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“Pet Shark”

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ABSTRACT:
Pet Shark
Christina Flemming

Pet Shark uses humour to negotiate between the comedy that surrounds death and the reality of self-imposed isolation which one is often propelled to confront upon the death of another.

At the outset of the novel, the unspoken despondency of the narrator over never having children with her husband has created a seemingly impenetrable divide in their marriage. When Helen and Harold become the legal guardians of their teenage niece, they must accept the shifting nature of the lives they assumed had been defined by circumstances outside of their control.

Additionally, the novel seeks to confront the conflict between those who believe in the reliability of animal instinct versus those who prefer utilizing logic and science to account for the inexplicable. This struggle is represented by Tri-Pod, a three-legged cat, who unfailingly predicts death in the care home where Helen aids the elderly. Tri-Pod avoids human contact altogether, only cuddling with patients three to four hours before they die. While some view the cat as a saintly comforter, others refuse to believe the cat's ability is anything other than coincidence.

At home, Helen must deal with her husband's newfound obsession with obituary writing. Harold barely says hello to acquaintances but eagerly rushes out to conduct interviews with bereaved family members in order to capture sensory details for his obituary writing. He views the obituary as an artistic medium without realizing he is utilizing the form as a means to explore the external world which he rejects through his reclusiveness.

Chapter One

When our teenage niece arrived at the house, she appeared to be dressed for Halloween. My husband and I had suddenly become the legal guardians of a Goth. Days before, we had been completely shocked when the police called and said Harold's brother, David and his wife, Maureen, were killed on their motorcycle. I had this terrible vision of their leather-clad bodies careening across the highway and skidding over the yellow centre line. What I should have done was thrown my arms around their daughter right in the entryway and whispered something into her ear about everything being alright but she was frightening with her eyes painted black and her chalk-white skin. Or maybe it was my own irrational fear of offering condolences, the idea that I would say something completely inappropriate that stopped me. *Sorry about your parents. Did they approve of you making up your face like a vampire?* There was no telling how long the Gothic phase had been going on because the last time we saw her, she was a child with pastel barrettes and a teddy bear called *Zzz* because, as she told us, that was the last word in the dictionary. Harold argued that *zzz* was certainly not a word but was defeated when his niece skipped away and returned with a battered dictionary. We followed the little finger she had planted on the last definition in the dictionary, *zzz / used to imitate the sound of a person sleeping or snoring*. It was difficult to imagine the little girl with the teddy bear had become the teenager wearing a necklace of metal spikes. Her hair looked like it was styled with egg beaters. She was wearing black boots that went right up to her knees. The soles were about four inches thick and there were metal buckles all the way up the side. When she noticed that I was staring at the terrible things, I had to comment on them.

“Nice boots,” I said. Right away, I realized they weren’t boots that you would call *nice*. It just didn’t work. It was like looking at a tattoo of Satan and calling it pretty. Her eyes slowly travelled down. She momentarily stopped chomping on the wad of gum in her mouth, spit on her finger, and began to scrub at a gray smudge on the outer edge of the boot. When satisfied, she wiped the dirty finger on the front of her short black skirt and looked up.

“That’ll keep ‘em clean,” I heard myself say. She looked at me with the same contempt she probably would have had for a pastel dress.

“Make yourself at home,” I motioned toward the living room. We had inherited most of the gold, orange and brown furniture along with the house but she didn’t know that. She probably thought she was moving onto the studio set for *The Partridge Family*. Then again, the Partridges were before her time.

Since she wasn’t venturing into the house, I decided to overcome my own terror. It was time to act like a reasonable middle-aged woman and offer comfort. Taking a deep breath, I stepped toward her. Lifting my arms slowly, I expected her to step into my hug and maybe even put her head on my shoulder. Instead, she took a step backwards. It was too late to retract the hug, so I moved closer and put my arms awkwardly around her rigid body. It was like hugging that wooden grizzly bear carving outside the SaveEasy. Once my arms were around her, I wasn’t quite sure what to do. The idea of whispering something comforting seemed more than bizarre. I lifted one hand and tapped her back lightly. It was less like the hug of an aunt and more like the impersonal hug of a teacher afraid of touching her student in any sincere way. I released her and tried to keep talking.

“Well. Should I call you Katherine or Kat?”

She looked at me with a sort of smirk. Aunts are supposed to know those kinds of things but we just never saw her.

“Katherine?” I guessed.

She let out an enormous sigh, like an eighteen-wheeler pulling out of a truck stop.

“It’s Kat.” Her tiny face was almost heart-shaped but the scowl took away from its delicacy. She would have resembled a little doll with her porcelain skin and tiny features, except for the outrageous amount of black makeup smeared around her eyes and the plastic skull earrings dangling from her ears. Still unable to bring myself to mention her parents, I led her inside and toward the kitchen.

“Thirsty? I’ve got milk, lemonade. And tea. But you probably don’t drink tea.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I just thought you might not like it.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure what girls your age drink but—”

“—Forget it.”

“You’re welcome to have a cup of tea, I just didn’t think teenage girls—”

“—I drink coffee.” Kat plopped down at the kitchen table. It was strange to imagine such a little body processing caffeine. Nevertheless, if she wanted coffee, I decided I would brew her one good cup of coffee. The special tin I got at the staff party last Christmas was out of reach on the top shelf. I wasn’t sure why I had been saving it. I grabbed a chair and gingerly climbed up. It was one of our wobbly old chairs and I had a vision of my feet thrusting through the seat and my teeth smashing against the counter. Leaning forward, I tightened every muscle in my body hoping not to fall. The tin had

somehow been pushed back out of reach and, being a smidge too short to see it, I used my fingers to feel along the back of the shelf.

“I don’t want any right now,” she said.

“Oh.”

I lowered myself carefully down to the kitchen floor. Instead of putting the kettle on, I poured two glasses of water and joined her at the table. My fear of making an inappropriate comment around someone in mourning was nothing new. As a care home worker, it was part of my job to sit with patients on the brink of death. I never found that part, holding their hands and stroking their hair, as bad as facing the grieving relatives. The patients themselves would charm us over the years. They would tell us stories about their first dates at the community center or the Fords they drove as teenagers. In certain respects, we got to know many of them better than their relatives because we sat and listened to them instead of fussing around the room adjusting pillows, arranging bouquets of flowers or interrogating them about changing their hearing aid batteries. Southwood always felt emptier whenever we lost one of our patients but whether they passed with us or spent the last days in the hospital, I always accidentally wound up saying something to insult the grieving relatives. When Mabel passed just shy of her eighty-fifth birthday, I mistakenly joked about how she hated sitting around with a blanket over her legs because she said it made her feel like an old woman. Only later did I realize that her daughter spent hours crocheting blankets in various colours for Mabel who shoved every new one under the bed with the cane that she also refused to use.

The root of my trouble with grief was this terrible group—the one and only extra-curricular group I joined way back in junior high school—the peer helpers. Of course,

Chester is so small that everybody knows everybody else's business, but it was supposed to be a service for upset people to talk with someone anonymously. *Peer counselling*, they called it. My first session was with a girl named Debby whose father had just died of prostate cancer. We were in junior high and I didn't even know what prostate cancer was. None of the teachers thought Debby should have been back at school so soon after the funeral but her mother insisted it was for the best. Debby was clutching a wad of Kleenex when she came into the room. I was sitting there with a clipboard and a pad of loose-leaf. There would be nothing to write down, it wasn't part of the function of a peer helper, but the clipboard made me feel less nervous. More official. She sat on one of those little orange plastic chairs they have in schools. I thought she was going to say something to start off but she just looked over at me with watery brown eyes. I waited. She waited. I was going to have to start the session. My mind was completely blank. If she started crying, I wouldn't know what to do. We had a peer helper orientation session one Saturday but the only thing I could remember was the free pizza lunch from Big Red's. Kelly had found a piece of hair on her slice of pepperoni. I looked at Debby, desperately willing her to say something but it was clear that she was waiting for me. I suddenly remembered that peer helpers weren't supposed to give advice. We were only supposed to ask questions.

"So, your father's dead?" I blurted. Debby's entire face collapsed. She immediately burst into tears. Instead of running straight out of the room, she sat there crying harder and harder until her face was shiny and wet. Eventually she couldn't breathe, she was gasping for breath between sobs. I remained frozen in the little plastic chair. I'd seen kids crying over lost ice cream scoops and skinned knees before but never

anything so serious as a lost parent. Her unchecked tears fell toward the floor and made tiny splatters on the linoleum. When her back started convulsing, she jumped up and ran out of the room. I watched the door swing shut in slow motion. Afterwards, Mrs. Barrett tried to say it wasn't my fault but I knew it was. Besides, no one tried to stop me when I quit peer helpers the next day. That was my first encounter with death.

Kat and I had been sitting in silence with the water in front of us for a while. I self-consciously took a sip of mine.

"Is the water alright?"

"I don't drink water," she said.

"That's okay."

"It has no taste."

"You're right," I nodded.

She pushed the glass away. I was thinking about recommending those new fruit flavoured waters when she reached into her bag and started rummaging around for something. It was one of those khaki military bags with a red cross stitched on the front.

"Where did you ever get a bag like that?"

"I found it." She continued digging through the clutter inside.

"Salvation Army?"

"Nope. The boys were doing their drills outside the armoury building. I found it then." She smiled to herself and started pulling objects out of the bag in an effort to locate whatever she was digging for. First, a pair of crumpled fishnet stockings were plunked on the table—that wasn't very sanitary but I decided to let it slide. Next, she pulled out a

wallet made of duct tape, and a handful of pennies, dimes and nickels littered with beer bottle caps. I hoped the beer caps were in there when she *found* the bag.

“Here you are!” she spoke into the void producing a package of cigarettes. She quickly extracted one from the little red box and twirled it around her index finger and thumb until it somehow came to rest between her clenched lips. It clearly wasn’t her first time handling a cigarette. I was alarmed by the fact that she smoked but more so by the fact that she wasn’t making any effort to conceal it even though she was far too young. That kind of thing was, technically, against the law. I was about to embark upon a lecture about how smoking kills when I realized, under the circumstances, that would have been a complete disaster.

“Smoking turns your lungs black.”

“I know.” She motioned toward a picture on the front of the cigarette pack. It was a photograph of a lung spotted with black tar patches and the big black letters SMOKING KILLS.

“Do you want to smell like an ashtray? Have wrinkles? Yellow fingers? You’ll look like a prune.”

“Everybody gets wrinkled eventually. Besides, if smoking takes a few years off my life then I’ll be lucky. Less time being old, ugly and useless.”

I was fairly certain she fit me into the old, ugly and useless category. Whatever she thought of me, it was my new goal in life to protect the girl, I couldn’t allow her to smoke under my roof.

“You can’t do that here.”

She was already blowing streams of smoke toward the sofa.

“I’ll go outside.”

“No!” If she went out on the porch, the whole town would be talking about the new girl and how I allowed her to smoke.

“My parents let me smoke.”

My heart skipped a beat. She was probably telling the truth. I could see them hovering over Kat’s cradle in their chaps and bandanas, shoving a cigarette into her mouth in place of a pacifier.

“Slip out the back door, just this one time. Make sure no one sees you!”

I figured she would be forced to quit whenever her pack ran out. Ali would never sell to minors at the Convenience. He would offer Kat one of his forty-seven flavours of soft ice cream instead. Once the door swung shut, I rushed across the kitchen and grabbed a can of room freshener to spray around the backyard once she finished smoking. Heading toward the back door, I noticed her bag was open on the table. There was a little plastic zip-lock bag protruding from underneath the limp flap. Stepping closer, I could clearly see that it read, “Kat’s stash” and was covered in little hand drawn skulls and stars. It was hard to see through the bag with all the scribbles but there was clearly something green inside. There I was fretting about the cigarettes when she actually had drugs in her possession! I didn’t know what to do. If the police were to burst in, we would all be charged with possession. I considered flushing it down the toilet, like in those police chase movies, but if it caused a blockage, we wouldn’t be able to call the plumber. I raced toward Harold’s office.

He was curved over the computer keyboard as usual, with his tummy pushing against the dress shirt that was stretched to its limit. At that moment, there was almost

something comforting about the sight of his bulging belly. It seemed to represent safety; the sedan of stomachs.

“She’s here!” I felt my face flush with panic.

“I realize that,” he replied without looking away from the computer screen.

“I told you to come out when she arrived,” I continued.

He shrugged. A normal person might have felt too embarrassed to face his niece after not attending her parents’ funeral but not Harold. He was just extremely inconsiderate. Nothing else could have explained his behaviour. There really hadn’t been any reason for him to concoct a sore throat before the funeral either. He had never bothered with his brother’s family but it wasn’t as if there had been a dispute of any kind or a bitter family feud. It might have made sense if he suffered from regret after losing touch but that wasn’t it. The day of the service, he had worked in his office as if everything were perfectly normal.

I felt there was no time to waste arguing over his impolite behaviour, under the circumstances.

“We have trouble already. She brought drugs,” I was trying to keep my voice down.

“Thank God,” he said dryly. “How much is she charging?”

“This isn’t a joke. Someone needs to do something.”

“What are you talking about?” He finally glanced up but I still couldn’t detect a hint of concern on his face. As if he were some kind of freewheeling hippie! Neither of us had ever touched that kind of thing in our lives.

“It’s marijuana. In a little bag. In her purse.”

“What are you proposing?” He stretched his arms above his head leisurely like a cat waking from a nap.

“I don’t know. She’s your niece!” I whispered.

“She’s also your niece.” Harold let out a heavy sigh and raised himself from his chair. I felt a resurgence of panic as the back door banged open.

Kat had fastened her bag by the time we returned to the kitchen. She was standing there looking innocent.

“What are you doing?” I blurted.

She shrugged. As far as she knew, we were in the dark about her little secret.

“Hi there,” Harold spoke as if addressing someone with a hearing impediment. His greeting was phoney and loud.

“Hi,” she mumbled.

“Let’s sit down,” I suggested.

Nobody moved. Kat remained standing behind the round kitchen table and Harold and I stood on the other side like statues.

“Or. Let’s stand.” I clasped my hands underneath my chin to keep them from shaking. “There is an important rule...or just a little thing that we should maybe talk about a little bit. Right?” I looked to Harold who was frowning. Kat was staring blankly. I deliberately allowed my eyes to wander toward her bag, thinking she might come clean.

“Look. I’ve been smoking with my mom since I was, like, fifteen, it’s no big deal,” she finally said.

“Smoking up?” I couldn’t keep myself from asking.

“What?” She chuckled.

I looked at Harold who was just standing there like a lump.

“You guys have a patch outside or something?” Kat slowly smiled. “I have nothing against middle-aged hippies, trust me.”

I was mortified. Harold must have sensed that I was thinking about stomping on his foot because he finally said something.

“My wife claims she observed a small bag in your possession.”

I nodded slowly. Kat looked at me with revulsion.

“Well. I have work to do,” Harold announced.

“It was on the table. I just happened to see,” I defended myself. I didn’t want to be the bad guy right away but we couldn’t have enabled her to indulge in what everyone knew to be the gateway drug. Harold was slowly backing out of the kitchen and toward his office when I sidestepped behind him to block his path. Meanwhile, Kat unfastened her bag and reached back inside. She extracted the zip-locked plastic baggie and threw it toward the kitchen table. The little bundle, too light to travel very far, flopped toward the floor. Upon impact, the battered pouch burst open and spilled tiny green stalks all over the kitchen floor. Of course, I never saw marijuana in my life. I’d seen a cannabis calendar in a corner store one time but I really wasn’t sure if the stuff kids rolled into joints looked leafy and green or if it was all mashed up somehow. Harold, looking down, burst out laughing. I crouched for closer inspection.

“Resembles parsley.” I squinted at the greenery.

“Doesn’t it!” Harold continued laughing. I wanted to belt him for treating the situation so lightly. I nudged one of the pieces with the tip of my finger when it started to dawn on me.

“Careful there, you’ll be high as a kite!” Harold continued.

It *was* parsley. I wondered if she was into cooking because why else would a teenage girl carry around a bag of herbs?

“She’s ready to garnish anything on a whim!” Harold continued.

I glanced up at Kat sheepishly and saw that she managed to maintain the same expression of revulsion remarkably well. I felt like a first-class jerk. Here she was in mourning and instead of welcoming her into our home, I was accusing her of doing drugs.

“You like parsley that much?” I had to say something.

“It freshens your breath,” she said.

“A few years back they invented a little something called chewing gum. That also works quite well,” Harold piped up.

