the second floor. The client would probably be impressed with the media room, make plans to install a giant ice chest and turn it into a man cave. From where she was standing, Ellen could hear the rise and fall of their voices, then the sound of laughter. It must have been a great joke to inspire those belly laughs. Maybe Margie and the client were old friends or maybe she had been showing him houses for a long time. As the voices came closer, Ellen flattened herself behind the bathroom door.

"The master suite is beyond belief. Note the mirrors above the shower. Doesn't that stir your imagination?" Margie was practically purring.

Then Ellen couldn't make out what they were saying, but she assumed they were discussing square footage or how expensive the fixtures were. She needed an exit plan. Margie and the man were in the master suite, so she couldn't access her clothes and purse. She would be pretty obvious running down the alley in a tee-shirt and teal robe. Surely they were almost finished with the walk-through.

Slowly, Ellen became aware that the voices were moans. If she didn't know better, she'd think Margie and the client were screwing! Margie and Wayne. *He's the client*. Their good friend Wayne, husband of Deb, patron of Papadeaux, and a Saturday night regular at Ellen's house.

Ellen had to be sure. With her bare feet on the frigid wood floor, she crept closer than was safe. Margie had left the french doors to the master bedroom open, and Ellen could see them lying across the bed, Margie in a green sundress, bare legs in the air, Wayne's two-bit barbershop haircut pumping up and down as were his blue striped boxers.

"Oh, baby, oh baby, you need it. I'll give it to you hard."

Yep, that would be Wayne, evidently getting his dialogue from pay-per-view-porn. Not that Deb had ever mentioned it, but Billy had made jokes about Wayne's cable bill. Ellen tried to feel sorry for Deb, but Wayne's smarminess was palpable: you could see it and smell it.

She snuck back through the bath to the guest closet and closed the door. She bit her arm to keep from giggling aloud. Was Margie the mystery woman lunching with Wayne in Jackie's bit of gossip? Did Margie screw all her male clients? Did Wayne have the slightest intention of buying this house? Deb hadn't mentioned wanting to move. In the dark, she giggled quietly into an alpaca scarf, feeling rude and disrespectful to the urn.

The thought of her cell phone stifled her laughter. Where had she left it? What if it rang, giving away her presence? If she had it with her in the closet, she could call Yolanda or at least see what time it was. Hungry and no coffee. What a rude awakening. She would try to start the day over.

After she sneaked and crept and listened, she determined that Margie and Wayne had left. In fact, they left the bed a mess, covers tangled, pillows askew. The light caught something silver in the folds. It was Wayne's business card case, engraved WPB, no doubt a gift from Deb. Ellen slipped it into the pocket of her robe.

Lying on a table by the front door, the agent's notice stated that on this day, Margie had shown the house to one Mr. Wayne Bradley. His comments were "favorable, likes the layout and decor, thinks it a bit overpriced." Well, yeah, what with the cable bill and all. Ellen got the giggles again. Passing by the library, she remembered her phone. Maybe Billy's anger had ebbed enough to call her. There were no messages, no calls.

Remembering nothing from the day before, Ellen had to decode the coffee system all over again, what to push for beans, what to push for water. When the aroma of coffee finally filled the

air, she took her cup and went to the computer to get the morning news. Weather, war, health warnings. She opened her email account. Maybe there was an email from Billy. He had not, but she spied a reply from Avery Spencer.

Dear Ms. Robinson, I am so pleased that you like the house and that you can see yourself living there, enjoying the life my family had expected to spend there. I'm not sure how much information Margie gave you, but my wife Sophia and I are dividing our properties. Neither of us has need of the Limestone house, which I designed and she decorated. The urn will not convey, as it contains Baby Puppy Spencer, the girls' first dog, a Great Dane. Perhaps we shall meet if you become the new owner.

The Spencers were divorcing. That called for another cup of coffee. Scott and Zelda were coming apart at the seams, just as they did in real life. Maybe Avery Spencer had gotten caught screwing Margie when she took the listing. Or maybe Sophia had a new love, an important job, a case of boredom. It could be anything. Like the rest of the world, wealthy people fell out of love or imagined new lives, but they could actually afford to do something about it.

As she poured another cup of coffee, the events of the day before washed over her, taking her breath. Billy had caught her in a lie. She felt his anger. He had grown steely, silent, closed off to her. Even when he was angry with someone else, it could take a while for him to warm back to life and to her. What she had done was unforgivable. She needed to find a way back to him, back into his trust, which she had taken for granted. Also, she needed to concentrate on Yolanda, to make a plan to help her. It was all too much.

Ellen back-burnered her dilemmas while she read her novel and drank coffee until she came to page 140 where the little sister leaves, choosing a conventional life over her family, " . . . and I had no sister after that night." A crying jag for lost sisters ensued. Through the sobbing and

hiccupping, Ellen wondered why Sue was so much on her mind and whether the chasm of loss would ever fill. Maybe she was reading the wrong book: two sisters in the book, two sisters in the little girls' room—two too many. She assured herself that Sue Ellen's ghost could not haunt Eureka, a place she had never been.

The crying jag over, Ellen stood to pace the library while she thought. Her head felt stuffed with cotton but her thoughts were clear. Bottom line: she had lied to Billy. Why? Because she wanted to "vacation" in an empty house that was for sale. How evil was that? It was not as if Billy's accusation were true. She did *not* have a lover. But she had betrayed Billy, betrayed their vows. She had lied to him—lies of omission—all summer while she sneaked off to Eureka. Her true lover: a house. The unrequited love in her life. Nevertheless, she had weaved an elaborate web involving Yolanda and a trip out of town, lies of commission to throw him off track.

Ellen was sure that if Billy would let her explain about Eureka, he would forgive her. Worst case: he would kick her out of the house. Best case: he'd lecture her about the repercussions of breaking and entering.

But if she began confessing, she might confess the other lie, the big one about being able to have children. Another lie of omission. She had never told Billy what the doctor had said after her miscarriage. It was too much to think about right now. Layers of guilt were collecting like bad weather, ominous and threatening.

One drawer in the master bath held an assortment of high-end makeup. Ellen picked up a wand of mascara and brought it to her red, swollen eyes. She put it down and picked up a tiny tray of eyeshadow in the purple-to-blue range. After applying all three colors to her right eye from lash to brow, she looked vampy, trampy. For the left eye, she chose a "holiday" tray of red, green and gold, which, once applied, gave her a rakish, Italian clown effect. She touched the

green wand to the end of her nose. The Crayola hair would have been the crowning touch. Ellen pulled on a bouffant plastic pink-and-gold striped shower cap with silver pom-poms floating on top. Rodeo clown sans barrel.

Ellen looked into the mirror and said, "I am not me. I'm somebody else. Somebody who could convince Billy to trust Ellen again." As she reached for her phone, it rang. Crystal. "Hi, Ellen. I hope you don't mind me spoiling your vacation again." Ellen remembered the skirt and top at By George. She had forgotten to worry about that obligation.

"Well, I hope this won't be any trouble for you. I just want you to keep your eyes and ears open. Martha Mabley popped me, so I have to move. A loft or studio, any little thing is fine as long as I can chintz it up. The sooner the better. Mrs. Mabley has no patience for this sort of thing."

Ellen had to turn her back to the mirror to keep from laughing into the phone. She imagined mean Martha Mabley giving Crystal the bum's rush, and for no good reason. He was a sterling person, probably a sterling tenant. If Ellen owned property, she'd rent to him in a minute. "This is a good time to look, what with school starting and people shifting around. I'll keep my ears out, so to speak."

Turning to the mirror again, she looked directly into the eyes of a convicted liar. If Billy kicked her out, everyone in Limestone would know she didn't go on a trip with Yolanda. There was a slight chance he might have figured it out anyway when she came home from a shopping "vacation" without a single new tee-shirt or new dress. Not even shoes. On the other hand, he probably wouldn't have noticed.

Billy doesn't want to talk to her. She could call and risk annoying him or she could give him time to cool off. Peering closer to the mirror, she tried to remember the name of the area

between the nose and the upper lip and why she even knew it had a name, of concern only to plastic surgeons and their lip-deprived clients. And people who did crossword puzzles. Using a tube of "Tango-Pango," Ellen drew on a full-blown pair of orange I-Love-Lucy lips, oversized, outside the lip line, as when Lucy was drunkenly selling the "vegametamatic." That made her laugh, smearing lipstick on her front tooth. She was tipsy without drinking.

She pulled open a drawer containing jewelry. At least, she assumed it was costume jewelry since the real stuff should be in a safe in the back of some closet. She might search for that later. With her nose almost to the mirror, she fitted the stud of an enormous gold hoop into her ear. Pawing around in the drawer for the matching one, she heard only the small pings and tings of metal trinkets bouncing off each other, not the front door opening or the footsteps crossing the floor of the living area, footsteps then muffled in the area rug of the master bedroom.

They spotted each other at the same moment, but neither heard the other scream. Ellen felt icicles down her back when she saw the woman reversed in the bathroom mirror. The woman sat heavily onto the bed, hand over chest as if the apparition with a plastic hat above a garish face bobbing over a teal shroud had brought on a heart attack. Ellen wheeled around. It was only Margie, who had changed from her rumpled sundress into a pants suit and flats.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Margie said.

There being no right answer, Ellen did not reply.

Margie stood, searching the room as if preparing an inventory of missing items. "What have you taken? Is that Sophia's earring? Where's the other one?" She gave Ellen a squinty look. "What are you, some sort of clown burglar? It's always a new angle with you guys. Why don't you just get a real job."

"I haven't taken anything," Ellen said. "I'm just trying out the house."

Margie went from menacing to flabbergasted. "You're what? Trying out? That's just not the way it's done, Lovey. Here's the drill: you call me. We make an appointment. I show you the house. You call your mortgage banker. That's the way we do it here. Maybe you're a foreigner? Are you French or something?"

Ellen could almost see a little light bulb come on over Margie's head. She scowled at Ellen. "Okay. I know who you are. Avery Spencer emailed me about you. You're that woman, that Marilyn Robins? Robnett? Robinson?" She shook her finger in Ellen's face. "That's you. Marilyn Robinson."

Could it be that Margie did not recognize her? Lots of people only saw what they needed to, could not identify their waitress at dinner or the person beside them on a plane. Perhaps Margie had never really paid attention to the hairdresser who stood behind the chair next to Mary Jo's. After the slightest hesitation, Ellen said, "So I am."

"How did you get in here?"

"Same as you. With a key."

"I'll call the police and have you jailed. The very idea." Margie reached for the phone clipped to her purse strap.

Ellen put out her lilac fingertips to stop the movement as her new, basso voice said, "I don't think so, Margie, because if the police come, everyone in Limestone will know that Deb's loathsome husband wears blue boxers. And that you, Miss American Dream Real Estate, make your money on your back."

Margie looked stunned. "How do you know everyone's name? You aren't a local. Do I know you? You might have seen my TV ads, but I don't know why you'd know who Wayne is. Unless you go to First Methodist."

Ellen's Eureka personality was completely at ease. "No, you don't know me." She smiled a big, orange lipstick smile. "No one around here knows me."

Without taking her eyes from Ellen, Margie began patting the bed covers.

"Looking for his card case? Don't bother. I have it. I'll leave it on the kitchen counter on my way out. It'll be a day or two." Ellen was in possession of the house and of new her persona; she felt powerful. She put her hands in the pockets of her teal robe and leaned back against the counter attempting a sneer. "By the way, is Wayne even in the market for a house? Or maybe you two are having an affair and get off on screwing in the homes of strangers."

Margie stood. "That's really none of your business, you trespasser, you blackmailer. You, you clown. You look ridiculous."

"Yes, and you look caught, like you've got a lot to lose. But, Margie, it's in both our best interests to keep secrets, isn't it?"

Margie didn't exactly answer, but she picked up her purse, tilted her chin, and left the room, which, to Ellen, seemed like tacit agreement.

As Ellen showed Margie out the front door, she noticed a deadbolt and clicked it into place. That should eliminate any more surprises. She sank into the Eames chair and shivered at her own audacity. As with any true actor, she was eager for the next performance.

It was nearly noon. Ellen slathered her face with cold cream to remove the thick make-up. When the water was hot enough, she took a shower in the master bath, shampooing with the Aveda and rinsing for a long time. She dried off and dressed in one of Sophia's loose-fitting outfits—green silk pants and top—and her own sandals. Now she looked like a grownup and as such, could deal with life.

In the library, she reached for her journal. She would begin by making a list of options. Ellen's mind opened to a thought that knocked her back into the chair: this thing with Billy was not all his to decide. She could call an end to the marriage, could start over. She had her cosmetology license, she could get a job anywhere in Texas. Or she could get a license in another state. Or she could change careers, become a miner or a railroad engineer, a school cafeteria worker, a chanteuse, an organic farmer, or she could join the army. She could be anything anywhere. That must be the definition of freedom. Anything anywhere. The thought made her palms sweat.

Freedom had a certain appeal, especially now that her back was to the wall. It had been done before—people wandering off, fictional characters like those in *Housekeeping*, non-fictional ones like her father. She had gotten things so wrong so far, what could be lost by starting over? Ellen hunkered down in the chair, half afraid of the idea and what it might lead to. She drew doodles on her blank journal page, played Hangman's Noose with herself and won. She wrote: Freedom. Fly. False. Fright.

A LIST by Ellen Monroe

1. Billy will be fine no matter what happens.
2. I'd like to try something different—dangerous?—so I'll know I'm alive.
3. Survivor guilt demands penance.
4. Women read romance novels to escape for an hour or 2. They don't pack their clothes and move to NYC or LA.
5. I love Billy the best I can.
6. Make choices. Then take action.

Chapter 18

Ellen considered the possibility that Hank could kill Yolanda the next time he became enraged. It was possible that her best friend might be murdered. The only way Ellen could help was to keep Yolanda safe until she found the nerve to leave Hank. That afternoon, when Yolanda called, Ellen described how to find the alley and hide her car in the garage by the Tahoe. "And bring wine." Together they would make a plan to save Yolanda's life.

Ellen was antsy with anticipation of the possibilities. Eureka was getting lonely, yet crowded with unknowns, fat with fantasies, pregnant with prerogatives. Obviously, she was losing it. Yolanda would bring a return to sanity and, perhaps, some insight about the future.

The garage door was up, a gaping hole waiting for the cavalry to enter. The outside heat mixed with the air conditioning, but who cared. Finally, Yolanda's dusty red Camry eased down the alley and into the garage. Yolanda emerged from the car like an elderly lady, slowly and carefully, body part by body part. She whistled. "Chica, this is uptown. What's the story?" Her bruises were purplish-black and her left eye was still droopy.

The noise of the garage door clattering down bought Ellen time to think. Why hadn't she gotten her story down while she waited for Yolanda to arrive? "I'm house-sitting. For a woman, a client. They only come here once in a while and she wanted me to check things out before they put it on the market."

For a moment, Yolanda looked as if she could buy it, but "Then why did you lie to Billy? Did you meet a man here? Are you having an affair?" She laughed. "That's not possible. There aren't any attractive men in this town. Well, of course, Billy."

Billy had jumped to that conclusion, too. In a way, Ellen was flattered that people assumed she was capable of such duplicity. "Haven't you ever fantasized about having an affair with Wayne Bradley?" She was lying to her best friend, trying to throw her off guard with gossip. She stopped smiling. "Yolanda, I may have lost it. I mean, I don't know why I do what I do. It's almost like I just act and react without knowing why. Am I crazy?"

"Well, considering that night at the Sagebrush, and now this, I think that's one possibility. Pour me some wine and show me around your place."

"You can't have a drink!"

Tears welled up in Yolanda's eyes. "No, I lost the baby. I can't help but think it's for the best."

"I'm so sorry." Ellen gave her a hug, holding her close. "But maybe you're right."

By the time the bottle was emptied, they had stashed Yolanda's things in the master bedroom and toured the house, even the upstairs. Yolanda settled at the kitchen island, her wrists cooling against the tiles, while Ellen opened a second bottle of wine.

"What about Hank?" Ellen asked as she poured.

"What about him?"

"You know what I mean. Where is he? What are you going to do about him?"

Yolanda swirled her glass of wine, watching the prisms dance across the ceiling. "I talked with a counselor at the hospital. It's pretty obvious I can't do anything about *him*. What am I going to do about me? And about the kids? I don't know. Something drastic. He really scared me this time. And sooner or later, he'll start hitting the kids." She looked up at Ellen. "So, I'm leaving his butt."

Ellen was impressed. "Wow, just like that?"

"He's in county jail for another day or two. I've got a peace bond against him so theoretically he can't come near the kids or me. The police have contacted his supervisor, which is a little awkward since he works for the city, so it'll all be public in about six minutes. But I've started the process. I even have an attorney."

"But what about all the reasons to stay together—no money, etcetera?"

"When I realized just how vicious he can be, those reasons became excuses. Now, let me enjoy some peace and quiet in this fabulous place."

They took their glasses and the bottle to the living area, which Yolanda preferred to the library because the books reminded her of school. "Okay, I agree that this house is Eureka. And I can see why you'd want to take a little vacation here. But tell me the real deal. Whose place is this? Why so secretive?"

There was no explanation, no good reason. Just because, as if she were back in elementary school. Just because. And look what it had cost her. "How would it have sounded if I announced to the Saturday night gang that I was hanging out in someone else's house? Without the owner's permission?"

"It would have sounded like breaking and entering."

"So, maybe that's why I kept it a secret. More wine?" Just like that, Yolanda had solved her own problem, or was on the way to solving it. She at least had a plan, a goal, a vision of how things would unfold. Ellen couldn't help but be a little envious.

Ellen's cell phone rang. "Hello? Oh, Crystal. No, no, no. You can't rent from him. He's crazier than Martha Mabley. Talk is, he has secret video cams in all his apartments. Did you call Jackie? She's still trying to rent out her house." She paused to listen. "Right, right. You can't avoid Lester if his wife is your landlady." Ellen looked around the vastness of Eureka. One more

person would hardly be noticed except, perhaps, by the neighbors. Here was the opportunity to help a friend while providing more distraction from her situation with Billy. "Crystal, if you can put your stuff in storage, I know a place you can stay for a few days while you look for a new apartment. That is, if you don't mind sleeping on a twin bed." And so it was settled that Crystal would move into Eureka the next day. Let the slumber party begin.

Talking to Crystal gave Ellen an idea. She and Yolanda were about to embark on a mini-adventure. Ellen ushered Yolanda back into the garage. Taking the keys from the peg, she unlocked the imposing Tahoe and punched various buttons until she heard the garage door lifting. After backing the behemoth out of the garage and closing its door, she drove slowly down the alley, picking up speed as she pulled into the street, then faster as she headed north on the highway toward Austin. Yolanda sat stiffly, elbows in, as if that would prevent her from being an accomplice to whatever Ellen had in mind, beginning with the newly opened bottle of wine in the console between them. Evidently they had crossed some boundary of Yolanda's: breaking and entering, okay; auto theft, not okay. Or maybe she feared for her physical safety.

" 'Landa, we're on a little errand. It's a favor for Crystal. We're doing a *good* thing, okay?"

The SUV floated like a boat over the open sea of highway, offering a bird's eye view into the occasional passing car. Its air conditioner rivaled that of Eureka's, blasting frigid air at their faces until they figured out how to raise the temperature and turn the blowers toward the ceiling. A few miles closer to Austin they connected with KUT's radio signal, a Tejano music fest riding the airwaves through the Tahoe's multi sense-surround speakers. Ellen felt a little vague, but not boozy. She wasn't weaving the Tahoe across the centerline, nor was she going 40 in a 65 zone. Everything was just fine.

"Grand theft auto," Yolanda said. "You're getting to be quite the criminal. Are we going to rob a bank when we get to Austin?"

"Aren't you a little surprised at my capacity to break the law? I am a true scofflaw. Isn't that a great word? I've always been such a goody-two-shoes. Always doing the right thing, the expected thing. No, no, I'm past scofflaw, moving toward outlaw. Really, aren't you impressed?"

Yolanda looked out the window at the burnt vegetation. "Surprised, yes. Impressed, no. Impress me by figuring out what you are doing and why. Are you trying to get out of your marriage?"

"I have no idea." And how was she supposed to know a thing like that?

Ellen suddenly understood the concept of cabin fever. She couldn't believe how big and blue the sky was. How wonderful it was to drive fast, watching things zip past as if they had never been there. The things you take for granted. A wisp of gray on the horizon, probably a farmer burning field rubble, reminded Ellen that she was a smoker. Three days in Eureka without a cigarette. She wheeled the SUV onto the shoulder and dug through her purse.

Yolanda frowned. "Did your phone ring? I didn't hear anything."

Ellen pulled out a lighter and a half-empty pack of Virginia Slims. "Pour me some wine?" She swung open the heavy door and leaned against the SUV as she lit up.

Yolanda exited the car with two plastic cups. "I'm glad we aren't in a hurry."

"Landa, I must not be addicted if I can go three days without a cigarette and not miss it, not even think about it. Can you imagine thinking you're addicted to something you don't even need? This smoke smells awful and tastes even worse. What else do I not know? Maybe I don't like Tex-Mex or maybe I love classical music. Hell, maybe I don't know I can play a piano if I've never had one."

A tanker truck blew by, propelling the women against the SUV in its wake.

Yolanda gulped the last of her wine. "You read all those books and they don't tell you anything. Have you ever read about anybody like you?"

"No, I've never read about a woman in love with a house. The only books that come close are about men obsessed with killing whales or sharks. It's a big difference." Ellen stubbed out her cigarette on the edge of the pavement and finished her wine. "Let's go to Austin."

The shop was full of mirrors and racks of silky clothes most women could not—or would not—afford. Nail techs must make better tips than haircutters, or maybe Crystal had inherited. In any case, he had the perfect body for these tiny clothes: straight up and down with no bumps, no lumps. The manager had Crystal's purchase wrapped and waiting, orange and lime fabric peeking from tissue paper.

The clerks and customers wore more makeup than the women in Limestone. They were just generally more fashionable, looking as if they had stepped from the pages of *Elle* magazine. Even though she was wearing Sophia's silkoutfit, Ellen felt dowdy.

"Now what?" asked Yolanda, fondling a soft, flirty sundress on sale for \$375.

"Have you had lunch? Have I?" They crossed the street to Whole Foods and were immediately overwhelmed by their choices. Mini-cafes offered omelets, sushi, Chinese, Thai, Tex-Mex, and other specialties that caressed and assaulted the olfactories, filling the air not only with aromas but also the hiss of the woks and the pop of frying oil. The tables and chairs were filled with people eating and reading or talking or typing on laptops. Most of the lone eaters were nodding to the rhythm of whatever was streaming through their earbuds. The general din gave the area an aura of liveliness and camaraderie. Ellen and Yolanda wandered around in a daze of

possibilities, finally settling on quiche de jour and iced tea. Planning ahead, they bought containers of Chinese food to take back to Eureka for dinner.

"Let's go over to BookPeople."

"Chica, you have books. Eureka has a whole room full of books."

"Come on, Yolanda. It'll be fun."

They stashed the Chinese food and Crystal's package with the info person at the front of the bookstore. Yolanda headed toward the magazine section, while Ellen found the mystery section. Life was full of mysteries. Why not add one more? At least in the books, mysteries had solutions. She considered the Scarpetta mysteries by Patricia Cornwell, the Amelia Peabody series by Elizabeth Peters, the Irene Kelly mysteries by Jan Burke, the Dave Robicheaux mysteries by James Lee Burke. (Were the Burkes cousins with a mystery gene in their DNA?)

Nothing appealed. It was as if Ellen had sated her appetite for food and books at the same time. That was worrisome. Her hunger for books had always been enormous, unending. Not six weeks ago, at this very bookstore, she had picked up so many books, she had to go stand in the military history section to calm her frenzy. For the moment, she was not interested in solving other people's mysteries. Walking along the shelves, tranced out, unable to read the titles or authors, Ellen suddenly imagined the one book she really did need. The diagram on the wall pointed the way to the travel section where she found her prize: a guide to Taos.

She left the store with one book; Yolanda bought three magazines and a leather-covered journal. "Blank pages, no lines, see? That way I can write, but if I get too angry, I can draw. The counselor said journals are good therapy."

"Yeah, I've got thirty-five, forty of them full of Natalie Goldberg writing prompts and look where it's gotten me."

Yolanda patted the leather. "Well, you just need one more."

Ellen remembered her journal lying on the library table in Eureka. Maybe she wasn't writing about the important things.

They finished the wine on the drive back to Limestone, Ellen's quiche protecting her against tipsiness. But her reflexes were sluggish, so that when the puma ran in front of the Tahoe, it took her a few seconds to register that a huge yellow cat was dashing across the road. To avoid hitting it, she steered hard to the left and crossed the highway.

Luckily, no cars were coming and, luckily, she missed the cat. Unluckily, she sideswiped a giant entryway, which consisted of twin five-foot-tall towers of Austin Chalk limestone with an iron arch between them heralding the Double-D Ranch. Ellen stared at the scattered stones—several of which rested on the SUV's hood. She watched the dust settle, listened to the hiss and ping of the engine, and swallowed several times before she fully realized what had happened.

" 'Landa, you okay? 'Landa?"

"Damn, woman," she said angrily. "First, Hank tries to kill me, and now you. Just drop me off some place where I'll be safe. I'm fine. No, wait. I've got another knot." Her hand shook as she touched her forehead. She turned to look at Ellen. Sure enough, the knot was over her droopy eyelid. The color drained from her face so quickly, she might have been going into shock.

Ellen was scared. "I'll take you wherever you want."

"Just take me back to my car." Yolanda was silent and trembling the rest of the way home.

Ellen focused on the damage to the SUV. It would probably be covered by homeowner's insurance, but only if the homeowner could explain what caused the divots in the hood. Maybe she could leave the Spencers an unsigned note.

Ellen pushed the remote to open the garage door and eased the SUV into its parking space beside Yolanda's car. She turned off the engine, noting the silence, the stillness. Neither woman spoke for a few minutes, then Yolanda said, "Later." She gathered up her magazines and journal, her purse, Crystal's package, and the Chinese food and got out. She shut the car door without really slamming it, but that's what it felt like to Ellen, who stayed in the driver's seat, waiting for Yolanda to come back out with her overnight bag, hoping she had cooled off, physically and emotionally, in the air conditioned house.

Whatever Yolanda was doing, she was taking her time inside Eureka. Ellen noticed the riding lawnmower sitting in the corner of the garage. It was the same brand the television ads said would "turn on a dime." Billy would rise from the couch and toast those commercials, the mower of his dreams. Billy. Right now he represented an enormous abyss that she must fill, one way or another. Leaving the garage door up so Yolanda could back her car out, Ellen began walking home to Billy. She didn't care that he had told her to stay away. He couldn't have meant it. She practiced saying "I'm sorry" with various inflections to see which one sounded the most sincere, because she really was sorry. She was just not sure what she was most sorry about.

Sticks and dried grass crackled under her sandals as she walked the alley. Dust rose and hung in the air.

Billy wasn't due for another half hour. She busied herself picking up, moving dishes from the drain board to the cabinets, boiling water for iced tea, and mentally editing her appeal to Billy's good nature. Passing the dresser mirror, she saw she was still wearing Sophia's green silk top and pants. In the shock of the wreck, she had pitted out, leaving wet, wrinkled circles under her arms. She changed into a tee and put the smelly top into the bathroom sink with cold water and Woolite. She could drape it on the towel rack, but outside, on a hanger, it would dry in a

second. Carrying the dripping garment through the entryway, the living room and out the kitchen door, she looked for an appropriate place. There being no clothesline, she hung the shirt on the handle of Billy's grill and returned to the house to continue pretending to be busy.

When Billy opened the door and saw her, he seemed surprised, then annoyed. "I thought you were vacationing in Austin with Yolanda." His sarcastic tone surprised her. He took off his cap and wiped his forehead. As always, his clothes were greasy and smelled of motor oil. "I'm going to take a bath."

Ellen stepped in his way. "I did. We just got back." Technically, it was true.

"That's nuts, Ellen. Remember, I saw Yolanda in the hospital."

"Can we talk? I need to apologize for not being honest. I know how important it is for us to trust each other." She reached out to touch his shoulder, but he flinched.

"Ellen, I have no idea why you did what you did, and I don't care what your excuse is, okay? I just don't care because it can't be good enough for me."

"But aren't you even going to listen? It wasn't about us, about you. Something was missing in my life and I found this house and that seemed to fill the void."

" 'Not about us.' That pretty much describes your view of our marriage. It's irrelevant. I'm irrelevant," he said.

"That's not true. I love you," she said, even though she wasn't sure whether that was another lie. "You don't understand me."

"I don't even know you." He shut the bathroom door in her face.

Ellen raised her voice over the sound of water filling the bathtub. "It all started when I found Eureka. It's like another world, not that there's anything wrong with this one, but I just—" She wasn't even sure he could hear her. She would just wait him out; after all, he didn't take long

baths with incense and bath salts. It was almost time for the news. They could watch it together as they did every night and things would get back to normal. Afterward, they could talk and work things out.

Sophia's top was probably dry by now. Outside, Ellen stared at the grill, trying to make the top reappear. She found the hanger a few feet away. Picking it up, she eyed the ground, looking for forest green against the dead, brown grass. It was almost to the alley, wrinkled and flat, with teeth marks across the ragged hem. The silk shirt had become a dog's plaything. She refused to spend a moment worrying about replacing it. If it had been one of Sophia's favorites, she would have taken with her to Dallas.

Billy's bath was taking longer than usual. She tapped on the door. "Hey, Sweets. It's almost time for the news." But Billy had finished his bath. He was in the bedroom, packing overalls into a brown grocery sack.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to Margaret's ranch."

"Why? For how long?"

"Lightening and I are going to overhaul her tractor."

"But Billy, we need to talk. You can't just leave."

He was folding tee shirts and socks, stashing enough clothes for a week. He kept moving around the room, deliberately avoiding looking at her. "I paid the phone bill and rent while you were on vacation. The electric bill will probably come next week." Somehow, he managed to say "vacation" without any sarcasm. The air conditioning unit roared to life. Billy pulled three bandanas from the drawer.

"How long does it take to overhaul a tractor? Days? Weeks? You're just trying to avoid me, but that won't solve anything." Ellen moved out of the way as Billy walked into the foyer and out the front door. She followed him outside, shouting, "I said I'm sorry. What else do you want?" She watched him drive away.

Ellen saw the news without hearing it. War. Drought. Probably someone gone missing. As long as it wasn't Yolanda, it didn't matter. Maybe she should call her. Looking around in the dimly lighted living room, she couldn't see her purse. Damn. It was still in the Tahoe, along with her cell phone. Her new guidebook to Taos was there, too. Her journal and crossword puzzle book were inside Eureka. She should go collect her belongings, but she didn't have the energy, didn't want to know whether Yolanda was still angry with her, didn't want to go anywhere near the house that caused the trouble.

From the bookshelf in the back bedroom, she picked out a volume of short stories and snuggled into her recliner, hoping she could escape, but she turned the pages without reading. Giving up, she pulled back the sheet on her empty bed, crawled into a fetal position, and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 19

In Eureka's master bedroom, Yolanda lay down without pulling back the bedspread. Her head hurt. She knew without looking that her forehead would be black and swollen, as if Hank had hit another exposed body part. She could rest here while she tried to think of somewhere to go.

Morning light crept through the blinds and woke her. It took a minute to remember where she was, why she was sleeping in her clothes. She rubbed the knot on her aching head. Hank was probably out on bail. The children were safe at her mother's, but her tiny *mamacita* would be no match for him if he decided to take the kids. She needed to get them to a safe place. She could pick them up from her mother's and bring them here, to Eureka, but that was a temporary measure.

Hank would be crazed, furious that she had filed charges against him, that he couldn't see his kids, that she wasn't his punching bag any more. So he would want to hurt her any and every way he could think of, which would be to hurt the kids. She was thinking in circles. Where was the straight line that would take her out of this situation. *Out* was the key word. Out of town, out of Hank's reach.

Ellen had been right about the women's shelter in Austin. Hank wouldn't be able to get to her. And she could take the kids, stay as long as she needed to regroup, maybe find a teaching job in another town.

Yolanda smiled. She was congratulating herself for her courageous decision to begin a new life when she heard a noise. Half standing, she held her breath, hoping it was only a cricket

or a squirrel outside. But no, the door in the kitchen was opening. How had Hank found her? Had Ellen betrayed her? Where was her cell phone?

Terrified, she glanced around the bedroom, hoping to spot a brass candlestick or a marble statue or a letter opener or anything she could use to defend herself. Why didn't she own a gun?

She heard the door close and footsteps across the kitchen tile.

Yolanda considered cowering in the closet, but she needed to practice being courageous, needed to show Hank what he was up against. And there was the weapon, lying in the closet floor: hot pink stilettos. They wouldn't kill Hank, but that tiny piece of metal in the heel would make him bleed. She'd like that. She took both shoes and moved toward the bedroom door, pressing herself flat against the wall. She raised a shoe in each hand into the air, ready to strike.

From the kitchen, Crystal said, "Miss Ellen? Are you here?"

Yolanda knew that the soft, semi-falsetto voice was not Hank's, but she inched her way down the shadowy hall and kept moving until she could see into the kitchen. She hadn't been to The Talk in months and, although she had heard about the new nail tech, she had not seen him, so she was stunned to see a willowy man wearing a fuchsia sundress and pink sunhat.

"Miss Yolanda?"

"Crystal?"

"Yes, it is I." He spied the By George bag on the counter. "Oh, joy. A new outfit always makes me pay closer attention to life for a day or two."

After fetching a sweater from Sophia Spencer's closet ("This air condition system is most impressive") Crystal and Yolanda sat at the kitchen island to compare information, but neither had any idea about the location of their hostess and benefactor.

Yolanda described her impending move to the women's shelter in Austin. The act of telling a stranger her plans made them seem possible. She would resign her teaching position, take her children to the shelter, and file for divorce. Her plan for survival really would end her marriage, her yoke-turned-noose with Hank. "We'll be safe. I have a peace bond and a restraining order to keep Hank away from us."

Crystal looked doubtful. "What you have are two worthless pieces of paper giving you permission to call the cops when you are in danger, and you'd better hope the cop gets there fast. Your husband doesn't sound like a man who would be restrained by a piece of paper."

Yolanda lost a little of her courage. It was tactless of Crystal to be so blunt, but he was right. Hank was never one to follow the rules. Wanting to think about something besides her husband, she changed the subject. "And you?"

The light from the window over the sink splayed across the island, brightening the air and bleaching the color from the tiled countertop. Crystal spoke almost too softly to hear. "I'll be fine. I'm fluid, like water."

"You could find a place in Austin. It's just an hour's drive. Of course, you have to watch out for puma and deer and livestock when you commute."

Crystal passed one of the stilettos from hand to hand, caressing the smooth pink leather. "No, I'm putting down roots here in Limestone. I like painting the ladies' nails in the salon, and then seeing them in their native habitat. I like waving to my clients in the grocery store or watching them talking on their cell phones or smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk while they window-shop. I want to be a local." Crystal looked around the kitchen. "This home is just lovely. Would you please give me a tour of the interior before I get evicted for the second time in a week?"

Chapter 20

Daylight crept through the mini-blinds, waking Ellen. Even before she opened her eyes, she was aware that both Billy and Yolanda were angry with her. It took a while longer to realize that she had left Eureka exposed, with the garage door open to let anyone and anything enter her secret, sacred place, although it was less secret now that Yolanda and Crystal knew about it.

She could fix everything as soon as she had a cup—maybe two—of coffee. And she would brew it here, in her kitchen, where she could easily locate the coffee beans and knew how the coffee pot worked.

She stood, looking but not seeing, out the kitchen window while the coffee brewed. Her house had never seemed so lively, so noisy. The fridge hummed as usual, but every once in a while, it burped. With her luck, it was probably about to die. The clock ticked loudly, slow as a heartbeat. A grasshopper had made its way into the windowsill, sawing her nerves with its chirping.