“Don’t mind him.” Even though I was frowning, he was looking mighty pleased with himself. I remembered Harold’s own mother gnawing away at her parsley plant, breaking off fairly large sized chunks after her morning and afternoon *nips*. She hadn’t been entirely successful if the parsley eating was intended as breath freshener.

“Good work detective.” Harold gave me a condescending tap on the back before making his exit. I was left standing there with Kat, the parsley on the floor between us.

“Sorry?” I said. Another bad habit of mine was turning statements into questions.

“Where’s my room?” she asked.

I pointed and she turned toward it without a word. Before sweeping up the mess, I scribbled *parsley plant* on the grocery list attached to the fridge.

Harold continued writing as if I wasn't standing in the doorway of his office. He was obviously hoping I would go away. Sometimes I would go away, congratulating myself for having the freedom to make whatever I wanted for supper without having to deal with his request. If he ignored me, he got his least favourite—pasta. This was a hollow type of victory because he never seemed to notice the correlation between the avoidance and the angel hair.

As always, he was typing with one hand, the other resting motionless beside the keyboard. It was fairly incredible to think that he was summing up somebody's life with only one hand. I was still cursing the day he retired from the library and took up writing obituaries for the *Bulletin*.

"Who are you working on?" I asked even though I knew the answer because it would force him to acknowledge me.

"Mrs. Zinck." There was a little smile on his face. He got exhilarated every time he wrote an obituary, like an old man getting his thrills from slowly completing the Sunday crossword but worse because he was piecing together somebody's life. It might have been more understandable if he was the kind of person that went to every community event, had tea at the socials with the ladies and whiskey in the golf club with the men. If he was the kind of person that knew everybody and just wanted to pay them their last respects, it wouldn't have been as strange that he enjoyed writing obituaries so much. The thing was, he was practically a hermit. He didn't care about anyone living.

Only the dead excited him. You would be lucky to get him to say hello to Mavis in the SaveEasy but as soon as her mother died, he rushed over for an interview. He had this theory about wanting to gather details to bring his obituaries to life—smells, tastes and touches.

When Donny Best returned from sea, his youngest daughter, Jillian, never failed to plug her nose and say, "Pheew, daddy's home!" before opening her little arms wide for a big hug.

Hilda Sider's homemade rolls were so light and fluffy that she was almost kidnapped by a soldier during the war who wanted to have the taste in his mouth before going into battle. He felt it would give him something to live for.

Even in her seventies, Rita Horsfall would swing her legs over the side of her son's rowboat and feeling the cool water against her ankles, would splash whoever was rowing the boat.

Worse, Harold subscribed to online obituary sites and read every word. It was frightening to know that there were others out there just like him waiting, with their pens and laptops, for people to die.

"Did you know that the *Inquirer* in Kansas used to have a forty-eight hour rule?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?"

“If you took longer than forty-eight hours writing, they wouldn’t run the obit. Can you imagine?”

“Stop calling them obits! Can’t you just say *obituary* like everybody else?”

“It’s insider talk.”

“Just tell me what you want for supper.”

Chapter Two

It was strange to find my *nursing staff* parking space occupied. When I saw the news truck, I thought maybe they were doing their annual story on nutrition for the elderly. Those young reporters had no idea. It was difficult enough convincing some of our patients to eat anything at all. Mrs. Peterson would say she could only eat egg whites on Monday. By Tuesday she could only eat the yolks. On Wednesday, she'd demand scrambled. When I'd tell her they used the whites *and* the yolks for scrambled, she'd snap and mumble something about not being that far gone. Then there was Harriet who outright refused to eat anything green or orange. We never determined why. Poor Isabelle would actually cry if you served her any food without a blob of ketchup on the plate. Breakfast, lunch or dinner, her empty plate would be smeared with thick red streaks from the food she dragged across it. When I asked why she liked ketchup so much her eyes got impossibly wide and she said, "I can't stand ketchup! My husband puts it on everything though." Of course, her husband hadn't been to Southwood for years. He was too frail to visit on his own and there was nobody to drive him over. We never corrected her because it was probably better that way.

I decided it would be an extreme coincidence if there was actually a fire on the one day I parked in the fire lane. It was the most rebellious move I'd made in years and my heart pounded a bit as I locked my door and ducked across the lot. Ming was out on one of her million daily smoke breaks. Harold once said she resembled a pineapple because of the short spiky hair topping the almost round body. Despite her weight, she did have unusually slim legs. I couldn't help but wonder if her walking outdoors for all

those smoke breaks contributed to that. As far as anyone knew, Ming was the first Asian person to ever live in Chester. She met Randy Higgins when he was in China doing missionary work and came back to marry him. It was a shock because everybody expected Randy to come to his senses and marry his high school sweetheart, Natalie Kelly. It was also a shock because most people in Chester happened to be white and unaccustomed to anyone who wasn't. When my cousin was a little boy, he mortified his poor mother by asking a black tourist if she was Aunt Jemima. She was the first person he'd ever seen with skin that dark in colour.

"Morning Big Ma," I said to Ming. We gave her the nickname because she had a knack for knowing everything about anything going on at Southwood.

"The TV crews are here to capture your morning look." She expelled a stream of smoke from her nostrils. Ming always sprayed a tin of chemical mist on her hair and smeared half a tube of lipstick on before work. I only bothered with makeup on special occasions. It must have been all those years watching the women in Southwood penciling their eyebrows on crooked that put me off, even though there was something admirable about the fact that they were still trying.

"Heard you have a house guest," Ming said.

I was hoping no one had seen Kat out smoking.

"How old?" she asked.

"Seventeen. She's no guest. She's staying. I mean, we're going to take care of her."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"I have no idea. She has cigarettes."

“That’s nothing. You have to be careful these days. Next thing you know, you have another house guest, one in diapers.” She rocked her arms as if cradling an imaginary baby.

“Trust me, there’s none of *that* going on in our house.”

“I didn’t think there was.” She winked. I resented the wink.

“She can’t go back to school right away but I didn’t want to call John and ask for time off.”

“Why not? You’ve been saving vacation days for twenty years.”

“I’m not saving them. It’s just that I have work to do,” I protested.

“Poor girl. What’s she supposed to do all day?” Ming asked sharply.

“Harold’s home.”

“What’s she supposed to do all day?” Ming repeated.

There was commotion as soon as I opened the door. A man wearing a headset was assembling some type of lighting device while another man was balancing a CBF camera on one shoulder.

“Where’s the cat?” a young man shouted. He wore a bright yellow CBF News jacket. I knew right away they were looking for our adopted cat, Tripod. He was originally a three-legged stray. I was never one of those cat lovers ever since my childhood cat, Kooky Murphy, used to lovingly place chewed-up mice on my pillow. He was proud. I was disgusted. Of course, it went without saying that there was something different about Tripod. The poor cat had to shimmy forward with his front paws and hop

along with his one and only back leg. Our boss, John said it was like watching a cat on a pogo stick.

Tripod was severely anti-social. He never went near anyone and we figured it might have had something to do with the way he lost his leg. It could have been a tractor accident. Frank down the road was always running over small animals without realizing it. The strip of yard that ran down to the pond was sometimes littered with the remains of baby snapping turtles with their small shells cracked. The squirrels were much too fast. It was possible that Frank somehow caught Tripod's little leg in the metal jaws of his tractor blades. One of our patient's grandsons even wrote a story about Tripod's missing leg. According to the tale that little Paul wrote for school, Tripod was one of many in a useless litter that farmer Brown decided to throw in the pond. It was just a made-up story with a made-up farmer, but that kind of thing used to happen a lot because people had to get rid of big litters. It was the most terrible noise the kittens would make when their burlap bag was sinking into the water, a high-pitched desperate squealing. In Paul's story, Tripod's leg was tied to a large brick. In order to save his brother and sister kittens, Tripod bit off his own leg and they all swam to freedom. Since no one knew the truth about the cat, little Paul gave him the benefit of the doubt by turning him into a hero. Of course, he was just a cat with three legs who seemed scared of people until the night he cuddled up to Maude.

Most of our women are perpetually cold but Maude was always too hot. Ming used to say it was the flames of Hell reaching for her. All night she would scream "AC, AC," hoping someone would turn up the air conditioning. One night, there wasn't any sound coming from Maude's room. The night nurse padded down the hall in her little

white shoes. Ethel, a night nurse, is the only one who still insists on wearing those little white nurse shoes. She gets them specially ordered from Sears, the rest of us just wear white Reeboks. When Ethel reached Maude's room, she couldn't believe her eyes. Tripod was nestled up in the curve of Maude's limp body. It was the first time he'd even entered a room with a patient in it, let alone cuddle with her in bed. Ethel thought it was touching. It wasn't until the next morning that she realized Maude was dead. The same thing happened with Mrs. Tanner. Then two months later, it was Isabelle Hiltz. Tripod would only cuddle with someone on the verge of death. We couldn't figure out how he knew.

Apparently, someone had tipped off the news crew from the city.

"Is there a Jesus cat here?" the young man in the yellow news jacket shouted.

"Excuse me? What did you just say?" Ming planted her hands on her hips. She was offended by any form of blasphemy. She even boycotted Merle's Bakery after Merle claimed she saw a silhouette of the Virgin Mary in a loaf of pumpernickel. The loaf was displayed in the store window until it got too mouldy.

"I need the Jesus cat—the cat who appears before people die. We're on a tight schedule here," the kid looked straight at Ming before adding, "unless you think someone might be dying later today, we'd love to get some shots of the cat doing its thing."

"Jesus does not kill people," Ming's voice started low and rose to a frightening pitch by the end of the sentence.

"Neither does Tripod," I pointed out. Ming gave me a look.

"Tripod? Three legs? That's great! Great for us, not for the cat," the kid was saying. He flipped his shaggy brown hair off his forehead by flinging his head backwards. Ming maintained her glare.

“Can I be of assistance?” John interrupted. I suspected he might have known about the camera crew in advance because he was wearing his red suspenders. He only broke those out for special occasions.

“I need a smoke,” Ming announced. She pushed past John and headed for the door. From the corner of my eye, I saw a blond reporter in a bright green pantsuit advancing. She looked more like a beauty pageant contestant than someone versed in current events. I quickly realized that she was Marissa Clarke, from the CBF late-night news team. She was so slim in real life that her head looked like a huge globe on the stick-like body.

“Hi. I’m Marissa Clarke, CBF, can I ask you a few questions?” Her expression was mighty serious for someone reporting on a three-legged cat. It took me a few minutes to realize that she was talking to me. I thought John would be taking over.

“Me? Oh sure,” I said after the strange pause.

They extended measuring tape from the camera right to my forehead. I was sure the man holding the stick with the big fuzzy sound-thing would drop it on my head. I hadn’t even washed my hair that morning. Of all days, Harold had some kind of nosebleed and wouldn’t get out of the bathroom. No man in the world gets nosebleeds after age ten except for Harold. Just as I was getting used to the bright light shining on my face, she started the questioning.

“This is an inspirational story. I mean, to think that a cat with only three legs could provide comfort to those passing into the next world.” She extended the microphone toward my mouth. I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t really a question. She waited. I looked down at the foamy microphone.

“And he’s never even had fleas,” I finally said. Marissa Clarke briefly frowned.

“We all know cats can’t talk! But what would Tripod want to say to the viewers at home?”

“Meow?” I managed.

“You’re cute,” Marissa Clarke said with a hearty laugh. It was the expression I hated most. The young nurses were always telling our patients how cute they were. *Oh Harriet, you’re cute*, they would giggle. After eighty-odd years, losing my teeth, my husband, and my freedom, the last thing I would want to hear would be *Oh Helen, you’re cute*.

Chapter Three

There was a time when I imagined myself as a mother. Back then, I was young enough to only think about the romantic parts. Patting the baby's delicate little back in a circle as it burrowed into my neck. Feeding it turnip flavoured mush from a miniature bottle. Holding my baby in the bathroom and tracing tulips in the mirror steam with my fingers while attempting to entice it to say *tulip* or *windmill* or *wooden shoe*. Harold said these imaginings were foolish, it would be completely ridiculous to teach a child to say *wooden shoe* before it learned *hello*. He never seemed to understand that I wasn't completely serious all the time.

I knew the baby would be my little ally. When it got older, we would roll our eyes together at Harold's bad jokes. His lack of humour would become humourous. It wasn't long after I'd conjured all those pictures that we found out it was impossible for us to have children. For a while, I alternated between a state of numbness and one of anger. The day I attempted to face my fears in the SaveEasy by walking past the diaper section, the song *Baby Love* by the Supremes started playing and I burst into tears. Out in the parking lot, I tried to kick a metal cart but ended up catching my pants and tearing a hole in the hem. I bent over with the intention of ripping the hole wide open in frustration but wasn't strong enough to even tear the fabric. That made me cry even harder.

Harold wouldn't talk about it. There was one morning when he got ready for work as usual, gathered his books, opened the door, went down the walk and got into the car before noticing he was only in his sock feet. That was the closest he came to admitting he was upset.

For a while I wrote adoption agencies for pamphlets but when the coloured booklets arrived by mail with smiling families on the front doing things like kicking around soccer balls and wielding hockey sticks, the whole thing seemed even more unrealistic. If parenting was about playing sports, Harold and I would have failed miserably, or at least that's what I told myself in order to feel better. Ironically, the site of our fist kiss became the same location where it was once and for all decided that I would never be a mother. We had been going to the Ocean Spray for breakfast ever since we first started seeing each other because Eileen, the owner, had allowed us to order breakfast even though it was past ten-thirty and she was usually adamant about the cut-off between breakfast and lunch. The first time we kissed, we were sitting in the corner booth underneath the portrait of Irv, a fisherman who had his breakfast of liver and onions at the Ocean Spray every morning. In fact, if we had been too early, Irv would still have been sitting there and our first kiss might have occurred in another booth or not at all. As it was, in our booth, underneath Irv, Harold tried to convince me that eggs and ketchup went well together. I only liked ketchup with onion rings. My coffee was cold and the mug was chipped and faintly discoloured but I sipped it anyway while staring down at the mess on Harold's plate. The yellow yolk and the red ketchup combined to make a strange goop on the white plate. Immediately after I'd placed my coffee cup back on the table, he scooped up a spoonful of the egg and ketchup mess and shoved it into my mouth before I had chance to react. I scrunched up my face while Harold happily took a bite of the mess himself. There was a tiny blob of ketchup on my lower lip and just as suddenly as he'd fed me the spoonful, Harold leaned across and kissed me. At the time, it seemed like the height of romance. After a while, I began to wonder if the whole thing

happened because he couldn't stand seeing ketchup go to waste. Either way, it was in the same booth at the Ocean Spray over a mess of eggs that Harold told me adoption was out of the question. End of story. He always said *end of story* whenever something was final.

As a peace offering, I bought Kat a leafy parsley plant from the SaveEasy and had them tie a thick yellow ribbon around it. I specifically requested yellow, thinking she probably wasn't a pink lover while red was simply a colour associated more with roses than parsley. After knocking lightly on her bedroom door and getting no answer, I knocked a bit harder. Still no answer.

"Kat are you in there?" I asked.

"Yep."

"I have something for you."

There was some kind of strange screeching music coming from inside. The plant was beginning to seem foolish. I contemplated ripping off the yellow bow and stuffing it into my back pocket before she had time to open the door. I tried the knob but the door was locked.

"I'll just leave it out here," I said.

"Yep."

Later that evening, she finally emerged from her room to find me in the kitchen peeling potatoes. She didn't mention the plant and I didn't want to make a fuss. I was peeling baby potatoes in order to make her roast beef dinner with gravy, Yorkshire pudding and roasted potatoes. Normally, I only made roast beef on special occasions but I

wanted to treat Kat. I would have taken more time off work during her first few weeks with us but I figured that as soon as I wasn't there, something drastic would have happened. Something would have happened and everyone would have known that I wasn't there to help because I was taking time off. Besides, Harold was basically retired though he would never admit it. He regarded himself as a librarian turned journalist.

"I'm hungry. Do you have any Mr. Noodle?" Kat pulled open the pantry and scanned its contents.

"Mr. Noodle? I'm making you a nice roast beef dinner!"

"I don't eat roasted animals. It's cruel."

When she put it that way, even I hardly felt like roast beef. She pulled out an old can of chickpeas that had been sitting in the pantry for months.

After googling 'vegetarian dishes,' I armed myself with a strange list of ingredients. Jimmy almost laughed me out of the SaveEasy when I asked about Arctic char. When he caught his breath long enough to speak, he explained,

"We don't receive none of them imported things from the Arctic." He adjusted his orange SaveEasy visor and grinned from underneath it.

"It's not actually from the Arctic, it's just called Arctic char," I lowered my voice to avoid embarrassing him.