The caffeine fueled her anxiety, but she kept postponing the trip down the alley, hoping that Billy might change his mind and come back, fearful that he would not. First the coffee, then the newspaper—just the headlines—then both of the daily crosswords to get her brain in gear. After a third cup, she took extra care in brushing and flossing. Finally, there was nothing to do but change into a tee and shorts and leave the house. It was obvious that Billy wouldn't be back for a few days, but that allowed her time to prepare a speech that would convince him to trust her again. *If* that was what she wanted him to do.

On the way through her living room, she saw Sophia's mangled green silk top on the recliner. One silk shirt. One puckered Tahoe hood. Her debts were piling up.

It was a beautiful, cloudless day and, at ten o'clock, it was not yet oppressively hot. A slight breeze ruffled the leaves of the crepe myrtle bushes, kissing the back of Ellen's neck and knees as she slowly made her way toward Eureka.

The garage door was closed. Good for Yolanda. The back door was locked, the key in its place over the sill. She opened the door expectantly. "Hello?" She closed the door quietly, looking, listening for evidence of company. She had anticipated a house full of people, yet here she was alone.

She was more than confused to see a pair of hot pink stilettos sitting atop the kitchen island. Nothing else was out of place, no stained coffee cups, no toast crumbs. The kitchen looked as it had all the other times she had entered. Except for those shoes. Where were her friends? Actually, she was relieved that Yolanda was gone. Most likely, her anger would have dissipated, but Ellen was in no hurry to find out.

Circling around the island, Ellen spotted a piece of paper tucked into one of the stilettos, a note from Crystal saying he would be at the salon until around five.

Ellen had steeled herself for confrontation, but now she faced nothing but an empty day. Talking on the phone was always a time killer. She tried to remember when she had last called her mother, but that reminded her that her phone—and her purse— was still in the SUV. The darkened garage hid the pitted-out hood until the interior light came on. Guilt forced her to carry the empty wine bottle inside to the wastebasket. At some point, she would have to figure out what to do with the bag of garbage since the Spencers probably did not pay for city pick-up service.

Maybe the neighbors wouldn't notice an alien bag. Her purse and phone she tucked into the master closet beside her duffle.

She poured herself a frosty crystal glass of pinot and carried it to the library, but she was too antsy to read and too unfocused to write in her journal. Carrying the glass of wine, she wandered about the house, finally stopping inside Sophia's closet. All those clothes, all those shoes, all those stacks of sweaters. Silk and cashmere and brocade (for formal cocktail parties in Limestone?) and linen in all colors. Ellen was patting the fabrics, tactile contact with the softness, the movement stirring a faint scent of perfume worn long ago. Her hand came in contact with something hard, something hidden in the folds of an ornate dressing gown. Finding the pocket, Ellen pulled out a pharmacy vial, the pills inside making a jarring rattle. The label read: "Hydrocodone, take two for pain." Ellen stared at the amber bottle, then quickly diagnosed herself as full of pain and took two, washing them down with the wine. She continued to pat the clothing, quickly working her way to the back of the rack that held blazers and robes, all with pockets. She was rewarded with another vial: "Tramadol, take two for muscle relaxation." Ellen fondly remembered the two days following her wisdom-teeth surgery when drugs like these allowed her to float away from pain. At that time, she understood how easily people could become addicted. Today, she didn't care what happened. She added tension and tight muscles to her self-diagnosis and took two with wine. She noted that her search had stopped at a pink diaphanous nightgown and went to the kitchen for a pinot refill.

She returned to the pink nightgown and continued pawing Sophia's clothing. She found Cyclobenzaprine in a blue jacket and Oxycodone in a misfiled sundress, although it did have pockets. Sophia's closet was a mini-pharmacy, each vial prescribed by a different physician. Sophia was either very sick or a hypochondriac. But where were the anti-anxiety pills, the anti-

depressants, the mood stabilizers? Perhaps Sophia was handicapped. As she tucked the vials inside her duffle, Ellen imagined Sophia nobly suffering from some painful, debilitating condition *ala* Frieda Kahlo.

Chapter 21

Yolanda knew she should have swung by Ellen's house after leaving Eureka. Ellen's erratic and risky behavior was frightening and out of character. The Roadhouse episode was just that, an episode. But living in someone's house without their knowledge and driving their car while tipsy was definitely questionable behavior. Yolanda would be the first to admit that Ellen, with her big imagination and her haunted past, would aspire to more than potato salad on Saturday nights in the front yard. But for the immediate future, Yolanda would have to take care of herself and her children before she could worry about her friend. She could only hope that Ellen would not harm herself or anyone else before then.

Through the windshield of the Camry, Limestone looked like the sad end of summer, all brown and dried up except for the occasional eerily green, overwatered lawn. Her plan was to stop by the house and get some of the kids' clothes and toys, drive to her mother's and pick them up, and leave Limestone for good, or at least for a good long while.

She had not seen Henry and Hannah since Monday when Hank had sent her to Blanco County General. The social worker had instructed her to tell no one, not even her mother, where they were going, but Ellen and Crystal already knew.

On one hand, the shelter conjured up life in a prison: no cell phones, no calls in or out for the first few days, no one to know her location, no leaving the premises without permission. She might as well enter a witness protection program. On the other hand, she would be safe from Hank's volatile moodiness. All the stress—his increasing violence, the beginning of the school year, how to go forward with her life without harming the children—would be lifted for the

immediate future while she got her bearings. She could let someone else worry about what to cook for dinner and other mundane details while she focused on the Big Picture.

Yolanda pulled into her driveway, scolding herself for not using the drive time to make a mental packing list. Now she would be randomly picking out things and probably forget the kids' favorite toys. She and Hank had never really taken family vacations, so they had no need for luggage. She could just throw everything in a sheet and knot the four ends together. It was almost noon; she could pick up the children and be in Austin by 1:30.

Inside, the house was a mess: toys were scattered everywhere, clothes piled in the hallway. The kitchen counter was covered with dirty dishes and beer cans and an empty Jack Daniel's bottle. Drawers were upended, silverware strewn across the tile. Yolanda eased her way through the debris. This was not the result of three days of bachelorhood; it was wanton destruction, one of Hank's drunken rampages taken to the extreme. In their bedroom, her clothes were scattered across the carpet, most of them scissored to pieces. Without her own clothes to pack, she would only need her cosmetics. She moved toward Henry's room. She had to pack carefully for him because he was particular about his clothes matching. And she would pack two or three of his racing cars.

When the front door slammed, Yolanda hurried toward the back door, praying that her car keys were still in the ignition.

Chapter 22

Having cleared his morning schedule to move into Eureka, Crystal arrived at the salon around noon. Such classy accommodations. Eureka indeed. Yet Ellen's absence meant they might not be available. It wasn't the first time he had tiptoed into Eden, only to be smacked back down to Earth, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Never mind. His possessions were safely in storage and he had a weekly rate at the Dew Drop Inn beginning tomorrow and, even though the owner of the B&B had nixed a long-term stay, Crystal thought he could finesse her if he tried.

The salon was empty, quiet before the afternoon onslaught of gossip and laughter. Mary Jo seemed more subdued than usual, seated, looking toward the plate glass window, eyes glazed.

"Might I offer you a gratis look into the future before the Limestone ladies alight?"

Mary Jo barely smiled as she turned to face him. "I think I have a pretty good idea of it, but maybe you can fill in a few details." She offered her hand.

Crystal rolled his chair closer and turned her hand palm up. Never having done a reading for Mary Jo, he was taken aback by the whole picture. It would require all the Gypsy lore he could conjure to give a hopeful reading of this palm. Her Heart Line was broken, indicating emotional trauma, which was no surprise considering the lines overlapping her Marriage Line. Her strong, straight Head Line indicated her realistic thinking, a plus for anyone running a business. Her Life Line, running close to her thumb, indicated a tendency toward fatigue common in most hairdressers after a day of standing on their feet. But Crystal was most concerned about Mary Jo's Health Line, which branched out into her Life Line, indicating a life-threatening situation.

Crystal mentally switched from reading the external hand to reading the internal hand via reflexology. Gently massaging her palm, he felt congestion in the fatty area near the thumb and below the Heart Line, which corresponds to the kidneys. And he felt an abnormality below the index finger corresponding to the lungs. A hairdresser's hands are often cracked, dry and red, but hers were in terrible shape. The joints were swollen and she flinched when he touched them. "Miss Mary Jo, have you seen your physician lately?"

"Now, Crystal, why would you ask that? Aren't you supposed to be predicting that I'll meet a handsome man who'll sweep me off my feet, or at the very least, that we'll have a wet autumn?"

"A very ladylike avoidance of my question." Crystal pumped soothing pink lotion into his hand and gave hers a deep massage to increase the circulation. Outside, tourists were beginning to congregate in front of shop windows.

The massage and the physical contact with another person relaxed Mary Jo to a degree she had not felt since before she got her test results. Crystal was the most centered of Mary Jo's friends and acquaintances, so she considered confiding in him, but she could not. "In fact, Crystal, I did see my doctor and he ran a few tests to see why I was tired all the time, and sometimes I'm dizzy. And I get headaches. My doctor diagnosed my condition as hairdresser, compounded by salon owner."

"Did he use those exact words? He must be new to his profession."

"That's interesting. I can't remember his exact words. I may have translated. Jargon makes me crazy. You see, I didn't graduate from cosmetology school. I graduated from beauty school as a beauty operator, a beautician, and went to work in a beauty shop. That's how old I am."

"Yes, ma'am, and I put the "man" in manicurist until they changed it to nail technician, and now I just try not to draw blood." They both laughed.

Mary Jo got a dreamy look in her eye. "Back then it was all about beauty, helping the client be the most attractive woman she could be, no matter how little we had to work with." She came back to the moment. "Now, it's pretty scientific. Cosmetology." Chemicals. Chemo.

Crystal pushed up the right sleeve of Mary Jo's smock to better apply the lotion, exposing her swollen elbow and a rash on her upper forearm. He rubbed lotion onto her arm, gently spreading it around the rash. Crystal bent closer and caught his breath. The rash was shaped in the bite of the wolf, the lupine: lupus. "But your symptoms could mean any old thing, Miss Mary Jo, so the generic treatment would be to stay out of the sun, get plenty of rest, reduce your stress, and begin to practice yoga or meditation. I can assist with several of those factors. For instance, I can help you plan your menus. And I can help with the inventory and ordering of salon supplies. When your trust in me reaches capacity, I can help you with the books. Have you thought of giving yourself a day off here and there for relaxation and recreation?"

Mary Jo closed her eyes and, with her free hand, rubbed her temples. She remembered the new vacancy kitty-corner from her home and wondered whether Crystal had ever lived in a trailer park.

Chapter 23

Ellen was euphoric. Between the meds and the wine, she had arrived at bliss. Woozy and waltzy, she roamed through the house, trailing her fingertips along the walls, nodding to the photographs, "Nice to see you again," smiling at nothing in particular. In the kitchen, she refilled her glass, spilling only a few drops, caressing the sharpness of the cuts in the crystal. Stepping onto a chair, she lifted herself atop the tiled island and lay on her back, staring up at the skylight. She closed her eyes against the brightness, but fought sleep by identifying the annoying noises outside: chainsaw, weed eater, garbage truck.

Rising from the island, she made her way to the stairs at the end of the hall, stepping carefully while the floor seemed to roil and buck. The second floor of Eureka had felt unfinished when she had initially investigated it, but now it called to her. Perhaps her judgment of it as ridiculous excess had been too harsh. The carpeted stairs opened into a vast sitting room full of matched sofas and chairs, with children's books shelved along the east wall. Ellen looked out a tiny window to see an alley and a garbage truck stopped nearby. Two doors located on the north wall opened into what could have been bedrooms; one was empty, the other contained piles of stuff: clothing, sports gear, board games, junk. A photo on the wall was similar to one downstairs, the two little girls and two adults posed against a snowy mountain, but the adults were not Avery and Sophia. Another photo showed the mystery couple—now younger—at their wedding. There were several photos from the 60s of two little boys. Collectively, the photos formed a history wall, but there was something eerie about it.

Ellen crossed to the media room. She twirled the dimmer switch, which brought up the lights: four wall sconces, nothing overhead. The dark brown, matt finish of the walls absorbed

most of the light, as the thick brown carpet would muffle any sound. The inclined floor held a half-dozen massive, brown leather chairs. An overhead projector aimed at a screen that covered the front wall. Cabinets housed videos (videos!) DVDs and CDs, and several types of projectors. She flipped through a stack of DVDs, mostly cartoons or adventure movies, with a few classics from the '40s. The world would be so much more interesting if everyone dressed and danced and acted like people did in the '40s.

A table full of lights and buttons and switches was evidently a sound mixer any DJ would envy. Ellen pushed "on" and the room filled with sweet saxophone jazz. She set her glass on the floor, turned up the "vol" knob, and played air sax for a few minutes, arching backward for the high notes, the tilting forward into the low ones. As the meds shook hands with the wine, she sank into one of the recliners like a fly ball caught in a catcher's mitt. She snuggled into it and drifted off.

The siren in Ellen's dream was incessantly loud, causing her to come partially awake. Unfamiliar with this part of the house, she panicked. The siren stopped and she heard men's voices under the jazz that was still wailing. Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. She was trapped.

"Well, no I haven't been here in several months. My wife visited recently, but I'm sure she wouldn't have left the sound system on."

"My experience is that burglars don't give themselves away by playing loud music, but with all the crackheads and meth freaks roaming around Limestone these days, we can't completely rule that out."

"In Blanco County?"

Ellen slithered out of the recliner, trying to hide beside it while the voices grew nearer, louder.

"That light's on. What's in there?"

"The media room."

"The media—" A hand holding a gun eased around the corner of the door first. "Come on out now. Slowly. Easy does it."

Ellen stood, her hands in the air. "It's just me. Don't shoot."

"A girl?" Two men appeared in the doorway.

Ellen recognized Police Officer Lyndale Beattie from his photos in the *Limestone Bi-Weekly Herald*. Nearly every week, he and the Chief were giving or receiving some award, though once Beattie had been photographed beside a skinned cow hanging from a tree after he caught a cattle rustler. According to a few of the regulars at The Talk, he was not exactly closed-mouthed about the more salacious details of his job. She recognized Avery Spencer from his photographs downstairs, but he looked considerably different: his stomach pushed against his blue shirt and hung over his khakis. His face was fuller and florid, and his hair grayer and thinner.

"Don't shoot." As she sidled toward the men, her foot kicked the crystal goblet into the chair leg, adding \$100 to her "vacation" debt.

Beattie lowered his gun, but did not holster it. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm Ellen Monroe and I first saw this house at Christmas last year. It was on the tour and I just fell in love with your library." She sensed she was blathering, but couldn't stop herself.

"Since no one seemed to be using it, well, I just thought you wouldn't mind if I did. So I've been visiting every Friday night since, well, about June I guess." Before she could even get to the part

about her vacation here and Yolanda and the drive to Austin and why the hood of the Tahoe was ruined, both men looked exasperated.

"Let's go downstairs where we can sort this out sitting down," Beattie suggested over the crackle and hum of his radio. He switched it off.

Ellen went first, followed by Beattie, gun still drawn. Avery turned off the lights and music. Everything was quiet; no chainsaws or weed eaters, not even a chirping cricket.

Ellen wondered whether Avery had noticed the Tahoe problem yet. Maybe he had come in, heard the music, and called the police before he had time to look around.

When they were seated, Ellen began again. "I--I just like it here. I've never taken anything. In fact, I've even brought my own things, my clothes, my wine. It's just that this house is so wonderful, so magical. Did you design it, Mr. Spencer?"

Avery puffed out his chest like a bantam rooster. "Yes, yes I did. Of course, I had an architect put the finishing touches—"

Officer Beattie shot Avery an impatient look. "Excuse me? Could we stick to the subject?"

"Of course." Avery looked like a reprimanded schoolboy. "Now Miss Monroe, exactly what are you doing here in the middle of the day if you aren't a burglar?"

"I told you. I just hang out here and read. This is the first time I've ever been here during the day. I usually come on Friday nights, but I —"

Officer Beattie stood. "Let's go down to the station and take your picture. Do you have a lawyer?"

"Oh, no," Avery said. "That seems extreme. She hasn't actually stolen anything. Isn't that right, Miss Monroe?"

Ellen felt her heart stop as she imagined herself picking up trash along the highway wearing orange prison clothes. Officer Beattie thought she was a real criminal. "No, I've never taken anything." She almost said she'd never damaged anything, either, but that was a lie.

"If you're not going to file charges, Mr. Spencer, I'll just let you two get acquainted while I get back to more pressing business. Some of us have a murder to investigate." He stood, his holster, flashlight, and handcuffs all clanking against his belt as they aligned with gravity.

Avery stood, too. "That's fine, Officer Beattie. Thank you for your quick response, but I think everything is under control here." His expression was not convincing. He sat again, frowning and slowly rubbing his palms together.

Fright and the short nap had countered the effects of the wine and the meds. Ellen felt alert, but not completely sober. Now that she could focus, she saw that Avery Spencer was probably in his late forties, chewed his fingernails down to the quick, and looked more like a CPA than her image of a rakish F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"I can't believe your audacity. Breaking into someone's house and making yourself at home. And don't think you're off the hook. I may still file charges." Avery stood, hands behind his back, and began pacing. "You have violated the sanctity of my home."

"But not really. Your home is in Dallas."

Avery looked shocked. "How do you know that? Are you stalking me? Are you a private detective or something?"

"No, of course not." She was merely a snoop. "I just saw something, probably the mailing label on a magazine there on the table."

Avery stopped pacing and squinted at her. "Not possible. The magazines are sent to my home, my *other* home, in Dallas. These—" his hand swept across the coffee table, "these are from

a newsstand or a drugstore. But you are quick on your feet, young lady." He looked around the room as if taking inventory. "If you aren't a private dick, maybe you're a druggie. Have you sold anything of mine? Crystal? Silver? My wife's jewelry?"

Indignant, Ellen leapt to her feet. "I did not. Besides, she only has the costume stuff here." Damn. She was beginning to wonder about her own innocence. She sat back down and began flipping a coaster back and forth on the coffee table.

"You certainly are familiar with things here. STOP THAT! Please, my nerves are shot anyway, and now this. Everything's a mess." He sank into the sofa and held his head in his hands.