"Georgian peaches ain't all from Georgia but with all due respect ma'am, Arctic char sure does come from the Arctic." He chuckled and shook his head, turning back toward a cardboard box he was unpacking and shelving. I wasn't sure about the Georgian peaches not being from Georgia and even less sure about the char.

The SaveEasy was one of the last places that still played the oldies radio station, albeit with interruptions about daily deli specials. I tried listening to the music and finding comfort in the Everly Brothers' assertion that one is the loneliest number but, strangely enough, ever since Kat arrived, I felt somehow lonelier. Maybe three was the loneliest number. Or, more likely, we were all ones living in a group of three. Just as I stretched across the lettuce, reaching for the fresher heads in the back, the mister burst on. The sudden spray of cold water made me jump backward. My hip slammed into Jimmy's cardboard box, knocking it off his dolly and sending cabbage heads flying in all directions across the aisle and toward the front of the store.

"Sorry! Sorry." I dropped to my knees to help round up the rolling cabbage.

"Don't you worry about this cabbage, are you alright?" Jimmy asked. I nodded. It was amazing how jittery I had become. One television appearance and one teenage vegetarian had completely rattled me. I tucked a few heads of cabbage under my arms and went to place them on the shelf but when I popped up, my head slammed into the metal dolly handle. It made a dull thud. The pain instantly hit. Everything seemed a little foggier. If I had been a cartoon character, there would have been stars and mallets circling the crown of my head.

"Careful there Helen. You hit your head," came the voice of the neighbourhood busybody, Betty Smiley. She never failed to delight in the suffering of others. Nor did she falter when it came to stating the obvious. I could have been pinned down underneath a forklift and she would have said, *Careful there Helen. You're stuck*. It only got worse when she became a teacher at the high school. She knew everything about everyone and made sure the people involved knew that she was judging them accordingly. Ming once

asked me who I would exile to a desert island if given the choice. I don't like to think of such things but I decided it was a tie between Betty Smiley and Céline Dion.

The polenta had to be made without Arctic char. The recipe also called for black leaf kale but I wasn't about to ask Jimmy for that. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw Mr. Hicks shuffling around next door. He was probably out inspecting the property line between our houses. The picket fence that ran along the perimeter of our backyard was there when we moved in but Mr. Hicks was convinced that we were moving the fence posts at night and stealing his land. He thought his backyard was getting smaller weekly.

"Hello," I said with a smile. Mr. Hicks looked over with a scowl. It was a hot and sunny September day but, as usual, he was wearing a long brown wool cardigan and sharply creased brown dress pants. Being of the generation that never left home without covering their heads, he wouldn't even dream of leaving the house without his tweed fedora. He stared down at the ground as I headed for my porch. His back was stooped right over and he was constantly grabbing things to steady himself. Still, he managed to fiddle around the yard most evenings and grumble as I passed. If he didn't have anything to complain about, he would invent something. When Harold tried to mow the patch of grass between our driveway and his, Hicks ran out and tore a strip off Harold. It was *his land* and we had no business mowing it. After that, the patch remained untouched. We had to look at the weeds and the overgrown grass framing our yard day after day because Hicks was too stubborn to let Harold mow it.

As my feet hit the front step, I heard screeching music. When I gently placed my grocery bags on the porch, the music stopped. By the time I pulled the door open, the house was completely silent.

“Hello?” I called.

There was no answer. I heard shuffling and the sound of muted whispering.

“Kat?” There was a strange bump before the door banged open then closed.

Someone was sneaking out. I rushed toward the front window and saw Mr. Hicks shaking his boney fist in the air. A teenage boy was running across the lawn next door with his head down and arms flat against his body. He ran like a penguin but something else was strange about him. He was albino. Of course, I knew of the kid. His parents weren't from Chester. They had been driving through one summer when they noticed the *for sale* sign on Arnie's tree lot. The land went back into the woods for acres and Arnie was getting too old for shearing and tagging all the Christmas trees. As it turned out, the people paid Arnie for the lot and moved right into the little cabin he had in the woods for warming himself during the cutting season. When tree buyers started calling about Christmas orders, the new people said they didn't believe in destroying nature for the sake of a holiday. Arnie argued it wasn't nature because the trees were planted and cultivated to be cut down. Of course, no one knows where they got the money to buy the lot or the money for living expenses because neither one of them left the woods again. They just stayed back there, sending the boy to town for groceries once in a while. Of all people to make friends with, she chose the son of the only hermits around. I wondered why she couldn't have made friends with the Johnson's girls. It did seem odd that she didn't have any

friends calling from the city but I assumed their parents might not have had long distance plans. I turned away from the window in time to see Kat sauntering down the hall.

“Company?” I asked.

“Nah.”

“I mean, I saw you had some.”

“Okay.” I expected a plea for forgiveness but she just shrugged.

“Where’s Harold?” He was supposed to stay home with her at all times.

“Dunno.”

“How did you get to know *that* kid? The albino?”

“Albino?”

“He was running across the yard next door, I don’t think he was just out for exercise.”

“Albinos are people too. I’m sure they exercise like everyone else.” She was violently ripping strings of frayed denim from the bottom of her mini-skirt and dropping them on the floor. The skirt seemed a little short and it was getting shorter with every tug. I thought about Ming cradling that imaginary baby.

“You can’t entertain boys in your bedroom while I’m at work.”

“Entertain? What do you think I was doing?” She narrowed her eyes. I knew that teenage girls sometimes went the promiscuous route as a way of dealing with grief. I took a deep breath. It seemed like time for a heart-to-heart. I figured we would laugh about the whole thing later over a bowl of polenta. Maybe even have a glass of that soy milk she requested.

“How are you?” I asked meaningfully.

“What?” She let out one of those loud sighs.

“Whenever you need to talk about what happened, I’m here.”

“Nothing happened!” she practically shouted.

“What? No, I don’t mean with the albino, I mean with everything. If you need to talk. Anytime you feel like it, just feel free to ask.”

“Great. Thanks. Maybe we can cut our wrists open and mix our blood later too.”

She stormed back into her room. I bent down to pick up the denim strings she dropped on the floor but stopped myself. The groceries had to be put away before Harold came and interrogated me about buying things from the organic section. He maintained that organic food was just the same as regular, only more expensive. I was just putting away a box of stone wheat crackers infused with dragon’s breath cheese when he came in and dropped a stack of books on the table. They were all about journalism. He wrote a few obituaries and all of a sudden he thought he was Walter Cronkite. I immediately told him about Kat’s visitor, hoping he would have a solution. He just sat there as if I was supposed to add something much worse. Eventually, he picked up a book and started examining the index. I always wondered why he couldn’t start with the table of contents like everyone else.

“He was albino,” I continued.

“My God. No skin pigmentation. How terrible,” Harold smirked.

“You know about his parents.”

“Ah yes, the Christmas tree hermits. An obituary writer’s dream.”

Chapter Four

The smell of pancakes filled the whole kitchen with the wafting aroma of warmth and happiness.

“Smells disgusting,” Kat announced as she entered the kitchen. As a nightgown, she wore an oversized black t-shirt with a skull surrounded by black roses on it. I wasn’t sure if it was better or worse than the shirt with the headless Barbie doll that she sometimes wore. There was a big fuss recently at the high school because they had passed a new rule to keep kids from wearing hoodies. If they were against hoods, I couldn’t even imagine what they thought of Kat’s collection of clothing. I placed a bottle of pure maple syrup on the kitchen table. She looked at the maple-leaf shaped bottle as if it was filled with antifreeze.

I figured a nice breakfast might cheer her up.

“How about some banana pancakes?”

“Bananas are gross on their own but they’re even worse in baking. They get all squishy. And I don’t eat breakfast.” She plunked herself down on one of our wobbly wooden chairs.

“You have to eat breakfast,” I continued. “Your brain won’t function properly without it.”

She didn’t reply.

Harold shuffled in wearing his ratty maroon housecoat. No matter how many times I gave him a new housecoat for Christmas, he just kept wearing the old one. The collection of navy, grey and paisley housecoats hung in the closet, with the tags still

attached. I even gave him another maroon one, in case it was just the colour he was holding onto, but he packed it away like all the others and continued to wear the piece of junk.

“Pancakes?” I offered. Harold would only eat toast for breakfast unless we went out; but we hadn’t been to a restaurant in years.

“Like Kat, my brain is functioning in a highly proficient manner already. At any rate, I must get to my research. I will take toast however,” he was used to placing orders as if I were a waitress. Even with my hands covered in pancake batter, he expected me to make his toast. There was some book on the table that he couldn’t take his eyes off of. Instead of making conversation, he buried his head in it and occasionally made little noises expressing private wonderment at whatever he was reading. Kat was slumped over with her elbows on the table looking bored. I couldn’t resist asking about the parsley plant which had disappeared from in front of her bedroom door.

“How’s the plant?”

“Same.”

“You can always take off the ribbon. I mean, if you think it’s too bright. I thought maybe yellow would be nice but if you wanted to take it off you could.”

“I did.”

“That’s good.” I wanted to cringe at my own awkwardness but reassured myself with the false notion that it would get easier. Harold continued reading and chuckling. It seemed appropriate to keep some kind of conversation going. That was why I made the mistake of asking Harold what he was reading.

“A collection of obituaries printed in newspapers across America. Quite clever.”

I was astounded. Only the most inconsiderate person would mention obituaries, let alone read them, in front of a girl who had just lost both her parents.

“What’s so clever about it?” Kat asked. She leaned back so that only the two back legs of her chair were touching the floor. It was terrifying. The chair could have easily slipped backwards.

“Can’t you put all four legs on the floor?” I asked. Kat gently lowered her chair legs without even looking in my direction. I felt foolish.

“Here’s a headline from *The New York Times*, “Norman Mailer, Towering Writer with a Matching Ego, Dies at 84,”” he read. Kat didn’t seem amused. I didn’t blame her. Ignoring the lack of interest we were showing, Harold continued.

“Here’s one for your generation, ‘McMuffin Man Dead at 89.’ Herb Peterson came up with the breakfast-on-the-run concept for the McDonald’s Egg McMuffin in 1972 because he loved Eggs Benedict. McDonald’s former president, Ray Kroc, thought a breakfast sandwich was a crazy idea at the time,” Harold glanced up. “Of course, at one juncture in history, people thought the basic sandwich was a startling concept—meat and lettuce between slices of bread.”

“All this coming from a man who refuses to try pizza,” I pointed out.

“They didn’t have pizza when I was young and it should have stayed that way. Who wants to eat sauce and bread? I merely thought the McMuffin Man might have been of interest to a younger audience.”

“I don’t believe in corporations,” Kat said.

I slid a plate of pancakes in front of her, hoping she might take a few bites. She pushed it away with one finger and leaned away from the table.

“You mean, you don’t think they exist? You don’t believe in corporations like you don’t believe in the tooth fairy?” Harold thought he was being funny.

“I mean they destroy natural resources in Third World countries.”

“Third World countries don’t have natural resources, that’s why they’re *Third World* countries,” Harold chuckled. I had to try and salvage the situation.

“Why don’t we adopt a whale?” I blurted. There had been something about that at the back of *Macleans*. They both looked at me with expressions of bewilderment and disgust. I knew the suggestion was even worse than the plant with the yellow ribbon but I just couldn’t seem to stop myself.

“Besides, Eggs Benedict is, like, totally nothing like a greasy egg on a soggy bun wrapped in yellow wax paper with a creepy smiling clown on it,” Kat continued.

“Both are served on English muffin with poached egg and ham, the only defining difference is the hollandaise sauce,” Harold announced. “Mind you, there is much debate over the original origin of Eggs Benedict. For instance, Lemuel Benedict, a retired Wall Street stock broker claimed he created the dish. He was looking for a hangover remedy in the Waldorf Hotel one morning, so he decided to combine buttered toast, poached egg, and bacon with hollandaise. Legend dictates that the maître d’ added the dish to the menu, only he utilized ham rather than bacon and English muffin rather than toast. Of course, I personally believe the dish is nothing more than a variation of a traditional French dish.”

“And he said he wasn’t interested in breakfast.” I attempted a joke but no one seemed to hear.

“I saw you on TV,” Kat said.

I had deliberately made a point of not watching Marissa Clarke because I hated the thought of seeing my bumbling self on television.

“Of course the French variation of Eggs Benedict utilizes salt cod and potatoes.” Harold was never deterred when people stopped listening. In fact, he seemed to gain momentum whenever disinterest struck.

“You kept meowing,” Kat told me. I took a gulp of coffee and burned my tongue when she said that.

“Meowing? I might have meowed the one time but that was all.”

“The French wouldn’t dream of using English muffin,” Harold continued. “That would be like flying a white flag over the breakfast table. They replaced English muffin with triangles of fried bread.”

“It was weird,” Kat said.

“I’m sure it was,” I nodded though it wasn’t clear whether she was referring to the story of the cat or my own television performance.

“On another note, did I not request some toast earlier?” Harold asked.

“I have to get ready for work.” Even though it was true, I grabbed the loaf of bread and rammed two pieces in the toaster.

I dreaded going back to Southwood with my whole heart. It didn’t take long to realize that CBF had edited the piece to show me meowing both at the beginning and the ending of the segment.

“What’s new pussycat?” Ming sang as I approached her desk.

“Ha ha.”

“We have a new patient, Eleanor Wellington, regal old biddy,” Ming said.

“I thought we were full.” The last thing we needed was another set of complaints.

“Her son is some powerful lawyer,” she explained, “John didn’t want to refuse him because he knows the mayor of Halifax or something.”

I rolled my eyes. John was always attempting to climb some kind of social ladder. He seemed to think there was a group of really rich and successful people who were constantly cruising around in convertibles, listening to Billy Joel, wearing fancy sunglasses and drinking Harvey Wallbangers and he wanted to join them.

“Let me tell you one thing, this lawyer is hot. Hotter than a red pepper dipped in red pepper paste,” Ming added.

“Yep,” I said flatly. I began to wonder if I would start acting like Kat.

When I poked my head into Mrs. Wellington’s room, I almost fell over. He was more than a man. He was Richard Gere. Better than Gere because he had brown hair.

“Hello. I’m Richard Wellington,” he rose from a plastic chair and extended his hand.

“Hi. I’m Helen.”

“Listen, I hate to leave Mother but I really must be going. You’ll take care of her?”

His smile was handsome in a way that only smiles on television seemed to be. I really thought those remarkably well preserved middle-aged men, the types with slim waists, muscular arms and perfect teeth, only existed on the sets of soap operas where they were caged like zoo animals and only released for filming.

“We’ll take great care of her.” I felt my cheeks getting hotter as I got a waft of his aftershave. It was remarkable to meet a man under seventy who still used aftershave. The rugged minty smell perfectly complimented the man’s flawless exterior.

“Mother. Do not torture this poor woman. I love you,” Richard said.

There was no sense of recognition on the part of his mother who sat perched on the edge of the bed as if she too were leaving at any moment. I was hoping the woman was hard of hearing, but her silence was clearly a form of protest.

“We will do everything here at Southwood to accommodate you,” I told her.

“My dear, the only accommodation I might request would be my removal from this dreadful little jail.” Her gloved hands clasped her little patent purse tightly. She wore a bright pink suit with a wide-brimmed hat adorned with silk flowers; just like the Queen wears at the tea parties you see on television. The royals are always wearing those thundering great big hats, as big as they can get them. If she was reconciled to staying, she might have already removed the hat.

“I’m sorry. I have to go,” Richard repeated. He gave me a quick smile as he walked out of the room.

I looked at Mrs. Wellington.

“Isn’t my son lovely? Abandoning his mother. Imagine that.” She was looking directly at me but I had no idea how to respond.

“Many of our patients feel—”

“That’s enough. I’m only interested in my own circumstances.” She waved her hand to shoo me from the room.

“If there’s anything—”

“Are you hard of hearing? I thought it was customarily the old woman who was supposed to be hard of hearing.”