Ellen saw her opportunity. "Mr. Spencer, let me apologize again for my behavior, which anyone in Limestone can tell you is just not like me. But when I saw this house on the Christmas tour and fell in love with your library, I needed to have it. And the backdoor key was just where any burglar would look for it and the security code is pasted inside the cabinet door, for heaven's sake."

Avery did not look interested, let alone understanding. He was busy chewing on his thumbnail.

"You see, Mr. Spenser, if you've spent much time in Limestone, you know there isn't much to do. Our social life is limited and culture is non-existent, except at Christmas when we have a Sing-Along Messiah and a Dance-It-Yourself Nutcracker. And the Festive Home Tour, of course. I've been coming here every Friday night since June. I sit in that big chair in the library and read *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. Have you read it? It's just wonderful, about these two—"

"Ah, yes," he looked at her, smirking. "I believe she's interested in buying this house."

Damn. How could she have forgotten about sending him that email and signing the author's name? He had even mentioned it to Margie Adams. Ellen would admit to trespassing, but she would not confess to snooping or forging an email. "I'm sure she could afford it. She's written several bestsellers."

Avery leaned toward her. "You believe that a book is a legitimate excuse to invade someone's home?"

Ellen looked past Avery into the library where the light was brighter than she had ever seen it. She didn't remember opening all the blinds. "You have a wonderful house, a sanctuary, really, against the world. In here, there's silence, a peacefulness that is the opposite of boredom. Maybe it's what Buddhists feel when they meditate, just exquisite nothingness."

He looked at her curiously, his face relaxed, but his eyes steely. "I suppose I should be pleased that someone appreciates this house. My family never did. My wife came here to pick up a few things before we put it on the market, but she only stayed one night. She didn't mention finding a stranger in the house."

"She didn't see me because I don't live here. I mean, I didn't then. Not that I do now, but I did see her when she came into the salon."

"The salon?" He sounded bemused as he straightened a stack of magazines, perhaps looking for address labels. "She actually got her hair done in Limestone?"

"Oh, no, women like Sophia just come in to buy product, shampoo in her case."

Avery stopped fooling with the magazines. His eyes widened as he stared at Ellen.

She caught herself. "She paid for the shampoo with a credit card. Sophia Spencer. I saw her name." She was surprised at how easily she lied, but then, she had had so much practice with Billy.

Avery seemed to believe her. "She's a wonderful woman. I'll miss her." Avery stood.

Ellen could not believe her luck. On television, when one person in a conversation stands, it means the meeting is over. But she couldn't leave yet. "Excuse me? Do you mind if I get my journal?"

"If you must." Avery waved her into the library.

She had never seen the library so brightly lit. The bookbindings looked different, faded so that she could not read the titles. The library seemed foreign yet mundane, not the exotic, enchanting place she had inhabited for months. In the dust, she could see fingerprints, *her* fingerprints, on the desk and the shelves, evidence of her presence in this room. "It's right here." Embarrassed, she felt the awkwardness of knowing something about the room that Avery, the owner, did not.

With her journal in her hand, it was obviously time to leave, but Ellen needed to know one thing. "Those little girls, Tina and Missy, are they okay? Are they safe?"

Avery came dangerously close to her, his body tensed. "Why would you ask that? What do you know?"

"Nothing, nothing." Ellen put out her hand to calm the man. "I just needed to know they were okay. Of course they are. It's just that, well, I always feel a chill in that room, a different temperature than the rest of the house. It's probably just a quirk in the AC system."

Avery looked toward the children's room for a long time before saying, "No, you're right about the temperature and it's not the AC. It doesn't matter whether the doors are open or closed, that room is always like a freezer to the house's refrigerator. Which is strange, because Tina and Missy have never been in that room. Sophia and I furnished it for them when we were notified that the adoption was almost complete. But it didn't go through. You see, Tina and Missy are my

nieces, my brother's children. When he and their mother were killed in a car wreck, they were to come live with us, as my brother had directed in his will. However, his wife's family had other ideas and more sway with the courts in California."

"But the clothes and toys and—" Ellen thought it best not to mention the dog ashes in the urn, hidden in the guest room closet, "everything."

"We had all their things shipped to us so they would feel at home, both here and at our place in Dallas. When their aunt won custody, she bought all new things." Telling the story took its toll on Avery. Now his cheeks were sunken, his skin slack, his color ashen. He looked like a haunted man.

"You lost the little girls, but at least they're together, aren't they?" Ellen was not usually a cup-half-full person, but the fact of the sisters having each other to grow up with pleased her.

"I don't know how we got off the subject of your transgressions." Avery walked out of the library, crossed the living area and the kitchen, and opened the back door. Taking the key from the outside sill, he pointed it at her, then slipped it into his pocket. He left the door open, evidently unconcerned about his electric bill. "You'll no longer have access to—"

"Eureka. I named your house Eureka. But don't worry, I didn't carve it into the door or anything. It's just a name I use."

"That's interesting. Sophia used to refer to it as 'The Waste Land,' it being an hour away from any Neiman's or an opera company."

Ellen again spotted the pink stilettos sitting on the kitchen island. She recognized them from Sophia's closet. Perhaps Avery was taking them back to Dallas. Standing in such an incongruous place, the shoes seemed an omen, but a *Wizard of Oz* omen or a dangerous one from *The Red Shoes*? Perhaps they were a clue to the whereabouts of Yolanda. Crystal was at the salon,

but where was Yolanda? The garage door had been closed when she came to the house today, but maybe her car was still parked there. Maybe Yolanda was here in Eureka, hiding in the girls' room or in the guest closet. The door to the garage had no window, so she could not see.

By the time Ellen's remorse overcame her curiosity, Avery had picked up her signal. "Did you leave something out there? Perhaps you keep more books and wine in the garage?"

The door was barely ajar when Ellen was taken aback by the sight of a dark green Jaguar where she had expected to see Yolanda's Camry. Next to the Jag was the dusty Tahoe, its scraped bumper hardly visible in the dim light.

He closed the door. "Satisfied?"

Ellen didn't mention the dings in the Tahoe. Avery would figure it out when the time came. Waving goodbye with her book, Ellen inched toward the back door, hoping for a smooth exit. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Spencer. I really appreciate you not pressing charges. I will never do anything like this again. I promise. Good luck with selling the house." She didn't mean it. What she really wanted to do was ask for the key back. Why couldn't she continue to visit Eureka until it sold? What was the harm, now that everything was on the up-and-up and the neighbors wouldn't freak? But she knew better than to broach the subject.

"It's just a house. I have several of them. I have myriad of everything, multiples of minutia." Avery sank onto a stool and leaned onto the tiled island, his face contorted as if he might cry. "What's one more? This one only reminds me of my dead brother and my lost nieces. And losing Sophia, although I suppose she's been lost to me for some time."

Ellen began to worry about Avery. He looked as if he were going to faint. "It's a lovely house. Maybe some family will buy it and live here year-round."

"You know, now that I'm here, now that you've reminded me how stellar this house really is, I hate to let go of it." He was caressing the swirling pattern in the tile, then he looked up. "Are those your high heels?"

"I believe they are your wife's." Ellen tried to imagine a scenario in which the stilettos were responsible for the dents in the Tahoe's hood and, although she was sober again, it would not cohere. "Can she wear these? I mean, she's not handicapped or anything, is she?"

"She's fine. Except, of course, for those times when she gets her prescriptions mixed up. Then the heels might pose a problem." Avery seemed to regain some energy. "You know, my brother would have loved this house. Patrick loved luxury. You see that faucet there?" He pointed to the kitchen sink. "Two thou. See that chandelier in there?" He waved his hand toward the living area. "Twenty-two thousand dollars. Of course, I pay wholesale because I own the fixtures supply house, but I got that for even less because near the top, there's a chip out of one of the crystals, so its refraction is crooked. Peculiar prism. Imperfection, however minute, will eventually tell on itself."

Ellen picked up her journal and moved toward the french doors. She was forgetting something. She was leaving her teal robe.

A burst of light blinded her. When her vision returned, she was facing a man standing in the open doorway, holding a camera. He stuck out his hand.

"Afternoon, ma'am. Are you Ms. Monroe? According to the police scanner, we have an interesting situation here." He moved toward her, coming into the house.

Ellen looked at Avery as if to say, *it's your house, you deal with it*. "I forgot something. She turned her back on the photographer and walked to the master bedroom.

Chapter 24

Ellen lingered in Sophia's perfume-scented closet, stuffing her journal and her robe into her duffle, which fortunately muted the jangle of the prescription bottles banging together. She jammed her purse, her stack of shorts and tees, and her flop-flops into the bag, hesitating to zip it closed. Sophia's elegant, expensive clothing hung at her fingertips. Who would know if she slipped that jacket beaded with jet or that Bohemian skirt into her bag? She would know. Besides, they wouldn't fit right, even if she did lose a few pounds. She had never stolen anything from Eureka, and she would now limit her thievery to the meds in her duffle. Her heart rate rose as she imagined walking past Avery, smuggling his wife's pills out of his house.

Depressed, Ellen felt around in the duffle for a prescription vial. Finding one, she uncapped it without looking and took two white pills, small enough to swallow without water. She smiled. Let the anonymous pills work their magic. Throwing the bag across her shoulder, Ellen picked up speed as she rounded the corner into the kitchen, hoping to make her way past Avery and out the door.

"Ms. Monroe, would you care to join us?" Avery waved an empty wine glass toward her. "It's after five, and Mr. Wallace and I are celebrating Happy Hour with your wine."

Ellen looked at Mr. Wallace, trying to decide why he looked familiar. He was probably in his seventies. The thickly smudged glasses riding halfway down his nose couldn't possibly correct his vision. In a different situation, she might suggest that he make an appointment at the salon so should could trim his wayward eyebrows and mustache, pluck that wiry hair standing on the rim of his ear, and clean his glasses. But still his name would not come to her.

She should cut her losses and leave, but she was loath to say goodbye to Eureka. Curiosity about the stranger seemed like a legitimate reason to stay a few minutes more, so she dropped the duffle onto the kitchen floor and accepted the glass. As Avery filled it, the glass became colder in her hand. She lifted it into the air. "Cheers. What are we toasting?"

Avery topped off his drink and said, "Walter here is going to write a story about us. Isn't that great? Maybe the publicity will help the house sell quicker. I'm back to keeping it on the market."

The man was a veritable pendulum. "Us? He's writing about us?" Walter Wallace. It came to her now. Walter Wallace was the reporter/photographer/editor/owner of the semi-weekly *Limestone Bi-Weekly Herald*. The chilled liquid stuck in her throat.

Walter evidently thought he had a big scoop. "It's a fascinating story. Front-page stuff." His hand arced, painting a huge headline in the air. 'Female intruder allowed freedom by homeowner.' It's just the kind of offbeat story the wires might pick up." Seated at the island, he licked the pencil lead before jotting in a tiny, ruled notebook. His tongue was stained black. "Now, we were talking about Ms. Monroe making herself at home." He turned to Ellen, "How long have you lived in Mr. Spencer's library?"

"I don't live here. I have a home."

"Right, you live at 145 Gribble. Have they paved that street yet?"

"Last year." Ellen suddenly understood how Avery felt when she knew too much about him. "Wait, how do you know where I live?"

"Everything's on the Internet. There are no secrets anymore. You're a haircutter. You're married to William Monroe who is employed at Limestone Motors and Garage. By the way, I really admire your taste in wine, footwear, too." He pointed to the stilettos. "So you have a home,

but you've moved into Mr. Spencer's house." He took a hearty gulp. "An excellent solution for anyone having marital problems or trying to avoid creditors. Very clever. Either of those scenarios fit your situation?"

Avery looked as if he were following a ping-pong match, his head swiveling between Walter and Ellen.

"I do not live here. I've visited here a couple of times, but I didn't really touch anything, didn't hurt anything." Except the Tahoe and the silk shirt and the crystal glass upstairs. "There's no story here." But wouldn't the whole town love to read it. Gossip! Scandal! The people of Limestone would hold their collective breath to see whether Mary Jo would fire her and Billy would leave her. Both were possibilities. "Mr. Wallace, this is not news. It's more like an incident, like someone letting their sprinkler system run in the middle of the day."

Walter offered his empty glass for Avery to refill. "Ms. Monroe, I guess I've been in the newspaper business long enough to know a story when I see one, when I hear one. Of course, we'll lead with the murder, but I've already got photos and the pertinent facts on that. I'll write the story after the Chief completes his report. But this, this is human interest. Quirky."

Avery and Ellen stared at Walter, but it was Ellen who asked, "Murder?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss the details just yet, but hell, the ladies at your beauty shop probably know more about it than I do. Anyway, before I heard about you on the scanner, I was going to go with a story about the LISD school buses being readied for the new school year. Do you know they found one bus with its brakes completely stripped? Now, without that annual maintenance shakedown, thirty, forty kids might have been killed on the first day of school. But thank god that story won't be in the paper because it won't happen, but I will write about them

finding the problem just in time." He tipped his glass to Avery. "But this, this situation equals a man-bites-dog story. Now, what does your husband think about you living here?"

Ellen stared at her lilac nails, trying to decide how to handle the man and the situation.

Walter pointed to her duffle lying near the door. "That yours? Is it full of your clothes or are you walking out with the goods?"

Ellen flinched, thinking he meant the meds, but he couldn't know about them. More likely, he was insinuating that she was stealing the family silver. Standing to show she was insulted and angry, she repeated, "I told you I don't live—"

"Hello? Miss Ellen? Are you receiving?" Stopped in the frame of the french doors, Crystal had never looked more dazzling, wearing huge gold hoop earrings, a two-day growth, and his new By George outfit: an electric green jersey over a lemon straight skirt and orange ballerina flats, looking yummy as a citrus salad. "Oh, you have guests. Perhaps I should come back later."

Avery stood and waved him in. "Come in, come in. Please, have a seat. We're having cocktails. Won't you join us?"

Crystal looked quizzically at Ellen. When she nodded, he said, "Vodka gimlet, if you don't mind."

"Vodka gimlet coming up." Avery smacked the north wall of the kitchen and an invisible door opened, exposing a well-stocked liquor cabinet.

Ellen was surprised and disappointed that Eureka had kept this secret from her. She watched as Avery gracefully poured gin and lime juice into a shaker and filled it with ice. An icemaker. She had no idea it was there, although now she did detect a telltale hum. He drained the drink into a cocktail glass and brought it to Crystal.

"Avery Spencer. Nice to meet you."

Crystal sat in the chair Avery had offered. "Thank you, Mr. Spencer. Nice to meet you, too. I'm Crystal Baxter. And you know Miss Ellen from—?"

"From about twenty minutes ago. And you?"

"We work together at The Talk of the Town salon. I'm a nail tech."

Avery hid his hands in his back pockets.

Walter was licking his pencil and writing as fast as he could.

"Introductions are in order," said Ellen, trying to avoid a train wreck. "Crystal, Avery is the *owner* of this house. And the scribbling man there is Walter Wallace who runs the Limestone paper." She tried a bait-and-switch. "He's your story, Walter. You could introduce Crystal to the community."

Walter looked dubious.

Ellen thought herself brilliant. "No, really, he's fascinating. He knows nails, fashions. He's a marvelous cook."

Walter reached for his camera, aimed it at Crystal, and snapped off a shot, momentarily blinding everyone with the flash. "I might give this to Eulalia. She does the ladies' page. So, Crystal, what part of town do you live in?"

"He wants to know if your street is paved," said Ellen.

"I'm in between domiciles at the moment." Crystal sipped his gimlet. "Wonderful mix, Avery. I notice you used Rose's. That is just so much more flavorful than real lime."

"Exactly. It's more like lime candy."

"In between? How does one do that?" Walter was like a dog with a bone. "Motel? Sleeping in your car? Or do you live here, too?"

Everyone but Walter froze. Avery looked to Ellen, seemingly afraid of what he was about to hear.

Ellen took a deep breath, speaking slowly and softly as if Walter were a small child. "No. One. Lives. Here. Isn't that right, Avery? It's just a weekend house. Or a once-every-six-months house." She jumped up to open the door of every cabinet, exposing—except for the set of crystal glasses and a set of dishes—their emptiness. "Who could live here without mixing bowls and jelly glasses?" She jerked open the pantry door, surreptitiously shoving her snacks into hiding. "Do you see any food? If someone lived here, wouldn't there be spaghetti sauce and minute rice and cans of soup and a loaf of bread instead of just Cheerios and a roll of garbage bags?" She bounded over to the refrigerator and flung open its door. "See? Ketchup and mustard and—" She was startled by the sight of the take-out Chinese containers. "That doesn't mean anything. Every fridge has those. They've probably been here for months." She flipped down the door of the dishwasher. "See, it's empty and dry as a bone." She ripped the instructions sticker from inside. "It's never even been used." She ran into the utility room and called back to them at a near operatic pitch, "No lint in the dryer. It's never been used, either." As she reentered the kitchen, she saw three men staring at her in alarm. She inhaled and lowered her voice. "So, Mr. Reporter, that proves no one lives here."

Walter finished writing, looked up, and said, "You can't prove a negative."

Chapter 25

Crystal gave Ellen a ride home and carried her duffle in, but declined her offer of wine. "I'm still dizzy from this turn of events. Do you realize I left my tote bag and my fuchsia hat in the children's room? I can replace most of it the next time I'm in Austin, but still."

"Please stay a minute. I can make some iced tea. With or without sugar?"

"Without, please. I'm sweet enough as I am." He grinned wickedly. "Sorry."

As Ellen poured the tea into two glasses, the ice crackled and settled. "We're lucky to have gotten away as easily as we did." She wrapped paper towels around the frosty glasses.

Crystal took a seat on the couch and set his tea on a magazine on the coffee table. "When Avery and Walter started in on the Glenlivet, I knew we'd be okay. By now, they've probably finished the bottle without realizing we're missing."

"But wasn't Eureka wonderful? Oh, you only got to experience it for a minute, but Eureka is Dream City." Ellen was too emotional to sit. "It's so extraordinary. It was superb while it lasted."

"And you'll always have the memory."