Chapter Five

If I had paid any attention to what my mother was doing in the kitchen, I might have known how to cook when Harold and I got married. On one of our very first nights as man and wife, I tried to make spaghetti. It had always been my secret fantasy to wear a beautiful black dress and prepare spaghetti for my husband's dinner only to have him come into the kitchen, sweep me into his arms and carry me off to the bedroom to make love in the candlelight like passionate Italians. I never worked out the logistics of lighting the candles in the bedroom, because everyone knows you shouldn't leave a burning candle unattended, but I donned my black cotton dress and put on a record called *Romantic Hits from the 60's* featuring Frankie Avalon and Ritchie Valens. Even when everybody was listening to the Rolling Stones, I preferred the stuff my mother used to like. It made me feel a bit ashamed, at times, to have such outdated musical tastes but I couldn't help enjoying the kind of music that made me feel happy. By the time Harold returned from work, the record was on its third rotation, my dress was splattered with little dots of boiling spaghetti sauce and the pasta was getting tough. Harold came into the kitchen and silently took one look at me before cautiously advancing toward the stove. He grabbed the pot with the pasta, held it over the sink, and flipped it completely upside down. Nothing budged. The pasta was glued fast to the bottom of the pot. He shook it a few times but there was no sign of movement. He turned to me and said, "If it does this in the pot, what in Lord's name will it do in your stomach?" I shrugged. "And what is that God-awful music?" He insulted my precious Dean Martin. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried. Even after all that, he didn't take me to dinner. Instead, we had

peanut butter sandwiches and cold pickles when I came out of the bathroom. “This is a different dinner,” I remember him saying. After cleaning the kitchen, I inserted my hair rollers and joined him in bed. He took a look at my bumpy head and said, “What the Hell are those?”

When I told Ming how Kat refused to leave her bedroom and come out for dinner, Ming suggested we take her out. Harold acted like I asked for a trip to Paris when I mentioned the possibility of going to a restaurant.

“You never know what goes on inside those kitchens. Cook A never washes his hands and cook B spits in the sauce. Don’t kid yourself, they do that. Just to amuse themselves.” I should have told him that I would *definitely* spit in the sauce if we stayed home, while there was only a fifty-fifty chance with Cook B. Instead, I pleaded on Kat’s behalf.

“She needs to get out.”

“We don’t have piles of money to be taking everybody out to dinner.”

“Everybody? Who’s everybody? Two other people? We don’t have piles of money for those World War Two vixen posters of yours.”

His face dropped. He thought I never noticed those brown cylinders that arrived by mail every so often. Every time one of his little packages came to the house, another buxom brunette in a nurse’s uniform would be plastered on the wall of his office. I always hated their naughty little expressions, smirking at the camera amid bales of hay. Too young and innocent to realize that hay itches when you’re barely dressed.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to,” Harold maintained.

“There was one in the mail today.”

“You opened my mail?”

“Get the car started.”

“Where is it? Was it Barbara Stanwyck?”

“Get the car started and you might find out.”

Kat’s bedroom door was shut tight as usual. There was something stuck to the door with a thumbtack. Getting closer, I realized it was a drawing of a robot made of rectangles and squares with fire coming out of its hands and joints. The robot was wearing a striped tie and boiler hat on top of his boxy silver head. He was towering over some tropical place with palm trees while stomping on all the little figures down below in the jungle. I wondered if it had anything to do with our discussion about Third World countries. It was clear that we wouldn’t be tempting her with a Happy Meal for dinner, no matter how much she needed one. I had once read in *Macleans* about signs like that drawing; they said it was artwork expressing aggression. On television after those school shootings, they always interview the art teachers, not the math teachers. I always said the parents themselves should alert the authorities right away, as soon as they discovered violent warning signs. Of course, I couldn’t do anything. Darren, Buzzy and the others would have a great laugh if I called the station to report a drawing. Not a robber. Not a fire. A robot wearing a tie. They’d probably cruise over in the squad car with a bottle of whiteout. I knew there was also the possibility that I was over-analyzing.

“Kat?” I lightly tapped on the door.

“What?” she asked.

“What’s this?”

“What?”

There was silence. I looked closer to see if there was anything non-threatening about the picture. Maybe there would be a bed of tulips somewhere in the little jungle or a nice waterfall. In the corner of the drawing, the little figures being trampled into the jungle floor by the big robot had X’s for eyes. I took that as a bad sign.

“Did you draw this?”

“No. It was a gift from Beelzebub.”

“Who?” I asked.

“That was nice of him,” Harold’s voice came from over my shoulder. “We’re going to dinner.”

“Have fun,” came the reply from the other side of the door.

“You’re invited,” I said.

“No thanks.”

“Great! We’ll stay home and eat something decent instead.” Harold looked pleased with himself. I nodded my head in the direction of the horrible drawing but he was already shaking his shoulders in order to wiggle out of his coat. In the next instant, the door swung open and Kat emerged. Harold grumbled and thrust his arm back into the cheap beige raincoat. He wore the thing whenever we went out in the evening whether it was raining or not. As if he was detective material.

We drove along in silence. After a while, Harold pressed eject and reinserted one of his polka CD’s, the exact one I had switched off that morning on my way to work. The

accordion blasted the same tune over and over. It was so relentless that I felt like throwing *The Greatest Polka Hits Volume Three* into the ocean. It was hard to believe there were enough polka hits to produce three volumes. For one, how could people tell the difference between songs? And furthermore, it was hard to believe that anyone could listen to the stuff without having consumed enough beer and sausage to drown out half of the noise. Harold only liked those small breakfast sausages, not bratwursts, and he wouldn't drink any kind of alcohol. He always said he didn't like the taste, the effects or the price of liquor.

"I have a headache," Kat strained to speak over the music from her spot in the backseat.

"Me too," I said with relief. Instead of stopping the CD, Harold reached over and turned the volume down a notch. Only one little notch to the left. The volume was hardly altered.

"There you go," he said.

I promptly switched it off myself.

Looking out the window, I wondered what was going through poor Kat's mind. Naturally, she was devastated. I probably wouldn't have even been collected enough to draw a flaming robot if I lost my parents at her age. It was hard letting go of my mother the year before when she died of cancer. She was eighty and I was fifty-six. "I'm ready to leave this island but God won't take me," she used to say. The truth was, I didn't want her to suffer but I could never agree with visitors who kept saying it would be a blessing when she finally went. Easy for them to say. Of course, I couldn't compare my loss to

Kat's on any scale but things might have been easier if I was capable of communicating with her.

I could see, from the corner of my eye, her head tilted against the glass of the backseat window. We were passing wooden houses with chestnut trees on their lawns and wide verandas cluttered with wooden chair swings. In Chester, the houses passed from one generation to another but basically remained the same for years. Each one was a different shape and a different colour. Kat and her parents had lived in one of those new developments in the city where all the houses looked exactly the same, brick with beige siding and minimally landscaped lawns. The residents called the development Birdland because all the streets were named after birds, Cardinal Lane, Blue Jay Drive, Sparrow Avenue, and Robin Road. Even though they lived in the suburbs, her parents were basically cool cats, which differentiated them from us. *They* had a motorcycle. *We* had an outdated station wagon with polka music.

"Not too much like Birdland," I said. Kat didn't seem to hear.

"Birdland also happens to be the name of a famous jazz club in Vienna," Harold said. He drove on while we fell into silence.

It was drizzling outside and the fog crept from over the water. A couple of tourists stood in front of the closed gift shops. They looked up and down the street in confusion. Most people who visited were generally surprised that everything closed up tighter than a drum around six o'clock. The only places that stayed open were the restaurants. There was no fast food in Chester, unless you counted Big Red's Pizza, because the historical society protested too much when there was a proposal to put in a McDonald's. The only

real restaurants in Chester were on the main street. Just like every other small town, the main street was actually called Main Street. The few restaurants were The European Café, Marty's Casual Dining, The Town Tavern and the one fancy place—The Gull's Beak. These places were sandwiched between the gift shops stocked with plastic lobsters and yellow sou'westers.

Harold refused to go to the one fancy place because the only time we went there, he found a plastic bread tag in his lobster sandwich. Instead of apologizing, the waitress informed us that lobsters are scavengers and that we could find almost anything in our sandwiches. Harold asked her if loaves of bread were also scavengers because the tag probably came from the bread, a remark which I didn't find funny at all and which left the waitress with a weary yet unyielding expression on her face. She just handed him the bill.

We couldn't go to Marty's either because Harold had a dispute with Marty over his father's obituary. Marty's sister, Anne, insisted that their father be portrayed as the spunky man he was. Harold wrote all about how everyone knew Clyde cheated when he played cards and got so sore when anyone questioned him that he would jump into his yellow K-car and drive away without even finishing the game. Marty insisted that it was a disgrace to his father's memory to have him remembered as a cheater but Harold refused to make any changes to the obituary. All things considered, the only place we could take Kat for dinner was the tavern. She was underage but they allowed younger people in for dinner.

The trucker hats and the eyes underneath them shifted in our direction as we passed the men slumped over the bar. The air smelled like cigarette smoke and fried food

with a disgusting dash of lemon Pine-Sol. The bingo gals occupied the corner booth and they held their chicken wings in midair, pausing to study us while we crossed the room. They called themselves the bingo gals because they were responsible for instituting Bingo night at the church despite protests from the older members of the congregation who maintained that gambling was a sin.

We slid into a plastic booth with the yellow styrofoam insides bulging through various gashes. The plastic menus were wedged between a bottle of no-name ketchup and a bottle of no-name hot sauce. The walls were decorated with beer coasters and wooden slabs with quotes about food painted on them. Above our table there was something attributed to “Orson Welles,” it read, “My doctor told me to stop having intimate dinners for four. Unless there are three other people.”

“That’s funny,” I said pointing to the sign. Harold stiffly turned and let out one of the bizarre little high-pitched giggles that he does whenever something truly amuses him. It sounded like a ten-year-old girl.

“Ah *Citizen Kane* the greatest film ever made!” Harold rapped his fist on the tabletop. The only thing I remembered from that movie was the actress with the irritating voice and I was sure Kat had probably never heard of it. She seemed to be staring at a blot of water in front of her on the dark wooden table.

“This is Chester!” I tried to distract her from the tiny dot. She started picking at the ketchup label. Fighting my urge to tell her to stop picking at the label, I extracted one of the laminated menus. They had Fish n’ Chips, Clams n’ Chips, Scallops n’ Chips, Wings n’ Chips, Ribs n’ Chips, Nuggets n’ Chips and the cheeseburger platter, which was undoubtedly served with chips. Kat was dangling her menu in the air between her

index finger and thumb as if it were radioactive. She squinted at the menu and I wondered if she wore glasses or needed an eye appointment.

“There are greasy fingerprints all over the menu,” she said.

“Whose wonderful idea was it to go out to dinner?” Harold looked at me. I cleared my throat. A waitress with red frizzy hair and arms as thick as lampposts appeared. She looked annoyed, as if we were inconveniencing her by being there.

“Food?” she asked. Her forehead was dotted with beads of sweat.

“Do you have anything that isn’t fried?” I figured if Kat liked all that vegetarian stuff she surely wouldn’t want anything fried, unless it was eggplant.

“Cheeseburger platter.” Twyla frowned down at us from her pad with the same intensity of a police officer about to issue a ticket. Only in Chester could such an intimidating woman be crowned a beauty queen. It was only three summers ago when they crowned Twyla Queen of the Sea. Granted, she did enter the pageant every year until she won, ten years in total. Everybody knew they gave it to her just because they wanted to get rid of her, all the other contestants were scrawny teenagers with acne, but Twyla was a three hundred pound woman with acne. She could have bench pressed the convertible provided each year for the victory cruise in the parade. She was way too old when she entered the pageant the first time, but nobody thought she would just keep on entering. Harold said she was the fattest woman in history to ever win a beauty pageant. I was convinced that there had to be a country somewhere in the world where bigger women were considered to be more beautiful than smaller ones.

“Is there anything that doesn’t have meat?” Kat asked. I noticed a flicker of amusement play across Twyla’s face.

“You’re not one of them vegetarians are ya?” she asked.

Kat nodded slowly.

“Figures. Ya look like you need some meat on them bones.” Twyla shook her head.

“You look like you’ve got enough meat on yours,” Kat said right back. Twyla slowly raised her head. The sheer bulk of the woman was mind-blowing. I figured Harold had been right all along, she would order the cooks to spit in our food before making her own contribution.

“It’s all muscle.” Twyla actually reached down and grabbed the roll of fat above her waist. “Took me years to develop such definition.” She released her stomach and proceeded to flex her bicep.

“Wow,” Kat said in her deadpan voice.

“Don’t get saucy little lady.” Twyla held up a one finger warning.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Kat said.

“I’ll take the fish n’ chips,” I made a point of interrupting.

Twyla scribbled on her pad.

“I’ll take the cheeseburger without the burger. Extra cheese and extra ketchup,” Kat said.

“You want a bun with cheese and ketchup? The gulls get better scraps from the dumpster,” Twyla laughed.

“In that case, I’ll take the asparagus and cranberry quiche with an arugula salad,” Kat looked more determined than I had ever seen her.

Twyla frowned and spoke as she scribbled, “Bun with extra cheese,” she looked up. “Ketchup’s on the table.”

“There must be something else,” I couldn’t help but interject. Twyla shrugged and looked at Kat who looked at me with her delicate features twisted in annoyance.

“I mean, isn’t there something better you can eat?”

“Like a mountain of fried gunk?”

“Well don’t vegetarians eat fish sometimes?” I knew they did.

Kat shrugged.

“I believe the technical term for one who abstains from eating meat but who eats fish is pescatarian,” Harold announced.

“Okay Alex Trebek.” Twyla rolled her eyes dramatically and fanned herself with her pad. Harold didn’t reply but I could tell he considered it a compliment even though it wasn’t meant as one.

“I guess there isn’t anything else,” I admitted failure. In an attempt to treat Kat by taking her out, I had instead subjected her to ridicule and condemned her to eat bread with cheese. If Harold would have consented to Big Red’s Pizza, she could have at least eaten a better form of cheese and bread. It made me feel old, being married to a man who thought pizza was strange.

Chapter Six

It was strange to see a Pets Pets Pets van parked at the curb in front of our house. Strange for various reasons. We didn't have any pets and we didn't want any pets. Also, there weren't any pet stores in Chester, which meant the truck came from the city. I was relieved to think that they must have had the wrong address because whatever animal was cooped up in the back of a metal delivery truck for an hour and a half on the highway probably wasn't going to be overly congenial when it came out. Come to think of it, I wasn't feeling particularly congenial myself. Kat had been withdrawn and sullen all week and there didn't seem to be a thing I could do about it. It just wasn't easy to entertain a teenager. You couldn't pull out Monopoly and expect cheering. You couldn't suggest going out for ice cream and wait for a flying leap into the backseat of the car. Craft time was out of the question. You couldn't call the mothers of other teenagers and just arrange for everybody to get together in your backyard with plastic shovels. Kat's case was even more sensitive because of all she was going through. I still hadn't really been able to talk to her about anything and it was beginning to look as if we never would have a heart-to-heart. Of course, I would have settled for an answer to *how was school?*

As I pulled into the driveway, two hulky delivery men jumped out of the Pets Pets Pets truck. They wore beige uniforms with cat and dog silhouettes embossed on the shirt pockets.

"Kat?" one asked. He had a large snake tattoo curling around his left forearm and a pierced eyebrow. I tried not to look at it. It's hard not to stare when someone has something sticking off his face. It draws the eye. The other one had a massively muscular

chest. They looked like escaped convicts disguised as pet store employees. Either that or professional wrestlers. There was something vaguely attractive about their beastly masculinity but I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone.

"You don't look like a Kat. I gotta say," the Chest seemed to be studying me. "Some people have names that suit 'em and some don't. We match people with names all day, doing delivery," he scratched the back of his neck before continuing. "You'd be surprised how many don't have names that fit. It's not like the parents can tell by holding up a little bald blob what name's gonna suit it ten years down the road. All babies look the same, except the real ugly ones. To me, I'd say you look more like a Dorothy or a Wanda." My heart dropped. There I was thinking wild thoughts about this muscle-bound ape when he called me a Dorothy. The most plain and generic name imaginable. It wasn't as if I had some glamorous image of myself built-up in the recesses of my mind. I was an average middle-aged brunette with straight brown hair, short legs and rosy skin but nevertheless, I did have a petite frame and nice blue eyes. Surely, I could have done better than Dorothy.

"Will you shut up?" the Eyebrow snapped. "He thinks he's some kinda Shakespeare."

"I'm Helen. Kat's...guardian."

"See! Helen. That makes more sense," the Chest said.

"We have a delivery for you," the Eyebrow ignored his partner. The thing sticking off his face was a small orange and green plastic ball shoved through a metal ring.

I shook my head. It had to be a mistake, there was no Pets Pets Pets order from our place. Obviously, Harold wasn't home or he would have already sent them packing. His favourite animal was steak.

“No. No. We really don't want any form of pet.”

“It's all paid for, including delivery. Just tell us where you want it,” the Eyebrow continued.

“Wait a minute. I don't even know what it is.”

They exchanged glances.

“You don't know what it is?” the orange and green ball rose about three inches. I shook my head and looked at the big truck behind them.

“Don't worry, it's paid.”

“Sign here.” A battered clipboard was thrust toward me.

“Wait a minute. What am I signing for?”

They both laughed heartily. The kind of laughter that came from deep within their bellies. That made me wonder if it was something strange like an ant farm. I was never clear on how they got the ant food into those contraptions.

“We just got the new address or it would have been here sooner, Helen.” They continued laughing. Out of frustration, I grabbed the clipboard and scribbled my signature. I had always secretly wanted a puppy but Harold wouldn't hear of taking in any living thing that cost more than a fern. I figured that Kat could take a puppy for walks. It would get her out of the house after school. Deep down, I must have known that deliverymen didn't laugh about adorable creatures but I was acting on impulse.

“We'll be right in with the tank.”

“Tank?”

“Every shark needs a tank.”

“Shark?” I repeated.

“Don’t worry, he don’t bite.”

“Wait a minute. Pardon me?”

They attempted to push the television flat against the wall but it was old and thick. Practically the width of six or seven of those new flat ones glued together. Then, they slid my coffee table right out of the living room and into the hallway because there wasn’t any other place for it once they carried in the gigantic tank. I realized why they were such strapping guys. That tank was heavy. Other people who owned seven-foot rectangular fish tanks probably had mansions to go along with them, not regular living rooms. They probably wrote screenplays or sold drugs. People working in care facilities, changing diapers and pushing wheelchairs for the elderly, just didn’t go home to feed their pet sharks after work. Other people probably had actual reasons for having sharks, male gigolos could use them as masculine objects to impress their female clients or drug dealers could stick the fingers of those who didn’t pay for their cocaine right into the tank. What reason did I have? I didn’t know how to refuse a teenage girl when her parents had died. Actually, that did seem fairly legitimate when I thought about it.

The tank went right between the sofa and the TV. This was after they shoved the sofa back as far as it would go. One of the delivery guys thrust a piece of paper at me. It was a form that read *Fun facts about your new pet. Dear customer, your new pet is an epaulette shark.* Whatever that meant. The creature was extremely ugly with little beady

eyes and brownish patches all over its body. Its body was about a foot long but the sheet said epaulette sharks could reach fourteen feet in maturity which would be impossible because, as the sheet indicated, that would mean buying an industrial tank or specialized swimming pool for the living room. It didn't mention where people were expected to house these industrial sized tanks. Apparently, Kat had also ordered tank decorations. The men carried in a cardboard box filled with neon green and black rocks for the bottom of the tank, a big red skull and a black castle the size of a microwave with openings for the shark to swim in and out of. The tacky display put me in mind of a reality program I'd watched about this chapel in Los Vegas where they did both wedding ceremonies and tattoos. When they interviewed the owner, he was laughing about how the tattoos were often more permanent than the marriages.

We all stood directly above the tank and stared down at the little shark. Harold's silence was almost as baffling as actually having a shark in the living room.

"It was supposed to be a surprise for mom and dad," Kat told us.

"A surprise?" Harold started. "A surprise is usually something good. Something like, *look Mom and Dad, I got an A on my history assignment.* Or, in your case, *look Mom and Dad, I ripped holes in my pants instead of buying new pants that come with holes ripped right in.* I'll never understand you people. Buying pants with holes already in them. Wanting sharks for pets."

Kat stared down at the tank with her face hidden behind a curtain of stringy black hair. The shark himself was hardly moving. I wondered if he missed the company of the other pet store sharks or if he somehow could sense that he wasn't welcome.

“I didn’t even realize you could get sharks from pet stores,” I admitted.

“I’ll tell you one thing. *I’m* not taking it back,” Harold said.

“What are we going to do with it?” I asked him.

“I don’t care. I’m not going to rent a U-Haul and drive to the city with a shark in the back then go begging for a return like an asshole.”

I’d assumed Harold would high-tail it back to the city with the shark but after he refused, I wondered what the plan would be. It seemed reasonable to keep the shark for Kat’s sake. It was the last thing she had wanted her parents to have and we couldn’t exactly take it away from her without a good reason. On the other hand, the new furniture arrangement or *disarrangement* seemed reason enough to get rid of the thing.

“Where will we put the coffee table?” I looked toward the hallway where the coffee table sat in the shadows. It was the only piece of furniture I really liked because it came from my mother’s house. We used to play snap and crazy eights on the glass tabletop when I was a little girl.

“We’ll need a table in the living room won’t we?” I said hopefully.

“Maybe we can use the wood to build a raft and paddle across the living room to change channels,” Harold said. He made his irritated face, lips scrunched to one side, which he did whenever something bothered him enough. Kat and I looked down at the motionless little shark. He seemed so melancholy. Not that we expected flips or hoop jumping but he wasn’t even going near the castle.

“What does it eat?” There was a soggy bag of something in a separate cardboard box but I wasn’t sure if it was food.

“I am not paying for it to eat scallop dinners while I have meatloaf,” Harold announced.

“Scallop dinner. Where do you come up with these things? Do you think sharks are swimming along in the ocean shelling scallops for supper?”

“What do they eat then? Pork chops?”

“It says here somewhere,” I scanned the sheet, “*pet sharks are not to be treated as garbage disposals—*”

“—What’s the good of them then?” Harold interrupted.

“If you’d let me finish. *Make sure that whatever you feed your shark is recommended for sharks.* Guess that means no dog food,” I paused but no one laughed so I kept reading, “*Recommended foods are flake foods, crab, shrimp, and black worms. One should work to vary the diet as much as possible. Check with the breeder before feeding your shark something new.*”

“Oh sure, yes, I’ll just call the local breeder down the street and tell him I fear my shark’s menu is too limited, he yearns for variety. We don’t want to stifle his creativity.”

“*Do not overfeed because the shark will proceed to dirty up the tank.*”

“Well, at least we won’t be wasting our Metamucil on him. Good God,” Harold went on.

I looked up from the sheet and saw something hit the water. A series of small ripples formed across the surface. Kat suddenly rushed back into her bedroom. I wasn’t sure if it was a tear or just my imagination.

Our first morning with a shark in the living room, I stumbled into the kitchen in a sleepy haze. The house had a new smell, an unpleasant mix of wet wool, mashed turnip and pet store. I decided against adding faux floral to the arrangement by using room spray. Harold was sitting at the table looking indignant. You could tell whenever he was upset because he sat with perfect posture as if waiting for the world to acknowledge him. Any acknowledgment, however slight, would enable his ranting. I figured he had probably decided that the shark had to go back—either back to the pet store or back to the ocean though I wasn't sure the little guy could handle himself in the wild if we were to drive him down to the docks and dump him off the wharf. There were seagulls down there that seemed tougher than the tiny shark who hardly moved.

“Do you know what I was forced to eat for breakfast?” Harold began.

“Frozen black worms?”

He was looking at me with a gravely serious expression on his face and, just for a minute, I pictured him buttering up the frying pan and sautéing the shark with scrambled egg and green pepper.

“What did you have for breakfast?” We had strawberry jam in the fridge and Ben's bread on the counter so I couldn't imagine why he wouldn't have had the same thing he ate every other morning. Of course, I didn't smell toast like usual but I'd assumed that was because of the new aroma of our living room.

“Raw bread.”

“Raw bread? There's no such thing. That would be dough.”

The remains of his unsatisfactory breakfast were abandoned in the middle of the table.

“*You* didn’t take care of the toaster problem,” he continued.

“So you had bread with jam instead of toast and jam, big deal.”

“Un-toasted toast is nothing more than raw bread.” He sat there with the maroon housecoat pulled tightly around his throat. I sat down and wondered what kind of man actually got so upset over not having toast that he couldn’t bring himself to eat bread. The bread was still perfectly good. It was the same loaf of bread he would have happily devoured if it had been toasted. I looked over at the forsaken loaf on the counter. Perspective. It was all a matter of perspective. Some people could handle the upset and just eat the bread but there were others who had to have toast or nothing at all. I wasn’t sure which was worse—being the kind of person who easily settled or the kind who didn’t. Settling didn’t seem so bad because you still got to enjoy *something* but I didn’t want to think of myself as the kind of person who was easily pleased with just about anything that came my way. Then again, it was a perfectly normal loaf of bread and what was wrong with that? The strawberry jam would taste just as good. Harold didn’t say a word as I stood and went toward the counter. I picked up the loaf of bread and held it in my hands. Maybe those who chose to suffer were more righteous in a way. I couldn’t decide. I stood there frozen over the counter with the bread in my hands. What was wrong with me? It wasn’t philosophy, it was pastry! I looked down at the bright plastic wrapper figuring that Harold was actually turning me into a lunatic. I was never the kind of person who thought about such useless things. It struck me that I should just make biscuits and be done with it. Jam and biscuits would be good, I thought. I lowered the loaf then hoisted it back up again at the last second. I didn’t want to make biscuits.

“What are you doing?” Kat’s skeptical voice came from behind me.

“Just deciding what to have for breakfast.”

“Is it that difficult?”

“Ask him,” I said.

I decided some cherry Danishes from the QuickWay would solve Harold’s breakfast problem until we got the toaster fixed. Kat liked sweets even though she wouldn’t admit it. I knew because Harold had been ranting about the persistent disappearance of the lemon Danishes for weeks.

Kat must have been in an unusually social mood because when I snatched my house key from its usual spot on the counter, she demanded to know where I was going.

“Out for Danishes. Would you be interested in taking a walk?” I semi-whispered the invitation because part of me wanted Harold to think I didn’t care about the whole breakfast thing and was leaving him to fend for himself.

“Why are you whispering about Danishes?” Kat said loudly enough for Harold and anyone within a mile radius to hear.

“Maybe they’ll have some frozen shrimp for the shark.” I changed the subject, crossing the room to peer down into the tank.

“*The shark?* He needs a name,” she said.

“You know, when I first met Harold, he had two goldfish and when I asked their names he said, *I didn’t bother giving them titles, they’re fish one and fish two.*”

“I can hear you and I stand behind my decision not to bestow names upon the same creatures I eventually flushed down the toilet,” Harold said from the kitchen.

“What are you naming the shark then?” I asked her. She shrugged. It may have been completely ridiculous to have a shark tank blocking the television, but at least it gave us something to talk about.

“How about Tyrone?” Kat suggested as we walked toward the store. I could imagine a bulldog named Tyrone or a rattlesnake but the docile little shark just didn’t strike me as a Tyrone. I wondered if they made those plastic warning signs for pet sharks, *Beware of Shark* instead of *Beware of Dog*. Not that I would have put one of those up in the window.

“Well, I suppose Tyrone would be okay.” I was determined not to argue, no matter what she said. The goal was becoming friends.

“Nah.” She fiercely kicked a stray rock from the side of the road, sending it spiralling through the air toward Mrs. Murphy’s flower beds. Of course, Mrs. Murphy happened to be outside putting around with her gardening gloves on. She straightened up when she saw us but her eyes flitted toward the descending rock. Her visor-swathed head of white hair swung around just in time to catch the rock smash onto the red pointy hat of her garden gnome.

“Sorry!” I called out.

“My gnome!”

“It was an accident!” I was mortified.

“That girl kicked a rock at my gnome!” Mrs. Murphy bent down to examine the surface damage.

“Oops,” Kat said with a smile.

“She could have knocked off his nose!” Mrs. Murphy continued to squint down at the bearded dwarf.

“Maybe you should apologize,” I whispered.

“I wasn’t aiming. If it’s that delicate, maybe she shouldn’t put it outside.” Kat rolled her eyes.

“She says she’s sorry!” I yelled.

“Sorry wouldn’t have fixed a broken nose,” Mrs. Murphy grumbled.

“Have a nice morning,” I said with a wave.

“What about Leon?” Kat casually continued with the shark names.

“Leon? Sure. Why not?” I didn’t think it really mattered what we named him because it wasn’t as if sharks responded to their names like dogs. You wouldn’t hover over the tank calling, ‘Here boy, come on Leon!’ and have the shark swim over with his tail wagging. Sharks didn’t have ears.

“Nah,” she said after a while. I wondered if she was going to keep making suggestions until she found something I objected to.

“Mussolini?” she tried.

“Sure.”

“Nah.”

We fell into silence. Her face looked even paler in the natural light and her eye makeup even darker. They weren’t what you’d call smoky eyes, it was like her eyes were surrounded by black holes. My mother thought it was outrageous when I, about her age, appeared for dinner with a light dusting of frosted pink on my eyelids. She probably would have phoned an exorcist if I had appeared looking like Kat.

Of course, it was a different world when I grew up. We didn't have the internet or cell phones. My mother used an egg timer to make sure I didn't waste too much time on the regular phone. It was so embarrassing whenever a boy would call and the timer would go off. They'd always say *what's that sound?* and I would say it was the doorbell and hang up right away. My best friend Mavis always had more dates than I did but that was only because I always had to hang up before anyone got up the nerve to ask me out.

I remember Mavis saying she wanted movie-love, like in her favourite Audrey Hepburn movie, *Two for the Road*. The movie ends with Audrey Hepburn in the water with her husband. He floats toward her and says "Bitch!" then she replies "Bastard!" before the two start kissing. We saw it in the theatre and afterwards people were denouncing the movie left and right because of the swearing. They thought the language was just terrible! But Mavis was in love with the idea of being in love and being able to express it through the use of profanity. Even then I didn't have too much faith in finding Albert Finney, reconciling a tumultuous marriage with him, and then heading for the French border.

"Are you still worried about that stupid little troll?" Kat asked, pulling open the QuickWay door. It took me a minute to realize she was talking about the garden gnome.

"Troll?" Oh! No. I was just thinking about how my mother used to time me on the telephone with an egg timer."

Kat's head flung backward until her eyes rested on the ceiling.

"Gross," she said.

I followed her gaze and noticed a dry brown stain the shape of a cloud, the kind that results from a leaky roof. In all my Danish runs for Harold, I had never glanced above my head.

“I need cigarettes,” Kat tried to make the statement sound casual as if she were mentioning her need for yellow highlighters or some type of necessary high school supply. I pretended not to hear and smiled at Peter Wolfe who was leaving the store with a bag of milk and a dirty magazine.

“Morning ladies,” his hands were full so he waved the magazine in our direction. There was a naked woman on the front cover with her eyes rolled back in her head as if she were really enjoying herself and there was an orange price tag slapped strategically over the space between her legs. And we thought it was wild when Audrey Hepburn said *bastard*.

“Perv,” Kat said under her breath. We heard the familiar drone of the slushie machines and saw the Albino Kid sipping some type of berry slushie out of a giant pink plastic straw. His entire mouth was dyed blue which was striking against his pure white skin.

“Did you ladies know that they translate magazines into Braille? Guess what magazine happens to be the bestseller?”

I was going to guess *National Geographic* but he didn't pause long enough.

“*Playboy*,” his almost nonexistent eyebrows shot up, apparently, for emphasis.

“Yeah, and I heard Helen Keller is going to be Miss October through extensive digital re-mastering,” Kat said.

“Well! We better get to our shopping,” I had to interrupt before Ali heard the terrible conversation they were having.

“What are you ladies shopping for?” the Albino Kid was clearly desperate to talk.

“Cigarettes,” Kat said with a smirk.

“Danishes,” I corrected her.

“Ah the Danish, a political pastry,” the Kid continued.

“Enjoy that slushie!” I stepped toward the bakery aisle but Kat didn’t follow.

“Did you know when the Muslims were offended by those Danish cartoons making a mockery of Mahomet, they officially re-named cherry Danishes ‘the rose of Mahomet’ in all Muslim bakeries in the Middle East. They do sort of look like roses, don’t they? With the red centers and the puffy pastry edges expanding like delicate petals.”

Kat frowned.

“Is that true?” I asked.

“Sure. Just like when the Americans re-named french fries *freedom fries* because the French refused to fight in Iraq,” the Kid went on.

“Yeah, like, one fry place in the entire country probably did that and then CNN reported it like it was a unanimous decision made by every restaurant with a fryer in the United States.” Kat crossed her arms.

“What about un-toasted toast?” I realized immediately that my comment sounded completely crazy because neither one of them knew what I was talking about.

“What?” Kat demanded.

“Sorry,” I waved my hand and bolted for the bakery aisle.

“Ever notice how grape flavour tastes nothing like an actual grape?” I heard the Kid ask. His remarks were all strange but some of them actually made sense.