That might not be enough. Deflated, Ellen sank on the couch beside Crystal. "If Walter publishes that story, I'm screwed. I'll be the laughingstock of Limestone. Mary Jo will be too embarrassed to have me in the shop. All my clients will go somewhere else." Ellen took a sip of tea. "I won't have any money, so I'll have to move into Martha Mabley's apartment, even though I'm not devout."

"Trust me, no one will ever rent that apartment again. Speaking of people in transition, I met Miss Yolanda this morning. She was about to fetch her children and move to Austin. She's doing herself a big favor getting away from the likes of that husband."

"Yolanda's gone? Already?" Without saying goodbye. Yolanda must have been more upset about the near-wreck than Ellen thought. Or, maybe it wasn't personal. Maybe Yolanda was just concentrating on getting her kids to safety. "Imagine living in fear of your husband."

Husband. Billy would be here by now if he were coming home.

Even in her weariness, Ellen remembered her manners. "I offered you a place to stay and then I blew it. You are welcome to stay here. I can sleep on the couch if I can sleep at all. Really, I could use the company." Ellen felt like crying, but was afraid if she started, she'd never stop.

"Miss Ellen, I'm not one to pry, but I noticed that your description of your ruination omitted one important fact, that of your husband. Is he traveling perhaps? Or did he, too, have a room in Eureka and I just wasn't there long enough to make his acquaintance?"

She might as well say it out loud to see how it sounded. "Billy's left me." She began shredding her paper towel into little balls. "It's not permanent or anything. When he found out I'd been lying about Eureka, he took it hard, but he'll get over it and then he'll be back. It's just temporary."

Crystal stopped Ellen's hands from their feverish task and held them gently. "I'm sure you're right. It won't take long for him to see it through your eyes." Crystal stood. "You probably need to get your wits about you. It's best to do that alone. And I have a big day at the salon tomorrow! We're taking receipt of a fine, new accoutrement."

Ellen had no idea what he was talking about but was too tired to ask. "At least let me loan you a brush? Some lip gloss?"

Crystal laughed. "Now Miss Ellen, don't forget I have access to an entire hair salon full of product. I'll just run by the 7-11 and pick up a toothbrush. I'm sure the Dew Drop Inn has a cot or a recliner for tonight. I'll be fine. You just take care of yourself."

He gave her a peck on the cheek, squeezed her hand, and was gone.

Ellen shoved the duffle bag aside with her foot in order to close the door. The house felt huge and empty, as impersonal as a motel room, so it was fitting that she had a bag to unpack. First out was the fabulous teal robe, which looked ridiculous in her house, evidence of her delusions of grandeur, her attempt at impersonating a person. Maybe she should burn it, but for now, she hung it in the back of the closet. She took out her journal, her purse, her phone (no missed calls), all those vials of meds. She chose a bottle of yellow pills, hoping one would make her sleepy; the rest she stashed in her nightstand, not really hiding them but not wanting anyone to get the wrong impression. Anyone like who? Everyone she knows seemed to have disappeared.

Light slipped around and through the bedroom curtains; night was hours away. When had she last eaten? That was a lost memory, but she still wasn't hungry. She would just have one glass of wine and watch television until she got sleepy. If she spent the night in her recliner, so be it. Tomorrow, she would deal with the loss of Eureka and Billy. Not in that order, of course, but somehow, Eureka seemed like something dreamed and she hated waking up from a good dream.

Waiting for the meds to work, waiting for sleep and oblivion to set in, she watched a housewives reality show. It should have distracted her, but even its inanity could not hold her attention. Her mind wandered. She replayed the scene with Walter Wallace, only this time, she controlled the situation and forced him to agree not to run the story. In her new version Ellen—girl reporter—interviewed Crystal in such flattering terms, he might get elected mayor. She was

imagining Avery handing her the backdoor key, saying she could use it any time, when she heard a familiar noise: Billy's motorcycle.

Billy was coming home after all. She would have a heart-to-heart with him, confess her mistakes, and they would find a new direction for their future. Now that Eureka was gone, she would have no reason to lie to him. Surely, he could understand that.

But Billy wasn't in an understanding mood. When he came through the kitchen door, he seemed surprised to see her, then acted as if she weren't there. He made himself a tuna sandwich while Ellen poured her heart out. "I'm so sorry, so sorry."

"Your pupils are enormous," he said derisively. "Are you on something?" But he left the room without waiting for an answer.

When she considered all the meals she had cooked and served Billy, she was offended that he had selfishly made one sandwich. Evidently, he was in a swivet and unwilling to discuss their problems. She would let him stew in his own juice for a while. She took a long bath, hoping that lemon bath salts would soothe her body if not her mind.

She drifted off to sleep waiting for Billy to come to bed, but when she woke up at four a.m., he was gone. She ground the coffee beans longer than usual and rattled dishes unnecessarily to fill the house with noise.

Chapter 26

Yolanda reached the back door and hurriedly turned the knob, but it wouldn't yield. Locked. She fiddled with the latch inside the knob, trying to remember which direction would unlock it, but her mind went blank. Hank was in the house. He had probably heard her running through the hall; he would be here any second. There, she jiggled the knob free and was pulling the door toward her when, BAM, a hand swam in front of her face and slammed the door shut.

Hank pulled her around to face him. "You slutty greaser. Tell me where the kids are or I'll kill you. I think I'll kill you anyway."

Yolanda was stunned. He had called her names before, but never racial slurs. Is that what he really thought of her? "Hank, think what you're doing. Your job, your family, it's all on the line. Don't let it go." Yolanda was too scared to think, too scared to make a cogent argument that would calm Hank, that would change his mind. She couldn't reason with a madman. And that's what Hank was at that moment. His eyes were glazed over, yet on fire.

He slapped her hard across the face, twisting her head to the right. She actually saw stars before the stinging set in.

"Spic whore. Wetback. Your whole family is wetbacks. You don't deserve to be a mother."

"Come on, Hank, don't—"

He whirled her around and held her close against him, his belt buckle digging into her back, his arm across her, elbow at her throat. "This is your last breath, Baby," he whispered into her ear. He tightened his hold on her.

Yolanda's head was at an awkward tilt. She could see where the wall and the ceiling met, could see the faded blue paint with specks of yellowed grease from hundreds, maybe thousands of meals cooked here for her family. Yolanda had no doubt she was about to die. She would never cook another meal here; she would not make it to the shelter in Austin. She would never see Henry and Hannah again.

Hank jerked her neck, lifting her off her feet. Rage filled Yolanda's entire body. She focused on the countertop by the sink. Everything from the drawers had been emptied out: every whisk, spatula, measuring cup, fork, spoon, and knife. And there it was, the butcher knife.

She would only get one chance. Yolanda grabbed the knife and wrenched away from Hank's grip. Where does one stab a man? She had to hit it right on the first thrust. If she merely wounded him, he would kill her for sure.

She brought the knife from behind her, up and into his belly, jamming it, opening up a torrential spout of blood, ramming it twice, three times, pulling it out and finding a new soft spot between his ribs. Blood splattered her face, into her eyes. She could see enough to register that the blue kitchen was now dotted with red. She couldn't let the children see it like this.

Hank bellowed and stumbled backwards. "You murdering bitch, you—" Blood shot out with his words. It dripped from the corners of his mouth, streaking down onto the whiteness of his starched shirt. His eyes widened and he reached both hands for her neck. Strangling her, he yanked her backward toward the wall, slamming her head against it again and again until she thought her skull would split open. It took her a few seconds to realize that Hank's grip had relaxed.

Yolanda opened her eyes to see Hank standing in front of her looking as if he didn't recognize her. Then he collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

She did not stop to check his wrist; she did not put two fingers to his neck. She hoped he was dead, but if he was not, she was still in danger. Running through the house without stopping to grab toys or clothes, Yolanda reached the front door and slammed it shut behind her. The keys were in the ignition. She jammed the gearshift into reverse, backed into the street without looking, and left rubber as she peeled out toward the police station, regretting only that she had not had time to wash her face and change out of her blood-soaked dress.

Chapter 27

On Friday, Ellen did not go to The Talk of the Town. After all, she was still technically on vacation, still supposed to be swanning around Eureka in her teal robe pretending to be someone she had yet to imagine. The reflection in her bathroom mirror showed the face of an older woman, perhaps a drinker or a druggie, given the lines and blotches and disinterested eyes. She slapped cold water on her face and dried it. Nothing a little makeup couldn't fix. God bless the person who invented concealer. That and the foundation, powder, eyeliner, lip-gloss and blush erased maybe three years. Coffee could take care of the rest.

Sunshine leaked into the house through every crevice and blind, but it was not the white glare of July. The light had a honeyed hue, warm without being hot. The coffee brewed, scenting the house with its aroma. Ellen found the newspaper in the shrubbery and settled in for a good read. The crosswords would be next.

She put the newspaper down and called Yolanda one more time. No answer.

Billy would be at the shop, but she didn't know whether he was thinking about her, whether he missed her, whether he was still angry with her. Yet she did know the answer to that last question. In fact, Billy probably hated her.

Leaving seemed to be the answer. She would let him keep the house. He hated change, and letting him stay would put her in his good graces. It was important that he not think ill of her; her karma debt was already enormous. She began piling her clothes into the duffle bag. When it was full, she switched to grocery sacks. The lack of real luggage spoke to their infrequent vacations. Later, she would take his pickup to the liquor store to get boxes strong enough to hold her books.

She loved Billy, but it was not the kind of love that was sustaining, not the kind she had anticipated for a marriage. She could not fault Billy. Even though they had married because of the pregnancy, she had known he was a kind and loving soul, a dependable, solid man who would stand up to any storm. As long as the storm wasn't emotional. She had not realized that until later. She did not know much about men. She knew even less about marriage as she had seen few close up, and up close, those did not look that successful. So she wasn't leaving Billy so much as she was leaving the life of a woman who would be content to be a small-town hairdresser married to a contented mechanic. Ellen wanted more. She wanted a bigger life. She owed it to Sue Ellen, who had been cheated out of any life at all.

Ellen wandered through her house focusing on her meager acquisitions: the owl lamp from a garage sale, the cast-iron ballerina statuette, the framed photo of her parents' wedding. The rest of her photos were in a box under the bed. She pulled it out and brushed away the dust. That's where she kept her sister. Of course, there weren't that many photos of Sue Ellen because she had died so young, but also because she was the second child. One was a school photo of the smiling seraph wearing a blouse with a Peter Pan collar, a hand-me-down from Lou Ellen. Another photo showed two toddlers in diapers on a pallet in a grassy yard, the shadow of their mother taking the photo accompanied them on the blanket. A shot of a Christmas morning when the girls were both four, surrounded by dolls and teddy bears and sweaters and wrapping, the colors now dulled to muted reds and browns. There were no photos of her father except for the one of the wedding.

Ellen was beyond sadness. She piled the photos back into the box and set it beside her sack of clothing. The little yellow sweater was jammed in the back of the drawer, but she found it and folded it and put it on top of the photo box.

Bella Gabriel picked up the phone on the second ring. "Gabriel residence." Even though she lived alone, Bella made it sound as if she were answering for a house full of people.

"Mom, it's me."

"Oh, hello, Beautiful. Stella said you would find a place for our reunion. We're so excited. And how are you?"

"Mom, I'm not so good. I don't know what I'm doing, what I want. Except I'm leaving Billy. I'm probably leaving Limestone, but I don't know where I'm going."

Her mother was silent for a few moments, allowing the news to register. "My sweet child. Come home. Take a break, think things over. The answers will come to you if you relax and let them fall gently to your shoulders. You yourself know that panic sends them flying away. Come home, even if it's just for a few days."

Ellen was tempted. In Galveston, the bay offered the gentle morning sun and the salty sea breeze, and the gulls gracefully swooping over the waves. The ocean would wash away the heat and oppression of summer. The view of the endless horizon would give her the space to think through her miasma.

"It'll be wonderful. Just the two of us," Bella said. "I'll make pasta and minestrone, and you can brighten up my hair a bit. We'll walk on the beach. It'll be wonderful."

Second thoughts pushed through Ellen's memory: her mother "forgetting" to knock before she came into Ellen's room; her continuing confusion over the names "Sue" and "Lou," her desire for companionship after a life lived alone; her compulsion to re-live the day her husband walked out and never returned. The one subject Bella never needed to talk about was the wreck of a school bus decades ago.

On one hand, Ellen would welcome the distractions from her own problems. But on the other, she needed to be quiet, to let her feelings and needs and wants swim to the surface, allowing her to put a name to whatever was lacking in her life. After all, there was the faint possibility of discovering that what she wanted, what she needed, was the life she was walking away from. That, of course, was the remotest possibility.

"Thanks, Mom. You're wonderful. Let me think it over. I'll call you back tomorrow."

Ellen spent most of the afternoon in her recliner reading Jill McCorkle, whose short stories are about normal people living fairly small lives. Ellen could identify.

With her recliner kicked all the way back, Ellen could see the evening news between her bare feet, but she had no idea what the news anchor was saying, probably announcing floods, earthquakes, mudslides, bank robberies, missing children, houses afire with families still inside, results of a poll showing the approval of a handful of Americans for their politicians, a movie star adopting another waif, perhaps closing with a story about a rescued puppy or bear cub, but nothing that would offer Ellen a peek behind the facade of life as usual.

By the time the local news was over, Ellen knew that Billy would not be coming home. Perhaps, like her father, he had wandered into a new life somewhere away from his wife. More probably, he was still at Margaret's dude ranch, trading his vehicle repair skills for a bed in the bunkhouse. Ellen hoped he felt as lonely and adrift as she did.

He had taken the pickup, which left her to move all her possessions tied onto the Vespa or the Lady Harley. What she really needed was a vehicle with four wheels, but she didn't want to begin her new life saddled with a car loan even if some banker, after hearing rumors about her emotional instability, would actually loan her money. She made a mental note to go by Blanco

Community Bank and see what was left in their joint checking account. That would indicate the level of Billy's trust in her.

Amid the mishmash magnetized to the fridge door was Wayne Bradley's business card with his cell phone number. Facing the remote possibility of breaking and entering charges gave Ellen an awareness that things could not get worse. So why not dabble in a little blackmail? Ellen regained her Eureka personality.

Wayne answered on the third ring and, recognizing his caller, began his usual tasteless flirting—something about the possibility of her being a single woman again—but an edge to his voice gave Ellen the impression that he knew what she had witnessed at Eureka.

For once, it was easy to ignore his bad manners. "Wayne, I don't have a crystal ball, but I'm predicting that you are about to be exposed as Limestone's foremost philanderer. Am I right?"

"I have no idea what you mean." He was talking off the top of his voice.

"I think you do. I think that Deb is about to find out who you really are. And since you gave away half of your net worth to your first wife, you won't have much left after you divide what's left in your divorce with Deb. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you find some way to prevent her from leaving." Ellen paced the kitchen floor, wondering why she was even talking to this bastard. Deb wasn't her friend, but she wasn't an enemy, either.

"Such as what? Chain her to the door?"

"Such as bribe her with a bauble."

"Ellen, you're craftier than I would have thought." He lowered his voice conspiratorially.

"But bribe her how? With what? Deb doesn't like diamonds and she already has a new car."

"Maybe she would enjoy driving a black Lady Harley with lipstick prints and a matching helmet."

His excitement came through the phone. "Oh, my God. And it's one of a kind. That's exactly what she'd fall for." Silence. "What she'd love. It's perfect."

"I can make that happen if I have twelve thousand dollars cash in my hand by this time tomorrow."

"Damn, Ellen. That's a lot of money. And today's Friday. The banks close in a few hours. Why don't I think about this over the weekend, maybe counter offer on Monday. What'd you say to that?"

"I'd say that in twenty-four hours, I'll present Deb with your silver WPB business card case and tell her how I got it." She hung up and poured a glass of iced tea.

Ellen took her tea to the front porch and sat on the steps. Only a few cars drove by. Most people were home from work, maybe watching the news or making plans for the evening. Twilight would come soon. If this were her usual Friday night, she would be on her way to Eureka, anticipating a chilly evening with her book, knowing that Billy was here, grilling steaks and drinking beer with his friends. But this was not her usual Friday night. She supposed this feeling in her heart was called "longing," but it probably had other names, too.

A silver Mercedes pulled into the drive and stopped. Ellen feared she had conjured up Deb. Deb never came on Friday nights. That was just for the guys. Maybe Wayne had told her about Ellen's attempt to blackmail him. Maybe Ellen had failed again.

Deb approached, wearing a pink playsuit created for someone younger and firmer.

"Hello," she waved. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by."

That was an obvious lie. The town was so small, if you were in Limestone, you were in the neighborhood. But Ellen just laughed, glad for the company even though wary of the cause.

"Have a seat. I'm just enjoying being able to breathe outside for a change. Want some tea?"

Deb sat. "I'd love some."

When Ellen came back with the pitcher and an extra glass, she asked, "How's the quilt store business?"

"Slow. We're still in the August slump, but things should pick up soon. It usually coincides with the start of football."

They were silent for a while, watching the sky redden with sunset.

Finally Deb said, "I talked to Margaret. She said the guys weren't getting together tonight."

"What did Wayne say?" Ellen was so nervous about the reason for Deb's visit, she couldn't distinguish the frost on her glass from the sweat in her palms.

"I haven't talked to him since this morning. I just assumed they were getting together like all the other Friday nights. But Margaret said no."

Ellen felt a huge wave of relief that Deb didn't know about her offer to Wayne. "Did she say anything else?"

"About what?"

"I don't know. Nothing." If Margaret had mentioned her new boarder, Deb wasn't going to pass it on. "I thought they might get together somewhere else. Billy and I are having a little trouble, so he's away for a few days."

"It must be something in the air. Wayne and I aren't getting along. He's on pins and needles about something. I have no idea what, but he's hell to live with. I'm sure it's just something at the office."

"It's this weather. Cool, crispy air makes people frisky. Or irritable. Something." Everything was so brown, she couldn't tell the dead grass from the grasshoppers until they jumped. She could almost feel the line between summer and fall. *Survived the Summer* might look good on a tee shirt.

Deb was twisting her car keys. "I came by because I thought you might want company, after what happened with Yolanda and Hank."

"I haven't talked to her in a day or two. What happened? Did she finally shoot the son-of-a-bitch?"

Deb caught her breath as her hand fluttered to her breast. "Ellen. It's not a joking matter. Besides, she didn't shoot him. She stabbed him."

"There's not a jury in the world that would convict her if she did, but what are you talking about?"

"It was on the radio." Deb refilled her glass. "Margaret heard it, too. Yolanda is out on bond. But you're right, the S.O.B. deserved killing."

Ellen sat stunned, trying to believe that sweet, gentle Yolanda was capable of murder. "How did it happen?"

"What I heard was that he pulled a gun on her, threatened to shoot her. It was self-defense, of course. Did you know she carried a switch-blade in her purse?"

"You've got her mixed up with me. I carry scissors. What about Henry and Hanna?"

"They're okay. They were at her mother's."

A black Suburban cruised slowly down Gribble Street, then sped up as it passed the house. Smoked windows hid the driver's identity, but Ellen suspected it was Wayne. Deb evidently hadn't spotted it as she was staring off toward the high school.

"Well, that's all I know. If you hear anything, call me. She's my friend, too."

Ellen stuck the tea in the fridge and found her keys. Yolanda and Hank lived on the other side of town, which meant a three-minute Vespa ride. If Yolanda wasn't in jail, she might be at the house. On the other hand, if it happened there, she wouldn't be.

As soon as she turned the corner, Ellen had her answer. The yard was wrapped in yellow crime scene tape, making the house look like a huge present. Ellen pulled around to the back, parked the Vespa, bent under the yellow tape, and stood tiptoe to look through the window in the back door. Even in the dim light, she could see the splattered wall. Her body began to shake and she sank to her knees as she understood how close Yolanda had come to dying.

Chapter 28

Hank's murder made the headlines of Saturday's Austin paper. Underneath were photos of Hank winning an award at the city's appreciation dinner a few years ago and one of the family from last year's Christmas card. The article wasn't much more informative than Deb, but it did say the police had been to the house on domestic disturbance calls three times in the last two months and that Yolanda had been battered enough to be hospitalized earlier this week.

Ellen's calls to Yolanda rolled over to voicemail. Between the media and the crank calls, Yolanda probably wouldn't answer the phone for a long time. She was out on bail, but Ellen didn't know where. No one answered the phone at Yolanda's mother's.

Coffee. The rest of the newspaper. The crosswords. Her day stretched out ahead. It was truly her last day of vacation, but instead of enjoying the freedom of nothing to do, Ellen was antsy. She missed the routine of work and the company of Mary Jo, Crystal, and her clients. If she were a normal person, she'd do her laundry and stock up on groceries, fill her day with chores and errands.

In the back bedroom, she stared at her antique computer, mentally comparing it to Avery's sleek little machine. Fortunately, without the key, she would no longer be tempted to "borrow" it. Lacking only a few courses to complete her degree, she should have asked Avery if he would rent it to her for a year. She scanned the bookcase shelves, waiting for something to appeal. Barry Hannah appealed. His weird, Southern-fried short stories perfectly matched her mood. She hunkered down in her recliner, thumbing through the hardback to randomly select a story. It was not yet noon, so she might read most of the fat book before bedtime, which floated anywhere between ten and two.

Five stories later, she was interrupted by a knock at the door. Two-thirty. Almost 24 hours since she had called Wayne.

"Good work, Wayne. You are a smart man. What did you bring me?"

He handed her a bank bag and stood silently while she pulled out hundred dollar bills bundled in red bands. "You know it's a deal, it's worth thirty, forty thousand in the store." Not trusting him, she flipped through the bundles to make sure they weren't padded with ones or Monopoly money, but he had come through. After all, she knew his secret. She went to the kitchen and returned with the keys to the Harley burning in her palm like stigmata. She was betraying Billy. If he ever found out she sold the bike, he would be devastated. And he would find out. Wayne would make sure of that.

"The bike's in the garage. The helmet's with it." She peeked around him to see that his Suburban was pulling the trailer. "Did you bring bungees and straps and everything?"

Wayne was stone faced. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Right. Just a minute." Ellen dug the silver card case from the bottom of her duffle bag and carried it back to him.

He turned to leave. "I guess twelve thousand isn't too high a price to pay to keep from ending up like Hank."

She slammed the door, hoping it hit him in the butt.

She had almost settled back into the short stories when the phone rang.

"Oh, Ellen, Ellen, Ellen. I did it."

"Where are you? I'll be right there."

Ellen barely remembered where Yolanda's mother lived. She had only been there a couple of times, and Yolanda always drove. On the way, Ellen tried to again to comprehend that Hank was dead. Dead. Although she had wished him gone, unable to torment Yolanda, this was not exactly what she had meant. And Yolanda. Who knew she had the capacity to kill, although Ellen supposed anyone whose children were in danger would do whatever it took to save them.

She steered the Vespa through golden sunlight and a slightly dry breeze. Goodbye to humidity and oppressive barometric pressure. Goodbye to sluggishness and slothfulness. Hello to golden light and thrilling breezes. Today was a good day to be alive.

Only a few dead-end turns and Ellen was there in the driveway, hugging Yolanda, both of them sobbing. They entered the farmhouse kitchen with its oilcloth on the table and cuckoo clock on the wall. Yolanda poured sweet tea and they sat talking, ignoring Hannah and Henry in the next room arguing about toys.

Ellen was trying to absorb the situation. "You were his target. If you hadn't killed him, you'd be dead and maybe Henry and Hannah, too." Yolanda had dark circles under her eyes. The thin turtleneck top did not hide the purple marks on her neck. She was electric, nervously darting her eyes about and picking at her sleeve, picking at her nails. Ellen wondered if Yolanda was on meds to keep her from freaking out.

"It's really weird, Ellen. I'm so confused, to have Hank gone, and know that I did it. I'll go to Hell, it's true. But I had no choice. I'm embarrassed to say it, but it's such a relief to know that he's not in this world, not a threat anymore. I'm trying to quit looking over my shoulder. But still, my children are fatherless and I'm a single mother now."

"Is the D.A. going to prosecute?" As often as Ellen had imagined herself in jail lately, she could not stand the idea of Yolanda in prison, away from her children.

"No, it was clearly self-defense. The D.A. said he'll go through the motions, but it's really over. We'll move away as soon as he says it's okay."

"No." Ellen wasn't prepared for this twist. "Why move? Your mom is here, I'm here. We can help you."

"*Verdad*, but I couldn't stand my seventh graders poking each other, joking that their teacher is a murderer. I can't be a good role model. In fact, I'm looking for something in administration, something where I have no contact with children."

As if she had been summoned, Hannah came in to say hi and get a long, sweet hug from Ellen, but Henry stayed pouting in another room. Yolanda gave her little girl a cookie and shushed her out of the kitchen.

Ellen was embarrassed to be more concerned about losing her friend than she was about Yolanda's situation. She couldn't imagine not having Yolanda in her life, especially now that both of their lives were suddenly fluid. "Please don't go far. Just to Austin or San Antonio or somewhere within Vespa distance."

"You know, you need a car now that Billy is gone."

Ellen took a slow sip of tea and tried not to look surprised. Then she tried not to cry. Where is he, where has he gone? She felt as if she had misplaced him like lost car keys or a favorite sweater. "What about Billy? Where is he?"

Yolanda stood and turned her back to Ellen, getting the tea from the fridge. She poured the tea and added ice cubes. She wiped up a non-existent spill. Finally, she sat down and took Ellen's hand. "Chica, Billy has moved to Houston."

Ellen laughed out loud. "He did not. Billy? In the big city, no, the megatropolis of Houston, population, what? Three million? Not my Billy."

Yolanda waited her out.

"What? You're not kidding? What else? Did he move there with the infamous, slutty Reba Williams? Or with Jane Lucas on the money she embezzled?" It wasn't possible. Billy couldn't leave. That was *her* plan. He was supposed to stay in their house in Limestone in case she decided to come back.

Yolanda continued her patient gaze until Ellen became a believer, standing, leaning across the table, face wide open in shock.

"Ellen, sit. I'll tell you what I know." Billy had put up the money for Yolanda's bail. She said he was gaunt and his Carhartts hung loose on his once-large frame. He had, as Ellen suspected, been staying in the bunkhouse at Margaret's ranch. With Yolanda unable to deal with the situation, Billy had made all the arrangements for Hank's body to be shipped to his relatives in Kansas, had arranged for a small memorial service at the Limestone First Baptist next week, and then headed east to Houston. "I know that's totally out of character, but he knew you had lied to him all summer, and soon everyone would know. He said he hated living in a fishbowl, with everyone knowing the details about his personal life. Didn't you notice his bike and trailer missing?"

Ellen hoped he took his cell phone. She could call him and smooth things out. Maybe she'd move to Houston, too. "No, I didn't notice." Of course, she should have checked the garage for his bike. Billy lived where his bike lived. He had probably taken it to the ranch earlier in the week, but she had been too distracted to notice.

"Yolanda, I've been a wreck." She wiped away tears. "That's no excuse. I'm sorry I'm such a lousy friend, but I do love you. How can I help? What if I go to your house and pick up

some toys and clothes for the kids?" Although her offer was genuine, Ellen dreaded going into that house with its bloodstained kitchen and the ghost of Hank lurking about.

"You're sweet to offer, but the social worker took care of that."

The three o'clock cuckoo cut through the quiet, startling them both.

"*Chica*, you are the best friend in the world. There's nothing you could have done."

Yolanda flashed a big smile and patted Ellen's hand. "Now, what about you? What are you going to do with yourself?"

Of course, Ellen had no answer. To be so clear-headed and yet have no options in mind, no sense of forward motion, no idea about tomorrow, let alone the future. "The first thing I need to do is to catch up on the past week. I need to buzz by the salon and see if I still have a job."

Yolanda looked puzzled.

"I got busted at Eureka. Thursday afternoon the owner and Officer Beattie came in while I was there. And then that newspaper guy came by. Crystal was there, too."

"Thursday afternoon? If I had stayed there, Hank would still be alive."

"It's my fault. You were scared after I almost wrecked us."

"Forget it," Yolanda was smiling for the second time that afternoon. "You can't take credit for the mess I'm in. Besides, this is a pivotal time for us both." Then she talked about the children's reaction to Hank's death (confusion and relief), her brief stop at the county jail (bizarre), and her job search (statewide). From there, the conversation degenerated into local gossip, and they were just two friends catching up and comforting each other.

Ellen steered the Vespa to the intersection of Main & First where Rick Barlow sold Barlow's Gently Used Vehicles. If she was going to change her life, even moving to another house in

Limestone, she would need a car. Or something. Parking the Vespa near the street, Ellen strolled among the offerings. On the first row, Rick was peddling a Ford Focus, a Taurus, a Cadillac Deville, and two Honda Accords. Scrawled across the windshields in florid colors were the prices, followed by a series of exclamation marks. She could get a better deal in Austin, but she was willing to pay for the convenience of not riding her Vespa on the highway for an hour. As she came to a group of pickups and SUVs, she spotted an abused, faded blue Ford F-150. According to the windshield, the pickup was over a decade old, with only 75,000 miles. The windshield was probably lying, but the vehicle was within Ellen's price range.

"Yessur, that little beauty is a bargain, but a young lady like you might be more at home with the Taurus. That red paint job is gonna last forever, and the price is very flexible. What do you say?" Rick Barlow was a red-faced, skinny man who had seen the inside of too many liquor stores.

"I like the little beauty. Is that price flexible, too?" Ellen gave him a full-on stare, causing Barlow to examine the asphalt in his parking lot and come down five hundred dollars. He agreed to come off another two hundred when she told him she'd pay cash. They had no problem loading the Vespa into the bed of the pickup.

Ellen unlocked her front door, half anticipating that Billy would be asleep in his recliner with the television on, but the house was empty. In the bedroom, she dropped her keys on the dresser and began searching for his things, for proof that he had really, truly, permanently left her. Sure enough, his underwear drawer was empty except for an old, graying tee-shirt. His key caddy held neither keys nor phone. His side of the closet was vacant. No overalls, no coveralls. He *had* left his blue funeral suit and dress shirt. His tie was on the floor. Evidently, he'd sworn off funerals.

Still not believing, Ellen ran outside. Billy's Weber grill was missing, along with his custom-made BBQ utensils. In the garage, the shelves and pegs where he kept his saws, screwdrivers, wrenches, vises, WD-40 and STP were all empty. It was as if he had never been there, as if he had never changed the oil in their friends' cars, never tuned the engines in their bikes, never rebuilt a motor here. Ellen squatted near the patch of oil on the dirt floor of the garage and cried until she was empty.

Maybe he had left a note. After all, she hadn't really been looking for one, so she could have missed it. First, she checked the bathroom mirror. Billy wasn't one to write in lipstick, but maybe he had taped something there. On the way, she double-checked the top of the dresser, knowing she would have already seen the note if it were there, but just in case. In the bathroom mirror, she saw only her red eyes and disappointment, and the afternoon sun streaming through the back window. Sure enough, Billy's shaving kit was missing along with his dandruff shampoo and wide-tooth comb.

What was she thinking? Of course, he would have left his note on the fridge. She hurried into the kitchen and flipped through the business cards and handbills and flyers and garage sale notices and photos of Hannah and Henry and out-of-date coupons and a photo of her and Billy on vacation in the Ozarks before they were married, but there was nothing that had not been hanging there for months.

So it was true. Billy was gone. She wouldn't "accidentally" run into him at the grocery store

Chapter 29

Ellen awoke a little at a time, body part by body part, her brain being the last to come around. Like her brain, her mouth was full of fuzz, her cottony tongue felt too big to fit. She shielded her eyes from the ambient light and thought it must be mid-morning, but of what day? She tried to remember why her body felt so ancient, but could only attribute it to sleeping on the crummy couch.

Slowly, creakily, she eased herself up and made her way to the kitchen sink where she drank from the faucet, holding her head sideways so that the water ran into her ear and wetted her hair. It tickled but she did not laugh. Orange juice. She needed orange juice in the worst way, but the jug in the fridge had green mold on top. She drank more water, from a glass now, and considered going back to bed, but the clock said 10:30, so she set the coffee to brew and eased out the front door to get the newspaper.

She brought in two papers. She had slept for 48 hours, missing Sunday completely. She remembered taking the pills, but did not remember whether or not she had expected to wake up. Frightened at her potential for self-destruction, she poured the pills into the toilet and threw the empty vials into the trash.

In between reading the lines of black type, her own news drifted in and out. Billy was gone. Yolanda killed Hank. Yolanda was moving away. Ellen let go of each thought as fast as it appeared, not yet ready to face the present. To hell with the future.

But there was her past, on page 4 of the Around the State section of the Austin paper. Damn Walter Wallace. Under the headline, "Cat Burglar for Books," the short article told about

her breaking into a house to read in its library. The humorous tone made her sound just slightly nutty or eccentric, not a threat to society. The story noted that no charges were filed. If the Austin editor thought it was amusing, the article may have appeared in newspapers all over the state.

A flashing red light distracted her from concentrating on the Sunday color comics. Finally, she was annoyed enough to focus on the source: the answering machine. Its rapid pulsation indicated that more than one message awaited. Billy. She hit the "play" button, anticipating his rich voiced, "Hi, Hon" but it was a reporter from a San Antonio television station wanting more information about her "hobby" of breaking and entering. He sounded amused. He had called yesterday. She sat back in her chair to absorb this heinous development: her innocent little adventure was statewide news. She was afraid to turn on CNN; afraid she might be of international interest. Well, maybe she was overreacting. Who would care about Ellen Monroe, Limestone hairdresser? The second message was from a reporter in Houston. She went from amused to indignant. The nerve. The third call was a radio station in the Panhandle. She was furious, erasing the messages as she went along, not even bothering to listen all the way through to the five that followed.

Luckily, she recognized the voice on the last one: Mary Jo inviting her over for mimosas on Monday around noon to catch up on events that happened while Ellen had been "away." Mary Jo did not even attempt to say "on vacation." Ellen tried to imagine any events that would warrant a visit to Mary Jo's. Ellen had been in Mary Jo's trailer maybe three times in as many years. They were good friends—Mary Jo knew about Sue Ellen and about Ellen's miscarriage and the diagnosis—but they didn't often see each other outside of work. Their relationship was built on hair. Ellen had had her fill of change, so if Mary Jo had closed the shop or fired Crystal,

Ellen didn't want to hear about it. On the other hand, maybe Mary Jo wanted to talk about Ellen's "events."

"Noon on Monday" was about 30 minutes away. Ellen showered and picked out a white linen top and pants for the last time this season, as her mother had taught her not to wear white or patent leather after Labor Day. More moisturizer, concealer, foundation, eyeliner and she looked almost human again, but her brain was still a mess. Perhaps a mimosa would unclog her thinking.

Curious about the initial article that had ignited the media intrusion, Ellen stopped at three *Bi-Weekly Herald* vending machines and the Mini Mart, but they were all out of papers.

She drove the pickup slowly, trying to feel its rhythms as she moved through the gears. Traffic was non-existent after she past the town limits so she let her mind wander. Today was Monday, the bane of the working class, but a day of leisure for those in the beauty business. When she and Billy were first together, they used to bicker every Sunday night until they realized they were just anticipating Monday, the end of the weekend and the beginning of predictable workdays.

Ellen pulled into the entrance to the Happy Trails RV & Mobile Home Park, which housed every variety of trailer ever invented, from the tilted, singlewide relics on the right to the enormous motor home that hunkered at the end of the lane beside a weedy playground. Ellen couldn't remember an address and Mary Jo hadn't said, so she just kept an eye out for Mary Jo's Buick. As she pulled under the aluminum carport, Ellen noticed Crystal's enormous Bonneville parked across the road, kitty-corner from Mary Jo's.

She knocked, then let herself in. "Hello, it's me." The scent of cinnamon and sugar filled the air. Mary Jo had redecorated since Ellen's last visit. The dark paneling was now a bright

white with track lighting to open up the formerly dark corners. An Indian tapestry had replaced Mary Jo's children's senior pictures. A low-slung white sofa and red leather glider gave the room a clean, modern look. Through the opening between the living room and kitchen, Ellen could see Mary Jo pouring orange juice into three flutes. "Wow. This looks so upscale, you hardly know you're in a trailer. Hi, Crystal." Crystal looked elegantly at home seated on the sofa in jeans, a red brocade smoking jacket, and a silver lamé turban.