The wire racks laden with baked goods were at the back of the store next to the fishing supplies. It never seemed particularly appealing to see fishing lures with little diagrams on properly using worms for bait right next to the frosted cupcakes and oatmeal cookies. Maybe it was a clever move intended to get people to buy snacks for their fishing trips but I couldn't exactly see a man in a boat, putting aside his line, holding up a dainty cupcake and taking a small bite but inevitably winding up with pink frosting all over his beard. Walking toward the cash, I glanced down at the calorie chart. All the sweets came from Lorrie Dresher's bakery and I wondered how she figured the calorie content of each baked good. As far as I knew, it wasn't as if she had any special machinery in her bakery kitchen or some scientific lab where she took samples to determine caloric content. My mother always used to laugh about calories and say there was no such thing when she was growing up. I never did understand who invented them and how. The idea made more sense for things like Danishes with their sickly man-made filling but how did they know how many calories were in something natural like an apple? Newton invented gravity but who invented calories? The Albino Kid would surely have a theory but I didn't want to hear it.

“Don't forget those cigarettes you wanted,” Kat piped up. That was when I finally realized why Kat had joined me in the first place. It was all a scheme for cigarettes. I felt like a fool for assuming we were becoming friends. It took me a while to understand that adults don't make friends with teenagers. Not unless the adults are extremely immature individuals, like those people with long white ponytails who somehow forget they've

aged and continue to go surfing, play guitar and call people *dude*. The kind of people who can't resist putting wheat in their mouths in open fields, who walk barefoot even at the risk of stepping in a cow patty.

I approached the cash but hesitated to put my package down because Ali was leaning against the counter and looking off into space. He claimed to enter meditative states for relaxation between customers but I always figured he was probably really just thinking about things. Meditation was always too difficult for me. I tried one of those yoga videos but whenever the instructor said, 'clear your mind, just breathe. Only focus on breathing,' I made mental lists of everything I had to do. Scrub bathtub, check car oil, open mail, chicken for dinner? Ali had to be thinking about something during the nirvana between selling lottery tickets and diet Coke.

"Don't forget your Players Light in the blue box," Kat repeated.

"I've never smoked a cigarette in my life. Except for one time but—"

"—Let me guess, you didn't inhale?"

I felt the urge to lie in order to appear less predictable but I nodded anyway. It was better to tell the truth, even if it did seem boring. I was never able to lie. The one time Mavis and I skipped school for the afternoon and went to the beach, my mother asked about the sand in our shoes and I just came right out and told her we went to the beach instead of school that afternoon.

"Have you ever done anything wild?" Kat went on. I figured the story about the beach didn't exactly classify, especially in light of my confession.

"Why don't you live a little? What do you *do* for fun?" I looked down at the rows of chocolate bars in their shiny packages. Not since childhood had I bought one. Years of

reading articles on the evils of cellulite prevented me from enjoying any form of candy. I was in decent shape for my age and had never felt the need to diet, yet I still feared Coffee Crisp and Big Turk.

“Fun? Once you get married, you don’t really think about fun. You think about retirement, what to make for dinner and whether to get unscented or lemon detergent,” I couldn’t believe what I was saying. There existed a cynical housewife inside of me that I hadn’t recognized before. Meanwhile, Ali had snapped out of his meditative state.

“Hello, how are you this morning?”

“Good. You?” I smiled.

“Don’t let her forget her smokes.” Kat nodded her head up and down as if she could hypnotize everyone else into nodding along. Ali looked at me but I shook my head from side to side. After a few moments of standing there with the change getting sweatier in my hand, I realized that Ali wasn’t ringing me through because he was waiting for an introduction.

“I’m sorry. Ali, this is Katherine. Katherine, this is Ali.”

“Kat.” Her testy voice was back now that all hope on the cigarette front seemed lost.

“How do you like it here?” Ali asked.

Kat gave him a shrug. She was staring over his shoulder at the rainbow rows of cigarette boxes. Silver, blue, red and black.

“Small place isn’t it?” Ali tried. He had been all over the world because his father was a famous artist from Lebanon who made carvings so minute they fit onto the surface of a piece of rice and were only discernable by microscope. According to Ali, rice

carving originated in Albania when idolatry became illegal because people still wanted sacred symbols to worship but if they were surprised by a raid, the carvings were undetectable because of their size. Ali's father began the practise for similar reasons. Ali's grandfather thought art was a sign of homosexuality and forbid artistic production in his home but the rice carving was easily hidden under Ali's father's math and science books. I considered telling Kat but feared an unenthusiastic response in front of Ali. The only sound was the humming slushie machine. Kat looked toward it. A large sticker on the side read, *gourmet ice*.

"Gourmet ice? What do you do, freeze Perrier?" she said. Ali looked toward the machines as if noticing the sticker for the first time himself. Slowly, he broke out into a radiant smile. He seemed to like Kat.

"How did you guess?"

"How much for universe detonation?" she asked. Ali scratched the back of his head.

"That's one of the expensive buggers." I had no idea what they were talking about until Ali looked up toward a shelf laden with fireworks and flares in a variety of sizes. There were even little black explosives shaped like bombs.

"Universe detonation?" I was in disbelief. In all the years I'd been making Danish runs or stopping for coffee cream, I had never noticed the brown ceiling or *universe detonation*.

"Puts on a good show, shoots straight up in the air like a fountain," Ali explained.

"Aren't those dangerous?" I was pretty sure they were illegal in the United States.

“You can only light it in an open area.” Kat looked at me expectantly as if we were supposed to share the same level of excitement.

“Should we get some?” she asked.

Not that I was changing my mind but the cigarettes were seeming less harmless by the minute. I pointed to the sign which dictated, in big red letters, that the purchase of all fireworks was strictly prohibited for those under the age of eighteen. She shrugged and headed for the door before I could move. There was something oddly comforting about the jingling bell that always signalled my exit.

Chapter Seven

Ming was fanning herself with the *National Enquirer* when I entered Southwood. I never quite understood how Ming reconciled her faith with tabloid articles about virgin children spontaneously giving birth but it seemed better not to enquire.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

She tilted her head in the direction of Mrs. Wellington’s room just as Richard was disappearing through the doorway. That explained the candy apple Mercedes in our yard of pickup trucks and rusty Fords.

“You best check up on Mr. Hunk and momzilla,” Ming said.

“*Momzilla?*”

“My kids call me worse.”

“Like what?”

“The blob.”

“That’s not very nice.” It was awkward whenever Ming made jokes referring to her weight because I never knew whether to dispute them or laugh at them.

“You ever see that movie? *The Blob?*” she asked. I shook my head.

“The blob is created when a meteor crashes to earth. It’s a huge bubble of jelly that eats humans.”

“Revenge of the condiments.” I let out a nervous laugh.

“You better get to work.” Ming’s expression said I wasn’t funny. I did realize that.

It took determination not to notice how attractive Richard was in his navy suit and crisp white dress shirt with his pale yellow and navy striped silk tie and patent dress shoes, but I wasn't about to fall for a shiny presentation. He was just an ordinary lawyer from the city who happened to be wildly successful and attractive with a beautiful convertible, a firm handshake and million dollar smile but that wasn't anything special. I assumed that he probably had friends in New York, Paris, London and Tokyo who met him at airports in their own Mercedes convertibles and took him out for gin but he was in my territory, meaning I didn't have to be intimidated. I thought it would be better to stop worrying about people who seemed to be living *the life* while I was just living life.

"Do you know if there is a vending machine in the building?" Richard asked. He was used to having every convenience at his fingertips but it didn't work that way in Chester. No sir, we didn't have vending machines in every nook and cranny. We hardly had any vending machines in the entire town.

"There's a vending machine outside the Esso and another one in the curling rink but that's about it." I was thinking out loud. How stupid I was, he didn't ask for a map of town.

They were occupying the only two chairs in the room, so I lowered myself onto the edge of the bed.

"It's just that Mother prefers bottled water. I can drop some off later but I thought if you had a vending machine. But, that's fine, I'll bring her some next time."

"We should. We should have one. There just aren't enough vending machines in this town." It was the most hickish thing I could have said. If Kat was around, she would have made a dry and sarcastic comment at my expense. Richard certainly wouldn't have

impressed her. If only there had been a way to temporarily adopt her nonchalance at critical moments.

“The water they give us comes from a well. I refuse to drink well water like an animal,” Mrs. Wellington announced.

She wore a startlingly bright green suit consisting of a short jacket with matching, perfectly creased, pants. As usual, she smelled like a perfume department. Though we had a ‘no scent’ policy, to protect those with allergies, she ignored it completely. She had already received several warnings. If patients didn’t heed our warnings we couldn’t exactly punish them. The only thing we could take away, food and pills being essential, was the right to spend time in the social room but Mrs. Wellington never went near the social room anyway. She leaned over and reached for a white alligator purse sitting on the table beside her bed.

“Mother, stop that!”

“No. I will give you the money for the water,” she said firmly.

“Please. Mother, *please*. That isn’t necessary.”

“A lot of things aren’t necessary but that doesn’t stop you from doing them,” she snapped. The purse, with its reptile skin, was bulky and expensive looking but it matched her ensemble perfectly. Not that she was going anywhere. Many of the others preferred to spend their days in housecoats but Mrs. Wellington always dressed and dressed immaculately. She never went without ‘putting her face on,’ which took about a half hour and included the slow application of every type of makeup ever invented. The process finally concluded with, at least, five coats of bright fuchsia lipstick. There was also a strictly regimented skincare routine, specific cream for day which was eventually

replaced by specific cream for night. The model pictured on the box of age-defying wrinkle cream was probably nineteen, and had certainly never discovered a wrinkle, let alone a crease on her face, but Mrs. Wellington didn't crack a smile the day I pointed that out. We usually called all our patients by their first names but Mrs. Wellington was Mrs. Wellington. She thrust money at Richard who quickly shoved it into his pocket. He looked up at me.

“How has Mother been treating you?”

“It takes a while to adjust.”

“Why would one have any desire to *adjust* to an institution to which she clearly does not belong? I can live alone and you know it.” She looked straight at Richard. He slowly massaged his forehead in a circular motion. I looked at the floor. There was a light dusting of beige beauty powder in front of the standing mirror. For some reason, the miniature grains of face powder reminded me of the sands of time. You can't help making bizarre associations when your husband writes obituaries.

“You can't be alone,” Richard slowly said.

“Show her the photograph.” Mrs. Wellington pointed toward a black and white picture in a fancy pewter frame. I jumped at the chance to fulfil at least one of her commands. As I got closer, I saw it was a picture of Richard, he was wearing a tuxedo and posing beside what looked like a supermodel in a wedding dress. The tall blond emaciated figure also had a million dollar smile and what looked like a million dollar dress to go with it.

“Not again! I can't count how many times I've thrown that in the garbage. Somehow, she fishes it out every time and it reappears on her bureau.”

“In my day, people didn’t go running off the minute they had a problem. When we said *till death do us part* we said it for a reason.”

“Guess murder was the only way out,” I smiled. The joke failed to lighten the mood.

“Samantha was a beautiful woman,” Mrs. Wellington said. Richard lunged toward the photograph but she seized it with her shaky hands and cradled it against her chest.

“I don’t care to hear that name,” Richard said.

“In my day, when we made a vow to honour and to cherish we meant it. *Family* meant something. I’ll tell you another thing we didn’t do. We didn’t shove our mothers away in these places when they aged, we took care of them. Not that I couldn’t be independent if you let me.”

Richard turned and stood facing the wall.

“Well, I should be going. Unless there’s something else I can do,” my voice was barely a whisper. The goal was getting out of that room as fast as possible.

“Look, I apologize,” Richard turned around and looked at me earnestly. It was unnerving the way he looked right into my eyes.

“I’m the one you should be apologizing to,” Mrs. Wellington snapped.

“We’ll take care of her for you,” I whispered.

“It would be preferable if you refrained from speaking as if I were absent from the room,” Mrs. Wellington said in a loud voice.

“She must actually be wearing her hearing aid for once,” Richard said.

“Don’t you worry, I hear enough,” she snapped again.

“Sorry,” he mouthed. It was hard not to feel bad for a man with such a cruel mother. Not that I felt sorry enough to be impressed by his perfect physique or that smile. Not at all. I decided to be cool as a kumquat on our next encounter. I told myself that his square jaw wasn’t that charming. It was only genetics, not something he could take credit for.

Kat was thinking about naming the shark Elroy. It was too gentle sounding for a regular shark, I couldn’t have imagined Spielberg calling his movie *Elroy* instead of *Jaws*, but the name seemed to suit our timid little guy. The shark was starting to annoy me a bit. After all, it was a bit demoralizing that he got shrimp for dinner and I had reheated casserole. I looked down at Elroy and sighed. He hadn’t even finished his frozen shrimp before settling down between the rocks in his tank. I watched the mess of food floating on the surface of the water and thought about real sharks in the wild who were fending for themselves; they would have jumped at the chance to have some frozen shrimp come along.

“Spoiled,” I said to him. We still hadn’t figured out a proper place to put the television set, so it was still behind the tank, or in front of the tank, depending on which side you were standing on. When I crouched down, I could see what the underwater version of *Wheel of Fortune* would have been like. It wasn’t that much of a stretch because the dress Vanna wore on that particular episode was remarkably mermaid-like. I heard the rattle of the doorknob and the creak of the door opening. We tried locking it as much as possible but usually forgot until it was time to turn off the lights for the night. The Albino Boy proceeded to enter without knocking.

“Watching a little Wheel of Torture I see. Did you know that Vanna White made the *Guinness Book of World Records*? You know why? She’s television’s most frequent clapper. Can you believe that? She claps something like 720 times each show, which totals something like 30,000 times per season.”

He was in Kat’s room before I could even respond. I still didn’t like the idea of allowing a boy in her room, but it wasn’t as if she was dating the Albino. She actually seemed to find him slightly irritating and I was wondering if they were only friends because he was available and Kat needed *someone* to spend time with. It would have been nice to have asked her about it but she would never talk to me. I usually got one of five responses whenever we tried communicating. *Yes. No. Dunno. Whatever. I guess.* Usually, *I guess* meant *maybe* but it could also mean *I’m not sure*. It was hard to tell sometimes.

Chapter Eight

Harold never started a conversation like a normal person. He would announce something monumental right out of the blue. When he decided to write obituaries, he told me one morning to let him know if anyone died just as I was handing over his cup of coffee. We were testing the new toaster, mainly because I didn't want to think about what vegetarian offering I could produce for dinner, when he came out with one of his declarations.

"I want a tombstone for my birthday."

"This *is* your birthday present." I held up the toaster and slid the plastic tube off the power cord.

"I want to choose the stone and compose the inscription myself."

He wasn't joking. I was still hoping he was but it seemed fairly clear that he wasn't.

"You're only turning sixty! This isn't the Dark Ages, people live a lot longer now."

"I'll take care of it, I just wanted you to know so you wouldn't have to get me anything." He headed for his office.

"Wait a minute!" I abandoned the toaster in its Styrofoam casing and chased him down the hall. He was already firmly planted in his office chair by the time I reached the office. I let out a horrified groan as I peered over his shoulder and watched him Google *personalize your own tombstone*. He clicked on a link.

“What’s that?” I pointed to a flashing little box that popped up in the middle of the screen.

“Nothing, just junk.”

“What does it say? *Tombstone taillight?*” I squinted over his shoulder. The notion that I was being particularly childish delighted me. It was such a crazed situation in the first place.

“Helen, for goodness sake. That’s enough,” he protested as I reached over his shoulder. Quickly seizing the mouse, I clicked on the blinking box. His precious old clunky computer opened to a new page surprisingly fast. There was a photo of a brown highly polished casket with what looked like the taillight of a motorcycle attached to the end.

“That’s enough. I’ll have every computer virus going.” His protest was weak because it was obvious that he was also curious from the way he leaned forward in his chair. The website was an online store advertising a specialized light you affixed right onto your coffin for the “*low, low price*” of *\$119.00. Plus shipping and handling.*” However, if you ordered the special formula casket polish for “*only \$29.99,*” shipping and handling was free. According to the website, you would have the light for your coffin in two to three business days.

“Two to three business days? They make it sound like people are going to be surfing the internet on their deathbeds and ordering these things! And who would actually order one for a family member?” I couldn’t imagine anyone taking comfort in the fact that their decomposing body wouldn’t be without light.

“This is something!” Harold said. I leaned closer and read the big font.

“Make sure you get noticed, noticed by who?”

“Hi-intensity LED,” Harold chuckled.

“But why would you want a light on your casket?”

“You’re going into the ground. Miners wear lights when they go into the ground,” he said.

“Yes, but they’re wearing lights in order to find their way back out of the ground!” It was outrageous.

“I suppose when the battery runs out, it’s lights out.” Harold made a putt sound to indicate lights going out. He had the kind of exhilarated smile he only got whenever he learned something obscure.

“You’re not serious about this tombstone thing are you?” It seemed better to get back to the issue at hand.

“All I ask is that you order my coffin light three business days before my funeral.”

“Be quiet!” I couldn’t help but smile at the foolishness of the entire situation. It was the most spirited conversation we’d had in years and we were talking about tombstones. There was no justice in the world.

“If there’s one thing I learned from writing obituaries, it’s that you should always be prepared.”

“It’s good to be prepared for inclement weather, or a computer virus or Christmas dinner. Not for death! Not at sixty,” I argued.

The fun part was over. We were back to being ourselves.

“I’m going to order a tombstone, end of story.”

“Sure is.”

“Perhaps polished granite but I don’t want anything too pink. My stone mustn’t be too feminine.”

I wondered if he was the first man to ever contemplate the possibility of his tombstone being too feminine. I stepped back and noticed his trash can was brimming with balls of crumpled paper. Before taking the initiative to empty the garbage himself, he would have buried the entire can under a snowbank of paper balls. I bent down to grab the trash when it struck me, we were man and wife, we would be buried together. I should have my say about the stone. What if I wanted pink granite?

“Did you ever consider me?”

“Your obituary?” He yawned, not even bothering to cover his mouth.

“No! I mean were you planning on being buried alone?”

“The odds are that I will die first. The tombstone design is, therefore, my choice.”

After finishing his fidgeting with the computer mouse, he flipped over the heavy glass hourglass on his desk. Without thinking, I flipped it back over before much sand had slipped through.

“What’s for supper?” Kat appeared in the doorway.

I could only shrug.

“We were discussing our tombstones.” Harold seemed to think this was a logical explanation for not having dinner ready. His insensitivity never ceased to amaze me. It was a safe bet to assume that in the wake of losing her parents, the last thing Kat wanted to hear about was an unnecessary tombstone order. Nonetheless, she seemed to be smirking.

“My mother didn’t get her last wish. She wanted to be mummified. They do it for the rich in Los Angeles.”

“I had no idea your mother was such an Egyptologist,” Harold said. Luckily, Kat didn’t seem to catch the sarcasm.

“She just didn’t want anyone getting her jewellery.”

I never thought of Maureen as the jewellery type. I once saw her standing beside her motorcycle in one-hundred degree heat—as other people literally passed out from heat exhaustion—wearing a full leather jacket with heavy leather pants, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette. You could have roasted a turkey on the sidewalk that day and there she was wearing leather and drinking coffee. To me, bikers were a whole other species. I wondered if they had gills to prevent them from overheating.

“Did your mother have a lot of jewellery?” I asked.

“Harley jewellery. Little silver bikes.”

“How classic,” Harold said.

“*Why* were you talking about tombstones again?”

“Harold wants to choose his own.” I figured she would finally figure out how crazy he was. *I* was the normal one.

“Can I choose mine?” she asked.

“You’re seventeen!”

“So?”

“Kat can join me on Thursday. I’m going to assess my options,” Harold told us.

“Don’t you mean *our* options?” If I was going to spend eternity in the ground with him, the least he could do was invite me along to the parlour on his afternoon visit

or whenever he was planning on going. In cases where there was actually no deceased party involved, I didn't know whether they took appointments or whether you just showed up. As far as I knew, normal husbands got kicks out of washing their cars and mowing their lawns. Mine was getting all fired up for a visit to the funeral parlour.

“By the way, one of my teachers wants to talk to my guardian or whatever.” Kat was on her way back toward the sanctuary of her bedroom when she decided to give us the news.

“Wait a minute. About what?”

“Dunno.”

I had a feeling she did know. She knew alright and it wasn't because she got a gold star either. The problem with her getting in trouble was that Harold and I were her guardians and, therefore, technically it was our fault whenever she did something bad. A creeping dread flowed through my entire body. Just like our patients at Southwood, she was almost unpunishable. I was fairly sure you couldn't tell a teenager to go to her room but even if you could, it wouldn't be a punishment because she basically spent all her time there anyway. It would be a punishment if we didn't allow her back into the bedroom. If we said, *go to the living room and think about what you've done*. Of course, first we had to find out what she did before dreaming up the repercussions.

Chapter Nine

Going back to Queen Elizabeth High was terrifying. It brought back all those memories of bad haircuts and embarrassing moments. I could picture myself ducking through crowded halls and pretending not to notice anyone belonging to the opposite sex for fear they would see me glance over and assume I was interested which would possibly trigger locker room mockery or, worse, hallway mockery. Not that I was particularly unpopular, I just had this feeling that whenever someone threw a party and invited everyone over, they actually meant everyone was invited except for me. The school looked the same as ever, the huge S was still missing from the lettering on the side of the gym so that it read, Queen Elizabeth High chool. It must have been a chool instead of a school for forty years. I frowned at the lettering but that frown immediately made me feel old because the only time Mavis and I really rebelled—besides that one afternoon at the beach—we had been caught throwing rocks at the h in an effort to make the sign say cool instead of chool. We both got the strap. Mrs. Mitchell stung our wrists with that leather strap over and over again until we never wanted to see another rock again, let alone throw one at the chool. As I pulled open the maroon door, I wondered what happened to all the straps the teachers had. They didn't put those along with the other Queen Elizabeth High relics behind glass in the memorabilia cases.

Even worse than facing the strap was the idea of facing Betty Smiley. I hadn't seen her since my incident with the lettuce mister but I could still hear her nosey little voice chiming throughout the store, *Careful there Helen. Meaning, My gosh! That never would have happened to me. In fact, I've never stumbled over any inanimate object in my*

entire life! I was looking for classroom 13A. That first day of school panic, when you don't know where your classroom is and it seems like your class schedule must have been confused with the schedule of a student from another high school altogether because 13A doesn't seem to exist, struck. I frantically looked in empty room after empty room between glances at my watch. The halls were really dark. If Betty Smiley said anything about me being tardy, I would blame the dim hallway lighting. Finally, 13A came into sight. The classroom next door was 5C. No wonder I had trouble, there was no logic to the numbering system whatsoever. Betty Smiley was sitting behind a bulky wooden desk. There was a poster above the desk with two identical looking blond cartoon characters holding hands and it read, *Be Your Own Best Friend!* Betty Smiley was always her own best friend. She was in the same grade as Mavis and I but Betty Smiley was the one girl who sat in the front row and never failed to remind a forgetful teacher to assign our homework questions. Nobody just called her Betty. She was always Betty Smiley or Betty brown-nose as the boys called her.

“Oh, Helen! I expected you might be early but you're actually a touch late.” She tapped her wristwatch in a jesting manner even though she was dead serious.

“Am I?” Forcing a smile, I lowered myself into a wooden desk. Betty Smiley was actually dressed in a bulky knit sweater with a large red apple on it. A green worm with a smiling face was sticking out from the top of the apple. She must have made it herself. If I were Kat, I might have said something like *nice sweater*.

“This niece of yours...” She shook her head from side to side in an over-the-top way. It was like a mime might have done to emphasize something dreadful but unavoidable like an impenetrable imaginary wall. I waited for the head shaking to

subside. Finally, she froze like a statue and squinted at me. She had the theatricality of a primary teacher.

“I don’t think it’s necessary for us to discuss her outer appearance. Suffice it to say that she is not too feminine and happens to be a tad bit scary. All that makeup she wears is inappropriate in general but for school it is especially inappropriate. However, there are more pressing issues at hand.” She paused for emphasis. “The issue is that she cheats.”

“Cheats?” I had to stop myself from breathing a sigh of relief, it wasn’t nearly as bad as I’d imagined. She wasn’t popping pills in the parking lot or performing Satanic rituals in the cafeteria. Not that cheating wasn’t serious but at least it wasn’t a criminal offense.

“Katherine has produced an identical set of answers on our previous test as Melissa Brown produced. Every number. Every answer. The same.”

“Oh really?” the tone of my voice was more jovial than I’d intended.

“I was hoping for a stronger response from you, Helen. We’ve seen this time and time again, this type of behaviour usually stems from *home*.”

She was blaming me. I was *home*. She made it sound like I was offering evening classes on cheating at the kitchen table. I couldn’t handle looking at her smug little face. Instead, I stared hard at the smiling green worm on that awful sweater. Who else would want to wear a worm?

“I’m a bit surprised that I have to ask,” she inserted one of her dramatic pauses. “But what is your response to this type of blatant and unacceptable academic plagiarism demonstrated by your niece Katherine?”

It was clearly time for me to say something stern but all I could think about was how annoying Betty Smiley was. She had always been that way. The kind of person with the ability to make you feel bad about yourself. I was sure that she had never cheated on anything in her life. Even in a place like the motor vehicle branch, she probably never got confused by a form and peeked over at the sheet of the person sitting next to her. She probably didn't even use a dictionary for fear of plagiarism. I was almost wishing that Kat was involved in some type of vandalism because the police would have been friendlier than Betty Smiley. I looked at her perfect brown bob, bright red lipstick and that damn apple sweater but there was still something about her that made me feel small.

"Helen? What do you have to say about Katherine?"

"Well. I'm not very pleased. Not happy at all. You know, to tell you the truth, she prefers to be called Kat." I couldn't believe that, in my own way, I had stood up to her. The disapproval on her face was priceless.

"I have a rule in my classroom. We call each other by our *proper* names. There are no Sam's or Alex's or any other abbreviations. I don't make exceptions but all of that is a wee bit beside the point, Helen, and you know that."

I nodded obediently. So much for one small step in the fight against overzealous educators.

"Though you do not seem overly concerned, I can assure you that we take this type of offense seriously. We could consider suspension or expulsion."

"You could?"

"We are."

I wasn't sure if the 'we' meant Betty Smiley and her own best friend or if the principal was involved. I looked down at the surface of my desk and saw that someone had produced a reasonably accurate representation of male genitalia. It was carved into the desktop and reinforced with layer upon layer of blue pen. Even with a penis carved into the desk in the front row of her classroom, she was wearing a sweater with an apple on it and decorating the walls with cartoon characters. Typical Betty Smiley.

Chapter Ten

Harold refused to eat the centers of his cinnamon rolls. Danish, yes. He couldn't get enough of the sweet sickly centers of his cherry or lemon Danishes but the soft lightly iced centers of his cinnamon rolls meant nothing to him. He treated the center as if it were just some sort of pillar holding the whole pastry together but nothing more. He did the same thing every time. Working his way through the roll by peeling off one layer at a time, he would finally reach the treasure in the center only to quickly drop it in the garbage. I would yelp *I would have eaten that!* But it was always just a second too late. No matter how many times we rehearsed the same scene, it was always replicated. He would never remember to save his discarded center for me. Now *that* was obituary material in my opinion, *Man throws lifetime supply of cinnamon roll centers in garbage without offering single one to wife.* There was a sweet chewy cinnamon center stuck on top of the crumpled paper balls in his trash when I entered his office.

"Hello wife," he glanced up from the pad of loose-leaf he was writing on. There were little brown sprinkles of cinnamon all over his chin but I didn't feel like telling him.

"We have a problem," I said.

He looked up slowly. The desk in front of him was completely covered with balls of paper. The sheer magnitude of bunched up loose-leaf reminded me of something they would use in a low budget comedy to symbolize writer's block. It was strange because Harold usually typed everything on his computer. I didn't want to ask questions because there was no telling how long and involved the explanation might have been. Harold cleared his throat. He picked up a few of the paper balls and dropped them over the

already full garbage but they created an avalanche, knocking most of the stack over onto the floor. He looked up as if waiting for me to question him.

“We need to talk about Kat,” I started.

He nodded but began to kick at the paper balls with his foot, as if pushing them toward the garbage can would substitute for actually picking them up. Before I could divert his attention, his chair rolled backward and he bent over and disappeared under the desk. I could hear him grunt slightly and the sound of rustling paper. When he didn't resurface, I stepped backward to see what he was doing under there. It was the exact same thing he had been doing with his foot, just piling the paper balls in a cluster around the garbage can.

“Will you stop hiding under there?” I finally said. It was getting a bit ridiculous. He went to sit back up but somehow forgot he was under the desk and banged his head smack into the hard wooden underside.

“Jesus!”

“I told you!” I crossed my arms.

He rubbed his head tenderly. There was considerably less hair to act as a barrier for those kinds of accidents. It made me feel slightly sorry for him.

“What is it? Why all the paper?” I couldn't avoid asking any longer.

“I happen to be writing an obit very close to my own heart.” He laughed like a maniac. I might have known that sooner or later he wouldn't be able to resist writing his own obituary.

“Am I in it?” I wondered aloud before thinking it was probably better to know as little as possible about the whole thing.

“There is customarily a place reserved for the list of surviving relatives following the write up,” he said.

That meant he hadn't bothered to mention me.

“I'm a footnote?”

“The focus is on *my* life and *my* accomplishments.” He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head like a man on a tropical beach.

“Accomplishments?” My eyes narrowed and it was the second time I wondered if Kat was starting to wear off on me. Either I was becoming more cynical or had been successfully suppressing my cynicism even from myself. He tried waving me off with his hand.

“Come on,” I leaned forward to take a look over his shoulder at what he was writing but he quickly planted his arms over it.

“Never mind. It's bad luck to show anyone your obit before it's finished. It happened to the obit editor of the Oregon *Mirror*. His daughter read the first draft of his obit and he was fatally struck by an ambulance that very night.”

“Wait a minute, you don't think the strange part about that story is the fact that a man was killed by an ambulance?”

He looked up as if waiting for me to leave his office.

“Can we have a conversation like normal people?” I asked.

“*Normal* people? You'd be surprised. Reading obits you see how normal is only a veneer.”

“Careful there, you don't want to start relating to people after all these years.”

“I’m *not* relating to people! I’m capturing them. You know what Andy Warhol said? He said, ‘*The most wonderful thing about living is to be dead.*’”

“He painted soup cans!” I couldn’t believe someone would get excited about such ridiculousness. He grabbed a book on his desk that had a black crow on the cover and frantically flipped until he found what he was looking for.

“Here’s what I mean. This is it! Andrew McKie, obituary writer for the *Daily Telegraph* says, ‘*The way to do someone ludicrous is absolutely straight.*’”

“You’re ludicrous,” I said. He seemed to take that as a compliment. It wasn’t.

Flipping through the book again, he hunched over and read by dragging his finger along the page.

“Look. Here’s one about a lumberyard owner. Okay? A regular lumberyard owner in Maine. *Potential customers weren’t even permitted to enter the lumberyard without first going to his house for a drink. Though his materials were always the best of quality, those who impressed George the most would receive offers for premium selections. If you made him laugh, you got wood without knots. If you could hold your liquor, he might even offer free delivery, though never same day because driving home was the test to see if you could hold it. In his words, ‘When it comes to getting things done, we need fewer psychologists and more lumbermen.*’”

“Kat cheated on a test. Can we talk about that or does someone have to die before you get all excited?”

At last he looked up from the book. His finger was still glued to the page.

“Which subject?” he asked.

“What does it matter?”

“You’re the one who wants to talk about it.”

“Math.”

“Who needs mathematics?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He was fully in league with these deranged obituary writers who thought they were some kind of ordained scribes for God, but math was out.

“Everybody. Everybody needs math,” I snapped. “In the real world, people use math. They might not remember anything from English class or history and they don’t have to. You don’t need English and history at the grocery store or at the gas station.”

“I highly disagree,” Harold leaned toward me. His finger was finally off the book and his eyes were almost shining he was so excited.

“I don’t care if you disagree. I just want to talk about this.”

He slumped back down in his chair as if he were a balloon I poked the air out of.

“If she’s expelled there’s only one high school here,” I said.

“This is true,” he exhaled deeply but his mind was somewhere else. I could see his eyes fluttering over the pin-ups on his office walls but not even taking them in.

Chapter Eleven

Mrs. Wellington drank tea every afternoon at three o'clock. If you wanted to call it tea. She only dipped her tea bag into the hot water before plunking it onto her napkin. Just a tiny splash of the bag in the water made it more like drinking hot water with milk. While the others usually took their tea or coffee in the social room, Mrs. Wellington preferred to sit alone in her room and drink her tea with nothing but the murmur of voices from outside as a backdrop. It was also a painstaking process waiting to collect her tray because she took about an hour to completely finish the small cup of tea. Each sip must have consisted of less than an eighth of a teaspoon of liquid. If any of the girls tried to take her tray back to the kitchen before she was finished, they would be sorry. She was always sitting there in silence waiting to pounce. I was taking around a tray of ladyfingers when I saw that Mrs. Wellington had a visitor.