"If that was supposed to be a compliment, you can leave and come in again." Mary Jo waved and laughed. "Hello, Kiddo. It's good to see you."

Mary Jo handed the drinks to Crystal and Ellen and lifted her glass. "A toast to our very own salon star of newspaper and television. You are truly the talk of the town."

"How bad is it?" Ellen sipped her drink, tasting the cold sweetness of the orange juice mixed with the tartness of the champagne, hoping it would dull the edge of her anxiety.

"The newscasts I've seen all mention that Avery didn't bring charges, so the tone is more human interest than crime report," Crystal said gently. "Of course, Walter's story in Saturday's *Bi-Weekly Herald* covered a lot of ancillary territory."

Mary Jo came back into the living room and set a plate of cinnamon rolls on the glass coffee table.

Ellen said, "I can't find a copy of the paper. What did it say?"

"Miss Ellen, he didn't write a breaking-and-entering story. He wrote about a quirky person who enjoys reading. And even though it was on the front page, it was below the fold." Crystal took a deep breath. "Most of page one was taken up by the story about the murder."

"I want to see it. Where's the paper?" Ellen looked around the room, but there was no clutter, no stacks of magazines or newspapers or utility bills or anything else. She went into the kitchen.

Crystal raised his voice. "You shouldn't be troubling yourself with this nonsense."

Mary Jo's purse was open on the counter, revealing a folded newspaper. Ellen opened it and saw a black-and-white photo of Yolanda's blood-splattered kitchen beside one of Yolanda in handcuffs. Ellen would wait to read that when she was alone.

Beneath the fold was a photo of Ellen from the announcement years ago that she had joined the salon. She was younger, her hair longer and darker, but she still looked trustworthy, hair-wise. As she stood reading, she became more and more furious.

Limestone Woman has Unusual Addiction

Some people are addicted to chocolate, others to alcohol or pills, but a local woman has a novel addiction: she's addicted to reading novels. But her strangeness doesn't stop there. She has a "habit" of breaking and entering the vacation house owned by a Dallas resident, Mr. Avery Spencer and his wife, Sophia.

Ellen Monroe, age 34, of 145 S. Gribble was caught Thursday afternoon in the upstairs media room of the Spencer house, located at 822 Cactus Drive, when Mr. Spencer and Police Officer Lindale Beattie entered the house. The officer said Mrs. Monroe appeared to be intoxicated, but because she was not in public, no drug or alcohol tests were required. Mr. Spencer declined to press charges.

Evidently, Mrs. Monroe had been appropriating the house for her own use for months. She assured Mr. Spencer and Officer Beattie that she had never stolen any property, that she only used the house as a private library where she read a book once a week. A search of the house by the owner later verified that nothing was missing. In fact, Mrs. Monroe even added to the property by furnishing several bottles of wine. Evidence indicated that Mrs. Monroe had moved in and invited a friend to join her, but she denied that was the situation.

"At least they didn't mention you by name, Crystal. Your reputation's still intact." Ellen did not sound as bitter as she felt.

Mrs. Monroe is the wife of Billy Monroe, a mechanic at Limestone Motors & Garage. She is a hairstylist at The Talk of the Town Salon. When reached on Friday, Mary Jo Winker, owner of the salon, told the Limestone *Bi-Weekly Herald* that she was "hard pressed" to believe that Mrs. Monroe had "a criminal bone in her body. She's been with me for three years and she's never stolen a dime or a shampoo sample." Mrs. Winkler thinks there must be some mistake, but after interviewing Officer Beattie and both Mrs. Monroe and Mr. Spencer at his Cactus Street house, this reporter is convinced there was no mistake.

Ellen whacked the newspaper against the doorframe. "*Et tu*, Mary Jo?"

"Well, Kiddo, when Walter called Thursday evening, I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about, so I just answered his questions. It wasn't until the next morning that Crystal explained what was going on. Have a cinnamon roll. It'll make you feel better."

Mrs. Monroe has no criminal record. An Internet search revealed one previous incident of emotional instability that resulted in her dropping out of college.

"Damn him! Emotionally unstable? College dropout? That's your idea of 'human interest'?" Walter's background research had turned up the only other time she'd been mentioned a newspaper article, the time when severe depression had cause her to leave her dorm in an ambulance. Ellen's face heated with humiliation. That information, at least, had not been picked up in the Austin article.

"Miss Ellen, 'unstable' describes three-fourths of our clientele." Crystal bit into a cinnamon roll. "Mary Jo's right, these are exquisite. Are they from scratch?"

"No, they come in a can, like biscuits."

"I can't believe I've made such a mess." Ellen slumped onto the sofa and wiped tears on her bare arm. "I've ruined my whole life over a stupid house." She had wanted to be a citizen of the world, but this kind of exposure wasn't what she had in mind.

"You need another mimosa," Mary Jo said, leaving the room. She turned to them. "Bet you haven't heard this one. Horse walks into a bar. Bartender says, 'So. Why the long face?' " She slapped her leg, laughed, and went to the kitchen.

Mr. Spencer, who is an affable fellow, appeared to see the humor in the situation. "That will teach me to double check the alarm system from now on." He has the house on the market, but is having second thoughts about selling. "It is a very special house. The fixtures are all top-of-the-line because they come from my boutique."

Mr. Spencer suggested that from now on, Mrs. Monroe use the public library for her reading needs.

"That Avery's a real wit, isn't he? But Walter is an S.O.B." Ellen threw the paper across the room where it landed in a ficus plant.

"Now Miss Ellen, forget about that article. Just calm down and allow me to bring you up to date on the latest Limestone news." Crystal stood and began slowly pacing the cramped room. "Let's see," he said, squinting his eyes in concentration. "Where to begin? In the past few days, one baby was born and one widow surrendered to assisted living; Dave is moving his deli across the street so he can expand; Jackie and Lester are on the outs, but no one has details; Mary Jo's new regimen is getting splendid results, she's gained one-and-a-half pounds and, as you can see, she's taken on a healthy glow."

From the kitchen, Mary Jo gave a shy look and flicked her hand as if to say, *it's nothing*. But Crystal was right. Mary Jo had not looked as healthy in months.

Crystal continued, "But the big event happened on Friday: they delivered our new pedi chair. Miss Mary Jo was so gracious to purchase one from the top-of-the-line with an eight-speed seat massager. It's a huge hit, booked for the next few weeks, and we've ordered that new gel polish in all thirteen colors."

Mary Jo handed out fresh drinks and raised her glass. "A toast to The Talk. I've also placed a large ad in the *Bi-Weekly Herald*, offering a ten percent discount on pedis as an add-on to a cut-and-color." She nervously tapped her nails on the side of her glass, dribbling a bit of the liquid over the side. "I'm just sorry I didn't do this sooner. Here it is, almost the end of sandal season. We could have had that chair paid for if we'd ordered it in June." She took a seat in the glider.

"But you didn't have a nail tech in June, so that was not a possibility, was it?" Crystal winked at Ellen. "Now, no regrets. Just look forward to a Limestone full of healthy, happy feet. Until that spa opens in the mall, the Talk would be the only salon with a real pedi chair, which is certainly classier than the dishpan pedis at the Cut 'n Curl." Crystal took on an innocent look. "We're emphasizing 'classiness' in our advertisements, so we rejected the idea of targeting the diabetic market whose unkempt feet could lead to amputation or death." Crystal sipped his mimosa. "As you know, pedicures are not my favorite, but women expect them in a full-service salon. And full-service—as soon as possible—is my goal for the Talk of the Town."

Ellen looked confused, so Crystal added, "Oh, I guess we should have started with this news. I have made Miss Mary Jo a lease-to-buy offer and she has accepted. In fact, we held our discussion over white wine in this very room Friday night."

If Ellen hadn't already been sitting down, she would have fallen over. She had no idea The Talk was even for sale. If she had, would she have made a bid on it, anchoring herself to the salon and to Limestone?

"By the way, you two ladies are the first ears to hear this: I have talked to Dave about leasing his old deli space to create a mini-spa. That's right, a serene, private nook for Limestone ladies and gentlemen to partake of facials, waxing, and massages. Won't that be luxurious? Of

course, that's several months and several thousand dollars away. What do you think? Do you personally know of any top-notch aestheticians?" Crystal took a dainty bite of cinnamon roll and waited.

Ellen shook her head "no" without even thinking about his question. She was still processing "full-service" which she understood to mean "open on Mondays." She gulped a third of her mimosa. Her stomach flipped. Everything was changing and she wasn't at all happy about it.

"Whatever you do is fine with me," said Mary Jo. "I've spent my whole life in a beauty shop and it's time for me to do something else like traveling or learning to knit."

Underneath the friendly chatter, Ellen felt a tension, an effort by Crystal and Mary Jo to ignore Ellen's situation with Billy.

"Just go right ahead. I'll look out for your place while you're gone." Crystal turned to Ellen. "It won't be any trouble at all. I'm doing a lease-to-buy on that sweet little Airstream over there. I have devised the most marvelous scheme for transforming it into something without angles or corners involving yards of draped fabric, primarily yellow silk. It'll look like something out of *Aladdin*."

She couldn't contain her anger. "You two are making all these plans behind my back? Where do I fit in or is there some detail you haven't gotten to yet, such as my leaving? What's going on here?" Ellen stood and pointed to Mary Jo. "Why didn't you offer me the salon? I've been with you for years, not weeks like some people."

In her softest voice, Mary Jo said, "In the first place, I didn't offer anything. It was Crystal's idea. And in the second place, you've been distracted lately, not that you don't have cause."

Ellen put her hands on her hips and glared at Mary Jo. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Calm down. I only meant that you're concerned about your best friend being in trouble, and now that publicity about you visiting that house so often."

"Once a week. And Crystal was there, too."

Crystal nodded. "That is true, and I totally understand your motives for entertaining yourself in that wonderful structure. Nevertheless, we are discussing the salon and its future. Yours, too."

"Why does everything have to change? Don't you know that Billy left? Left Limestone, left me?" She was talking near the top of her voice, just short of screeching. Her emotions were pinballing from sorrow to anger and back again.

Crystal seemed taken aback at the rapid change in subject. "He left Limestone?"

Ellen was not fooled by Crystal's tact. After all, this was Limestone. The news had had time to go around town twice in past the week, more or less, since Billy drove away, although she wasn't exactly sure when that event had taken place. "Surely you've heard. He moved to Houston, didn't even leave a note." She crumpled into the sofa, her hand on her forehead.

Mary Jo moved to sit on the sofa arm and smoothed Ellen's hair. "Oh, Kiddo, you're a big part of our plans. We couldn't do any of this without you. And I'm sorry about Billy, but you two might patch things up yet."

"It's not likely. I haven't even heard from him." She was lucky the newspaper article didn't mention Billy leaving her. He would hate his personal life being exposed, and he would blame her. "I probably won't hear, either. I've made a mess of things."

"Miss Ellen, that's just your past talking. By the way, in my news roundup, I forgot to mention that your favorite real estate broker was in Friday to get a touch-up from Mary Jo,"

Crystal eased back onto the sofa. "She was all agog about her new boyfriend, Frank somebody, letting us know that she and Wayne were no longer seeing each other. You see, Jackie had finally figured out who was the mystery woman with Wayne in the Austin restaurant. In any event, Margie also said that Avery Spencer has taken his lovely home off the market, temporarily, at least. She thinks he's considering moving in, to contemplate his future." He finished his mimosa. "Speaking of, would you like to look at yours? My tarot cards are in the car."

Mary Jo rose and walked toward the kitchen. "I'll make coffee and scramble some eggs while you two get all mystical."

Ellen welcomed the chance to let all this news and her reactions to it settle down.

Crystal returned carrying a small, purple velvet package. He lifted the cover like a magician, "*Voila*," and shuffled the deck three times, cutting it once. He handed the cards to Ellen. "Close your eyes, hold these to your heart, and ask for guidance in a specific situation."

Ellen could feel her heart beat against the cards. Closing her eyes, she vowed to overcome her skepticism and have faith in the cards and Crystal's reading of them, whatever they revealed. It was hard to ask for "guidance in a specific situation," when she had so many situations: family or friends; legal or love; head or heart. A throw of the dice, or in this case, the flip of a card, could determine the rest of her life. So be it: *resolve the question of what is keeping me from going forward?*

Crystal took back the deck, held it against his chest. "This card represents your Past." He dealt the first card from the pack and laid it face up on the table: the Three of Swords, which was upside down to Ellen. "This second card is your Present." He turned over the Four of Cups. "And this is your Future," he said in a lilting voice. "The Ace of Wands."

"Now, this Three of Swords, your Past, represents heartache and pain, but because it is upside down, the pain is past. It is time to let it go."

"The Past," Ellen repeated. "So that probably doesn't represent my situation with Billy."

"No, this is probably something older, perhaps something from your childhood."

If she were a normal person, pain from her childhood would be the death of a gerbil or coming in last in the sixth-grade talent show. Crystal had no way of knowing about Sue Ellen and the chocolate kisses, about her father's abandonment and her mother's grief. "It's time to let go? Just like that?"

"It could happen. Here, just think of this card as your pain from the past. Now wad it up, kiss it goodbye, and throw it into the trash." He flicked his hand toward a small wastebasket near the sofa. "It's okay, I have other decks."

Ellen smiled at the absurdity of the ritual, but she did as Crystal directed. Wad, kiss, waft. She laughed lightheartedly. "I do feel better. Do you think that's permanent?"

"It's up to you, Miss Ellen, but I wouldn't be surprised. Whatever you were carrying has weighed you down for a long, long time. Now you're free to enjoy yourself. You have paid your dues. Paid in full. Now you are freed from that obligation."

Ellen was dumbfounded. If it were that easy, why had she not freed herself of blame and guilt years ago? Maybe no one had said the right words. Or, maybe, she had not been ready to let go of such a familiar feeling. Or, most likely, it was her way of keeping Sue Ellen alive.

"Now, this second card, your Present, is the Four of Cups. That represents discontent and dissatisfaction."

Ellen squirmed at the words. Such a succinct and damning description. How could she be satisfied when she was trying to live *two* lives? Anyone could have told her that was impossible.

And everyone probably had, but she could not hear them. Cups. She called to Mary Jo, "Is the coffee ready?"

"Come and get it."

"No, thank you, but you go ahead." Crystal closed his eyes to concentrate while Ellen piddled, selecting a cup and pouring coffee, taking the milk from and back to the fridge. Finally, she came back to the sofa.

"Miss Ellen, the Present is always temporary. That's why there is a Future. Now, your discontent could simply be the inability to see and appreciate the blessings that surround you. Boredom, depression, and apathy can often lead to dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction being one of the main reasons people become hermits and loners. But you aren't there yet. You can easily change your present state of mind."

Ellen tipped her coffee cup to her lips, letting it hide her face s

Chapter 30

The house felt very still and calm. With Billy's things gone, it seemed bigger, more spacious, but not empty. Ellen flipped on the light in the entry and dialed the A/C unit to "high." After a few minutes, her tiny rental house took on the characteristics of Eureka at a tenth of its square footage. Room to dance. Chilled air to prevent perspiration. No obligations, no supper to cook. Books for the reading.

Ellen settled into her recliner, supremely aware of the empty one beside her. The hum of the fridge and the ticking of the kitchen clock kept silence at bay. The table lamp by her shoulder cast a swath of harsh, yellow light across the room. She switched it off. First thing tomorrow, it was going to the garage. And she would find someone to haul away Billy's recliner, even though it was the only thing of his that remained. Maybe she would rearrange the furniture. Maybe Crystal would help her decorate, suggest new curtain fabric or find a rug that would pull the room together. On the other hand, there was a new condo development out on the highway: new
o Crystal wouldn't see the tears welling. He had hit a little closer to the mark than she would have liked. It was as if he knew she could have stayed in Eureka forever without missing anything or anyone.

"Well, here we are at your Future, Miss Ellen, the Ace of Wands. This represents your career, your attitude, all your possibilities. Anything you want to happen, *can* happen. This is a very forceful card. It's all about opportunity and ideas."

The card did look very forceful. A strong fist held a bat, a thick cudgel that could knock any depression out of the ballpark. It could fight fears and anxiety and dread and disappointment. The cudgel was decorated with tiny green leaves. "What are those?"

"The leaves represent ideas, inspiration. And that cloud behind the hand holding the wand is a storm of energy propelling thoughts and hopes into being. Can't you just feel it?"

Actually, she could feel it. Her heart was lighter already. The sadness was lifting. After all, the future had a fifty-fifty chance of bringing pleasant surprises.

"That was a very positive reading, Miss Ellen. I'll recap for you: let go of the heartache and pain in your past, acknowledge your discontent and your inclination toward isolation, and finally, accept that your future is full of hope and possibility. Now, accept that your Present is full of scrambled eggs."

Chapter 30

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Ambient light from the entry softened the darkness. Ellen poured herself a glass of pinot grigio. She imagined Avery, in Eureka's kitchen, pouring a glass of wine at the same time. Salute. At the first taste of the cold, tart liquid, she felt her shoulders relax and her breath deepen.

As she closed the fridge, a flurry of paper caught her attention. She couldn't image how the door got so cluttered. She sipped her wine and released a batch of coupons from their clothespin magnet, evidence of her good intentions to be frugal. Somehow, she always forgot to take them when she went shopping. Most of them were so out of date the paper felt like

parchment; others were for products she would never again need to buy, such as Frosted Flakes and dandruff shampoo. She threw them all in the trash.

She heard a light tapping, but couldn't find its source until it became louder. Someone was knocking on the front door. She looked at the clock: nine-thirty. A little late for visiting unless it was Yolanda or Billy, but why would he knock at his own house?

The man at the door looked like someone who had lived a hard life, but had retained his dignity. He was very formal, almost bowing, and offered her a white envelope without ever lowering his gaze, almost but not quite smiling. His shirt collar was frayed; his nails clean and trimmed. When Ellen reached out to take the envelope, the man hesitated to let go for the slightest second, then released it and walked away. She never even heard his voice. But when she looked down and saw her name written on the envelope, she knew who it was from. The handwriting was the same as the note she had gotten on her first day of school. "I'm so proud of my big girl, Your Daddy." She had read that note until the smeared ink disintegrated into the tissue paper.

This note, in blue ink on white paper, was of about the same length. *Please call me. 512/555-8694. C.L.P.* Her father had always been a man of few words.

Ellen slammed the note onto the kitchen table and went back to organizing the fridge door. Under the Mickey Mouse magnet were flyers Billy had collected. She doubted she would ever have a need for sandblasting or pressure washing or concrete sawing. She threw the whole batch into the trash.

The opposite of love was not hate but indifference. Her venom toward her father was an over-reaction. She resolved to analyze that emotion later, when she wasn't so confused. She

picked up the phone to tell her mother about this stunning twist of fate, but changed her mind, unwilling to revive her mother's fury at her own abandonment.

The school photos of Hannah and Henry, anchored by roadrunner magnet, were at least four years out of date. They still wore the open faces of children who trust the photographer and everyone else in their lives. She would ask Yolanda for new photos, especially since the kids—and her best friend—were moving away. The photos went into the trash, too.

Most likely, Christopher Leonardo Peterson had read about her troubles in the newspaper and had perhaps seen her face featured, larger than life, on televisions in bars and hotel lobbies across the state and wanted to share the spotlight. Yet, he had contacted her instead of the media. She wondered if he ever thought about Sue Ellen.

She peeled Wayne's slick, magnetized business card from the fridge and pitched it in the trash. She would never need to call him or see him. He would never again drink beer in her yard. She unstuck two flyers for garage sales that happened months ago and practiced a bit of origami.

She could just forget about the visit from her father or she could replay the fantasy in which her father calls and explains himself with a plausible excuse for his behavior. She agrees to meet him, bringing along her mother. The three of them talk of individual pain and suffering and of loss, accompanied by many tears. Then they all forgive each other, allowing group hugs to mold them back into a family. Of course, this was an old fantasy dating back to childhood, but one she hadn't revisited in a decade.

Ellen's blood froze in her veins. She reached for a chair and sat hard onto the wood. She felt expanded, as if her body were ballooning, about to float to the ceiling, free of a weight. Of course. Why had she not recognized this before? If she was responsible for Sue Ellen's death, then she was ultimately responsible for her parents' divorce, and for her mother's lifetime of

misery and abandonment. That must be part of the great weight she had been carrying. But she hadn't caused Sue's death. That was a childhood lie, invented by a seven-year-old and repeated to herself night after night. If that was a lie, then so was her responsibility for her parents' rupture. It was all part of the past, part of the heartache and pain that Crystal's cards had said to relinquish.

Ellen felt bollixed by the truth. She drank a glass of ice water, letting its chill zing through her body. She pulled the last item from its magnet: the photo of Billy and her on vacation in the Ozarks, red and gold leaves shimmering in the background surrounding the smiling, hugging couple. She kissed the photo and watched it sail into the trash.

Chapter 31

The morning sun streamed through the kitchen window as Ellen poured her second cup of coffee. There wasn't much of interest in the newspaper, chiefly a rearrangement of the comics and puzzles that eliminated one of the crosswords. Of all the things in her life that she depended on to stay the same, the crosswords had risen to the top.

Steam rose from the coffee, bending sideways when she blew to cool it. For the first time in a week, Ellen was about dress and go to the salon where she would greet her clients, ask about their weekend, and dance around their inquiries as to Billy and Yolanda and her notoriety as a cat burglar. She was looking forward to the chatter and gossip about other people and other situations, counting on the new pedi chair to draw attention away from her for the first few awkward minutes of each appointment.

In half an hour, she would bathe and begin dressing, but for now, the coffee and the paper were comforting. The phone rang. Maybe it was Billy. She answered it before the second ring. "Hello?"

"Lou Ellen, I'm so glad I got you. I never know if I'm calling your cell or your house or the shop."

"Hi, Aunt Stella." During the obligatory chitchat, Ellen made all the Ss in the Dear Abby column into dollar signs. Finally, Stella got to the point.

"Your mother asked me to call. She's too embarrassed. It's about your father. Can you believe that? After all this time? Well, what she's never told you is that she has ESP with him. About eight years after the divorce, she had a weird feeling, so she called around. Turns out he was in the hospital with a broken leg.

"Couldn't that have been just a coincidence?"

"Lou Ellen, you have no idea how much time your mother has spent thinking about him. Obsession doesn't begin to describe it. Another time, when she intuited that he was in trouble, he was in jail overnight for a DWI, and this was in the last few years. Anyway, she didn't want you to know she's psychically in touch with him. But now she's divined something different, but he doesn't seem to be in trouble. Something else has shifted. So, have you heard from him or seen him?"

Ellen felt off balance. She took a sip of coffee, which for the moment was the perfect temperature for drinking. "Why would she think I was involved?"

"It's just what her 'vibes' tell her. So, are you? Involved?"

"Let's put it this way. A man came to my door and handed me a letter from my father. I don't know who the man was. It may or may not have been him. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to contact him."

"Did the letter have an address or phone number?"

Ellen found the letter underneath the sports section of the newspaper. There was no return address on the letter or the envelope. "You don't think she'd actually call him, do you? After all this time? What if he's married again?"

"She doesn't 'feel' that he has," Stella said.

Her mother needed a hobby—like crosswords or sudoku—that would occupy her mind. Obviously, knitting was out. "Aunt Stella, I'll give you the number, but you might want to be there when she calls in case he doesn't want to talk to her. It's five-one-two, five-five-five, eight-six-nine-four."

Stella repeated the number, just to be sure. "Bella said I shouldn't mention that little article about you in the Houston paper. She said you'd be embarrassed."

"I am." Ellen took another sip of coffee. She put the cup down and walked into the bathroom, turning on the water in the tub and squatting so the noise might be heard all the way to Galveston. "It isn't a big deal. He didn't file charges." Of course, he hadn't seen the Tahoe yet.

"Well, I'd better let you go. Just one more thing I'm not supposed to mention."

Ellen's stomach lurched. What now? Her mother has cancer? Or a boyfriend? Or she's moving to Limestone? Ellen walked into the foyer to hear better. "And that is?"

"It's Billy. He came by to see Bella on Sunday. He's got your mother concerned about you being alone. Like her. Of course, she didn't say that, but she didn't have to. After all, Billy is such a sweet man and he loved you so much. You should thank your lucky stars to have a man like that. You are throwing away gold."

"Oh, Aunt Stella, do you hear that? I have another call. Maybe it's Billy. Bye now." Ellen hung up the phone. She still had time for a soothing bath.

Driving to The Talk, her excitement rose as she anticipated seeing her clients, getting her hands into the sudsy shampoo, thinking about something other than herself. If she were lucky, a new scandal would have arisen in her absence that would derail her own as a topic of conversation.

Through the light from the salon windows, the changes in Mary Jo's health were even more obvious: rosy cheeks, lustrous skin, and the new weight that filled out her face. "Mary Jo, I want some of what you've got. Are you taking vitamins?"

Mary Jo pointed to Crystal. "It's him. He's got me on a healthy diet, got me walking three days a week, and made me take an extra day off." She twirled around to give the full view, stopping to shake her finger at Ellen. "It's time you started taking better care of yourself, Kiddo."

Ellen looked in the mirror. She looked at least forty. Her spotty eating over the past week caused her to lose weight, sinking her cheeks and making her elbows knobby. Too much wine had painted dark circles under her eyes. She hoped her future career—if she had one—would not require her to stand in front of a mirror all day.

The morning slipped by easily. Her clients were glad to see her, gently inquiring about her health, then quickly changing the subject to the new pedi chair or football or WurstFest. Over the protests of Mary Jo and Crystal, Ellen skipped lunch to meet with Roy Ferguson.

The law offices were on Crockett Street, just a few blocks from the salon. An elderly receptionist showed her into Roy's office and motioned for her to sit in the blue chintz chair with stains on the arm. A credenza behind the desk held a photo of a nondescript, middle-aged woman, a photo of two middle school children, and one of a blue Ducati motorcycle. How could there be two in a town as small as Limestone? She couldn't wait to tell Billy about her discovery. Then she remembered.

Ellen was having second thoughts about choosing Mr. Ferguson, but he had the biggest ad in the Yellow Pages. She could not unravel the extent of her legal situation without assistance.

Roy Ferguson turned out to be a gray-haired, solid body of a hunk. His brown eyes flashed as he gripped and patted her hand. "Sorry I'm late, but—" He waved his excuse into the air. "Now tell me what this is all about."

He pretended ignorance of the situation as Ellen explained about her Friday nights at Eureka.

"Breaking and entering," he said as he wrote on his yellow legal pad.

"I didn't 'break.' I used a key."

He waved away her protest.

She described the accident with the Tahoe.

"Grand theft auto. Damages to the vehicle." He wrote, then thumped his pen on the edge of the desk.

"But Avery may or may not know about that yet."

"He will at some point. Damages to Double D entrance wall. Reckless driving. Loss of control. Any alcohol or drugs involved?"

"No, we were sober by then. Also, there was a silk blouse and a crystal glass."

His eyebrows shot up as he doodled on his yellow pad. "There is the possibility that if you agree to pay for all damages, plus some for pain and suffering and inconvenience, Mr. Avery might let it go. He waved away 'let it go.' "Now, is there anything else I need to know?"

Ellen tried to think. At one time, she might have confessed her guilt about Sue Ellen and the bus wreck, but Crystal had convinced her that the statute of limitations had run out on that. She couldn't come up with any more of her mistakes or errors in judgment, so she shook her head "no."

"Well, then, do you have any questions for me?"

She thought again. "Do you handle divorces? I might be needing one."

On her way back to the salon, Ellen swung by James & Son Hardware. The son agreed that, seeing as she had not actually used the tent and sleeping bags, that in fact her layaway purchases had not ever left the store, he would return her money if she would return the complimentary camping headlight.

She was in no hurry, nodding to passersby who walked a little faster in the breezy fall air. It was a glorious day. At some point, she would need pencil and paper to add up her tip money and the leftover cash from Wayne's hush money, then subtract what she would need to pay off her obligations to Avery Spencer and her newly hired lawyer. Regardless of the total, she resolved to drive to Austin next Monday and buy a speedy, sleek, lightweight laptop and whatever equipment she needed to install Wi-Fi. She imagined a whole new world of online shopping and college courses and travel booking. Welcome to Taos.

The afternoon passed quickly at the salon, the gurgling of the pedi chair as it filled and emptied provided a background to the chattering voices. Steam carried the aroma of lemon salts across the air. Ellen had just brushed the trimmings off Thelma Roberts' skirt when Margie Adams entered the salon.

"Hi, Mary Jo, everyone. I just stopped in to see if I left my checkbook here last week. Have you seen it?" She glanced around the salon without really focusing on Ellen. "I just realized I didn't have it when I went to give a check for groceries on Saturday."

Mary Jo pulled the leather-covered checkbook from the desk drawer.

Crystal turned to look. "Why Miss Margie, those are just the most fabulous shoes. Where ever did you purchase them?"

Margie pointed her left hot-pink stiletto into the air. "Oh, they were a gift from a grateful client after I suggested that Limestone Motors could get the hail dents out of his Tahoe. He can't figure out how they got there." She put the checkbook into her tote bag. "I suppose it has something to do with that French clown I met. Wonder if she ran into that cat burglar? Sounds like Grand Central Station over there." Margie was almost to the door when she stopped and turned. "Oh, right, the cat burglar works here." She scanned the salon, slowly now, until she came to Ellen. "You. You cost me a sale, you know. He has taken it off the market. I should sue you." She left, slamming the door so hard that the bell echoed for a full minute.

Chapter 32

Friday dawned, but Ellen could barely sense the sun behind gray clouds. Today was a good one for not riding a Vespa in case Limestone got a good soaking rain later this afternoon.

Working at the salon was a pleasure. Ellen was glad to be back among the people and the aromas and the busyness. Crystal was amazing, wafting around in his gauzy gray maxi-dress, a scarf tied gypsy-style around his curls. In only a short time in Limestone, he was settled in, knew the names of *all* the salon clients, not just his nail patrons, and seemed to have found a home. Roots. Ellen admired his élan.

Charlotte Ryder bustled in at 3:00, full of herself because her son, Rob, would be the starting quarterback in tonight's opening game against Bowie. She seemed to think everyone should envy her for being so important. Tonight's was a home game. Most of the town would be there. Ellen remembered how excited Billy had been about the start of football season. She was sorry he wouldn't be here. Her sadness surprised her.

"Ellen, isn't Yolanda Starnes a friend of yours?" Charlotte looked at Ellen quizzically.

Ellen tensed, jerking the damp towel from Charlotte's wet hair. The Limestone ladies would not confront her about Eureka, but as payment, they demanded this grist for their gossip mill. Ellen would not give them the satisfaction. "Yes, Yolanda is my best friend. It's so unfortunate that I haven't seen her lately, what with school starting and everything. By the way, I'm using a new product today that will hold your style even if it rains during the game."

Crystal took up the conversational ball. "Has anyone heard a forecast? I mean a reliable one? That poor weatherman in San Antonio must use a crystal ball instead of Doppler radar.

Would you like to try some of this new gel polish, Mrs. Patterson? It comes in a variety of colors."

"The Austin weatherwoman said there was a ten percent chance, but I don't pack an umbrella unless it's fifty percent or more. Less than that and it usually blows into the next county before it rains a drop on Limestone." Mary Jo was halfway smirking, watching Charlotte twist her diamond ring round and round, waiting for a conversational break so she could butt in. "Ellen, when was the last time you attended a high school football game?" Mary Jo was so skilled she could backcomb Jennifer Mallick's hair while looking at Ellen.

"Last year. I went to every home game. I have the requisite red-and-black tee-shirts, cozies, and roadrunner bird caller." Tonight was the big game. Tonight, Ellen would not be going to Eureka and reading and sipping wine. She felt a rush of longing. "Are you going to the game, Mary Jo?" She assumed Crystal had more interesting things to do.

"Yes, I am. Why don't I come by and pick you up about six-thirty? We can eat supper at the Freshman Cantina. Their Frito pies are real tasty because they make their own chili."

It would certainly beat staying home and moping. Besides, Ellen had almost finished *Housekeeping*. "Sounds good to me. There you go, Charlotte. All done, and don't worry about the rain." Ellen practically pushed her out of the chair. Charlotte wrote out her check and left with just the tightest goodbye smile.

Chapter 33

Ellen couldn't understand why Fridays were so fraught with emotional baggage: memories of going to the football games with Billy and going to Eureka alone. Although she was a mental mess, when she and Mary Jo arrived at the game, Ellen knew she had made the right decision.

Approximately ninety percent of Limestone's ambulatory residents formed a sea of red and black, walking, waving, cheering, eating, generating way more excitement than a normal high school game should, but this was the season opener and everyone had high hopes for another chance at district.

Bowie's fans were wearing yellow and green tee-shirts with the mythological chupacabra on their chests. Their version of the mascot was a skinny, doglike animal with yellow fangs and huge green eyes. Ellen liked the idea of a mythological mascot because it could have superpowers, might surprise its fans with fantastic feats of power and speed.

Mary Jo and Ellen bought their Frito pies and drinks and wandered through the crowd. Ellen waved to Roy Watkins and Thelma Roberts and a few more of her clients as she climbed the steps to empty seats on the aisle ten rows up in the bleachers. Mary Jo pointed out the Cantina's new cardboard trays with "Acme" labels on them. They were laughing about the roadrunner joke, when Ellen heard a familiar voice calling her.

"Miss Ellen. Yoo-hoo! Ladies!" Crystal was three rows up, waving a red and black chiffon scarf in the evening breeze. How delightful of him. A couple of rows behind Crystal and to the right she spotted Lester Wilson, alongside Lewis Davenport, the new teller at Blanco Community Bank. Ellen didn't have a clear view, but it looked as if they were holding hands.

When Ellen turned back to the game, she spotted Lester's wife, maybe soon to be ex-wife, Jackie, a few rows below. She appeared to be alone. Ellen waved to Deb and a fake-smiling Wayne.

Last year, Ellen and Billy had sat with Hank and Yolanda at every game. She and Yolanda would talk through most of the game, half aware of Henry and Hannah scrambling around with friends or begging for money for hot dogs. Billy would lean in to update the women when the team did anything exceptionally good or bad. But tonight, Hank was dead and Billy was three hundred miles away. Yolanda was probably staying out of the public eye. Perhaps Mrs. Hernandez brought the kids to see the game. Everything had changed. Maybe when she got home, she'd call Billy, tell him the game score, and possibly figure out the score between them. Then again, she should probably let him read about it in the paper.

One man in the row in front of Ellen and a few seats over looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. He looked a little shinier, a touch classier than most of the men in Limestone. He had a great haircut, blue shirt, khaki pants. No red or black. No team logos. When he turned his head, she got a clearer view. It was Avery Spencer. She giggled. F. Scott Fitzgerald had become a local.

At halftime, she tapped Avery on the shoulder. "I heard you're staying in town for a while."

He smiled and reached toward her, offering his hand. "I'm glad to see you, Ellen. I wanted to tell you I'll be in town for a few months at least. You're welcome to visit anytime you'd like. In fact, I'll probably be looking for company since I don't know anyone in Limestone."

"Wow. That's awfully generous of you, considering everything that's happened."

"No, it's the least I could do for someone who appreciates my good fortune more than I do. Take me up on it." He patted her hand and returned to his seat to watch the second half kickoff.

She imagined visiting Eureka—and Avery—some evening, discussing travel and books. It was a possibility, but she was not interested in a relationship with Avery or anyone else until she understood herself better.

At the beginning of the fourth quarter, the sun had finished its dazzling descent but the stadium lights obscured the stars. The Mighty Roadrunners were ahead 44 to 13, and the crowd was already on its feet when the Roadrunners' quarterback, Robert Ryder, ran the ball for fifty-six yards. Ellen rose to her feet, cheering, barely glancing at a child at the end of the aisle, a little girl wearing a yellow sweater.

VITA

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