Ming was off for the day or I would have known right away that Richard was there. He was wearing another expensive looking suit with gold and black cufflinks and a solid black satiny looking tie. His shoes were a shiny black patent and his brown hair was the epitome of perfect man hair. It reminded me of the handsome male models on the boxes of *Men's Only* hair-dye that Harold used before he decided to go grey like Father Time. I always wondered about the name brand *Men's Only*; was there really some great chemical difference between the hair of a man and the hair of a woman that prevented women from using *Men's Only*? What was the worst that could happen?

"Hello again," Richard held his cup of tea aloft in a friendly gesture.

“Ladyfinger?” I lowered the silver tray to offer the little rectangular biscuits for dipping.

“Ladyfingers?” Mrs. Wellington said. “Do you want us to break our teeth off? Have you people made some kind of deal with a local dentist? Giving the elderly the only type of biscuits harder than mortar. Ladyfingers make biscotti seem like pudding.”

“The others—”

“—The others can remove their dentures and gum it to death. I have all my teeth and I plan on keeping it that way.” With a shaky hand she raised the tea cup to her lips and took a miniscule sip.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think of to say. She was the only one who still had her teeth.

“I’ll take one, thanks,” Richard said with a wink, his cufflinks flashing as he reached out and took a ladyfinger. At times he was amused by his mother’s outbursts.

“Helen here knows that I take my tea without interruption,” Mrs. Wellington continued.

“Mother, she was only offering sweets,” Richard took a bite of the ladyfinger and it snowed little crumbs all over his fancy suit.

“I wasn’t referring to the sweets,” she glared at Richard. “You’ll have yourself all dirty.” She pointed toward the crumbs. He stood up and shook them off.

“I suppose, if I’m such an interruption, I should be getting back to the city. I have a function tonight anyway. I was only here for a short visit and to drop the flowers and spring water.” He placed his cup of tea on the side table.

“You take those flowers with you when you go. They bother my allergies.” She smothered her nose with a handkerchief even though there was nothing to wipe and she hadn’t sneezed since I’d been in the room.

“I love you, Mother. Next time I’ll just bring water.” He smiled at me as if we were sharing a joke. It was such a pity that she didn’t appreciate such a beautiful arrangement. It was done in pinks and purples and there were roses, lilies, gladiolas and orchids framed by wild vines which gave it a more natural look.

“Just get rid of them and let me finish my tea before it cools.” She took another tiny sip. Without another word, Richard took the vase of flowers off the windowsill and slowly left the room. His mother sat there sipping her tea without even looking up. I followed him outside. It seemed he was waiting for me.

“Would you have a place for these flowers?” he asked. I looked down at the bouquet and felt like a teenager getting a corsage. Only it was much more expensive and bigger. I knew he was just trying to get rid of them but that didn’t stop my heart from beating. Harold had never ever given me flowers because he thought it was a waste of money to buy something that would only die right away. Maybe that was how all men felt but they weren’t supposed to admit it. In the early stages of our marriage, come Valentine’s Day he would surprise me with small cactus plants from the SaveEasy which ended up cluttering the kitchen windowsill above the sink. I would look at their prickles whenever rinsing the dishes.

“Here, you can find a place for them somewhere?” Richard in his suit was pushing the vase toward me.

“Sure. Yes. They are beautiful.”

“Yes I got them from a flower shop called *The Flower Shop*,” he chuckled.

“Oh. That makes sense. I mean, take *SuperStore*, why did they pick the word super? It could have been WonderStore or FabulousStore or CheaperStore or just plain GroceryStore.” I frowned at myself. Store naming was something I thought about while examining junk mail one day, it seemed funny at the time but as I studied Richard’s blank face, I knew it wasn’t as amusing as I’d assumed. Or maybe it was my own awkward delivery that ruined it.

“Look, another thing I wanted to enquire about,” he continued. “A senior colleague of mine was thinking of sending his mother here but changed his mind because of some news report on, please forgive me if he was yanking my chain, but he said he saw a news report on a cat here that cuddles with people before they die. He actually called it the death cat.”

“Death cat makes him sound so sinister.”

“Old Spense wasn’t just yanking my chain.”

“No, I mean yes, there is a cat but I wouldn’t call him the death cat,” I laughed nervously.

“Does he go by another name?” There was that megawatt smile.

“Tripod.”

“That’s funny,” he said without laughing. “It would be the end of me if mother heard that one. The death cat wouldn’t be fast enough to get to me before she was through.”

I glanced back and saw Mrs. Wellington looking down into her teacup. It was surprising that she wasn’t straining to hear our conversation.

“Anyway, I have a function. Better start back for the city.” He put his hand on my arm and handed me the beautiful bouquet. The lilies smelled so sweet. I once went on a few dates with a young fisherman who brought me wild lilies. Of course, I knew he picked them from the garden in front of the train station but it was still nice. He had the most beautiful eyelashes. Every time we were together, he wouldn’t stop talking, not even a pause, I thought it was probably because he was so used to being alone at sea. Not that he was ever really alone on the fishing boats but there was never anyone he could really talk to, really open up with, onboard. Most of the other men were older and they had to keep fishing to feed their families but when Paul came back from his first big storm and described the way their bodies bounced straight up off the bunks at night, so that they couldn’t sleep even if they tried, he swore there had to be something else for him. In a way, it was good that he did all the talking because my life as a sixteen year-old girl on shore, going to school and learning to bake Hello Dolly squares seemed completely unimportant and uninteresting after the dangers he faced at sea.

He never did find another vocation but he never really looked for anything else either. I was still in high school when he sailed away on a tall ship bound for the Caribbean. At night, I felt foolish and young for soaking my pillow with tears in my safe little bedroom with the pastel curtains. It was hard, knowing that I had nothing to cry about as he was the one who would possibly be faced with real life pirates. Still, at the time I felt that pirates were preferable to gym class. We had to wear bloomers in gym. I hated the puffy things that made our legs look like exclamation points underneath our skirts. They divided the girls and boys with a big partition that split the gym into two parts but the boys would always peer through the dividers and laugh at us.

Chapter Twelve

There was no telling how long Kat had been cheating in school or if she'd ever been in trouble before for cheating at her old school in the city. Over dinner, I kept having false starts. I would clear my throat and look at Kat before glancing back down at my plate and taking a mouthful of carrots. I finally decided to wait until all my carrots were gone before bringing up the issue at hand. Carrots were always the first to cool, so it made sense to finish them off. The beautiful flowers from Richard were sitting on an end table near where we were eating. Now and then I glanced over at their beauty.

"I called Snow's to make an appointment, they have a variety of stone samples on the lower level where they keep the caskets," Harold announced.

"Let's not talk about this at the table," I said.

"Fine. Where did those flowers come from?" He pointed his knife at the bouquet. I ignored him and continued with my carrots. He always hated how I ate one thing at a time. First the carrots, then the peas followed by the potato before finishing with whatever meat we happened to be eating. I'd been successfully keeping things on my plate separated since childhood and wasn't about to stop for his benefit. I liked to taste each individual type of food. A forkful of carrot with potato and meat was equivalent to eating goulash. If I wanted to eat goulash, I would have made that.

"They came from her boyfriend," Kat said. She wouldn't eat the roast beef Harold demanded but she delighted in crafting little volcanoes by hollowing out the middle of her mashed potato and filling it with gravy until it overflowed. It was kind of refreshing to see her do something childish, so I decided not to point out that it probably went

against her definition of vegetarianism to eat sauce made from the juices of roasting meat.

“They’re from a man at work.”

“A man at work?” Harold repeated. He locked his eyes on mine while shovelling a forkful of food into his mouth. No matter what he ate, it ended up as a huge brown glob on his plate. Whatever you served would become an unrecognizable mess in less than thirty seconds.

“What man?” he was trying to be casual but I could tell he really wanted to know. It gave me a pleasant surge of amusement to know that he was curious. It would have been even more delightful if he knew how handsome Richard was.

“I just don’t like the smell of lilies, that’s all,” Harold said. For years he had been telling me that all flowers smelled the same. Suddenly, he had a special hatred for lilies.

“Did you guys ever notice that Mickey Mouse wears gloves but no shirt?” Kat gobbled her potato, dripping gravy on the tablecloth. “Most people never think about it but you don’t really see him eating cheese either. He’s a big mouse who doesn’t like cheese and wears gloves but no shirt.”

I could hardly imagine how to switch the discussion from Mickey Mouse to academic plagiarism.

“If you really think about it, he couldn’t really eat cheese even if he wanted to because it would stain the white gloves,” Kat said.

“Can you pass the potato?” Harold motioned toward the bowl near Kat’s elbow.

“You were caught cheating on a test,” I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Kat’s face was instantly masked with annoyance. She sucked in another blob of her own mashed potato before thrusting the bowl at Harold.

“Mrs. Smiley called me in,” I told her. Kat took another mouthful. I wasn’t sure if she was really enjoying the gravy or just trying to avoid giving an explanation. It was a special gravy recipe. Somehow, whenever I tried to confront her about something, she had a way of making me feel like I was in trouble. Harold was eating his roast as if nothing important were happening. It seemed to me that death was the only thing he found important. I cleared my throat again.

“You can’t cheat in math because it’s cumulative. I mean, if you stop cheating then you’re completely lost.”

“So I can cheat in other subjects?” She reached across the table and took back the bowl beside Harold then proceeded to pile another lump of mashed potato on her plate. I felt bad about making roast beef but Harold had insisted on having a nice Sunday dinner whether she happened to be a vegetarian or not.

“You need math to graduate.”

“Why does everybody need math?” Harold began. “Students in Europe are able to specialize from adolescence. They are not forced to study mathematics if they happen to possess an artistic temperament.”

“How can they tell the difference between artistic kids and just plain fucked-up ones?” Kat asked.

“Excuse me! You can’t say that,” I said. Swearing at the dinner table was something I would not tolerate.

“No, you can’t say that anyone is fucked-up because the most fucked-up people often possess the greatest genius,” Harold folded his hands underneath his chin and smiled.

“Now. You know what I meant. We won’t swear at the table,” I said.

“Actually, fucked-up was officially added to *The Oxford English Dictionary* some time ago,” Harold said. “It’s hyphenated.”

“Fuckface is in there too,” Kat added.

“She could be expelled!”

“How do you know fucked-up is in the dictionary?” Kat looked at Harold. “Do you read it for fun? I bet you never got in trouble in school. What were you, the president of the computer science club?”

“There was no computer science club. There were no computers.”

“You’re old,” Kat said.

“I was actually quite the hell raiser in my middle school days.” Harold raised an eyebrow. Kat looked like she was trying not to smile.

“What did Hell Boy here do in middle school?” Kat asked.

Harold was a few grades ahead of me in school but I certainly didn’t remember him ever being in trouble. I used to see him on the school bus with this little brown corduroy jacket and think he was unusually cute with his big ears popping off the sides of his head from underneath the curly hair he had.

“I once punched someone out.”

“You what?” I found that hard to believe.

“Why?” Kat dropped her fork.

“You know Nelson Locke?” Harold looked at me.

I nodded. Nelson Locke was one of those kids who pulled the fire alarm when he wanted to get out early. He was the first one to have a girlfriend and the only one to ever stand on the seat of his desk in music class and refuse to sit back down. He claimed to be moved by the music. In the end, he was moved by the principal.

“Locke and his buddy Sippy used to make cow noises and stamp their feet on the floor all throughout history class,” Harold stamped his feet on the floor to demonstrate. His knee hit the table and I had to grab my water to keep it from spilling over the top of the glass.

“Aren’t you going to do the cow noises?” Kat asked.

He shook his head. “The two of them also made a point of stealing erasers before throwing them whenever the teacher wasn’t looking. This one day, we were supposed to be learning about the French Revolution. I found the mechanics of the guillotine particularly interesting but it was nearly impossible to learn with their noise. Nelson was in the middle of a loud moo when I punched him as hard as I could.”

“Where did you hit him?” Kat asked.

“It may have been what they refer to as a sucker punch. Nevertheless, I did punch him,” Harold said. “In the back of the head.”

“Are you kidding?” I couldn’t imagine little Harold with his big ears and puffy hair punching anyone, let alone the biggest bully in school. All in the name of learning.

“Granted, I was sent to the principal’s office and immediately attacked after school by Sippy,” he added.

“Really?”

“It was my first and last black eye.”

“I’ve had all kinds of black eyes,” Kat said.

“You paint them on!” Harold pointed a finger at Kat’s makeup.

“Funny,” she said, standing up from the table.

“Wait a minute, we weren’t finished,” I told her.

“Cheating,” Kat said. The tone of her voice didn’t help to clarify whether she cheated or not. Before I could ask further questions, she disappeared down the hall. Harold was looking straight ahead as if he could see his adolescence projected on a screen.

“Did you really have a black eye?”

“My mother took care of it with a bag of frozen peas, until it was time for dinner.”

“Oh please,” I said.

“No. I’m serious. You know my mother. She was already too sloshed to go to the store for another bag of peas, so she took my ice-pack and cooked it.”

“Did they stop bleating and mooing through the French Revolution?”

“They added clucking.”

“I hoped they at least clucked in French.”

“I was recently reading an article about an English woman living in Paris who wasn’t sure whether to teach her daughter animals noises in English or French.”

“There’s no difference!” Even I wasn’t that gullible.

“There is a difference. For instance, m-e-u-h in French is m-o-o in English.”

“You expect me to believe that cows in France make a different noise than cows here?”

“Helen, please. The cows make the same sound everywhere but we humans translate it differently.”

“I knew that. I was only kidding,” I lied. “That poor child in Paris would never be able to figure out how to sing *Old MacDonald had a Farm*.”

“What a shame,” he said.

Chapter Thirteen

The rooms at Southwood were set up with panic buttons beside the beds in case of emergency situations. If someone had a fall or they couldn't make it to the hallway or dial the telephone, for whatever reason, they could just press the button and we'd be alerted. In a strange way, Tripod was sort of like a living version of a panic button because he only travelled between his spot on the windowsill and his food dish, unless something was wrong. As soon as he sensed something, he would sometimes pace the halls for two days before he determined whose turn it was. It was never pleasant to hear his little paws clicking across the linoleum, knowing what it meant.

Old Mr. Holly who spent the last years of his life complaining about being useless, once tried to scoop up Tripod and drop him on the bed. It would have been a strange suicide attempt, except that it wasn't time for Holly to go. Tripod sniffed the sheets briefly before jumping off the bed and scampering away. He wouldn't enter the person's room until two to four hours before the person died. It gave us enough time to call the relatives in to say their goodbyes. Especially at first, people were doubtful or offended or a combination of both but Tripod was right every single time. Eleven times to be exact. Even if they didn't understand it, people had no choice but to stop questioning and start believing.

I was in the process of loading up pill trays when the frantic buzzing of the panic button sounded. It took me a minute to realize what it was because we hardly ever heard it. I rushed toward the front desk where Ming could electronically determine which room was buzzing. She had her hands over her ears but when she saw me, she pointed toward

Mrs. Wellington's room. Of all people I never expected Mrs. Wellington to be in trouble. It was seven-thirty in the morning and most of the other rooms were still in darkness. As I got closer, I saw that Mrs. Wellington's lights were blazing. The door was ajar and my heart was racing as I pushed it open. I was terrified of finding Mrs. Wellington on the floor clutching onto a table leg but she was sitting in her armchair looking prim and proper in a blue pantsuit with the newspaper spread across her lap.

"Are you alright?" I felt a hint of annoyance after the false panic but she was clearly in some type of state.

"Alright? I most certainly am not alright in any way, shape or form," she announced. Nothing in the room seemed out of place. Her collection of face cream was perfectly stacked on the bedside table beside the photo of Richard and his ex-wife. She pointed a shaky finger in my direction as if I were some culprit in a police line-up.

"How can you people be so deceitful?" she continued. I briefly wondered if her mind was going. She thrust a finger at the paper on her lap.

"You people knew about this all along and never told my son, let alone told me, about it."

I approached cautiously craning my neck in an effort to see what she was reading. Her cheeks, usually powered with a special type of rouge, were brighter than ever. I leaned forward and squinted at the upside down paper.

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" Mrs. Wellington flipped it around and pushed it toward me. There was a large photo of Tripod in the middle of the page with a headline that read, *Feline Fatale Never Misses His Mark*. The reporter sure didn't interview me or Ming for

the article. Scanning the first column, I saw a quote from John. For some reason, he was desperate for publicity that would only hurt Southwood.

“I have phoned my son and he will be picking me up as soon as possible,” Mrs. Wellington said in that huffy tone of hers. I folded the paper and stuck it under my arm.

“Now wait a minute, that’s my newspaper you have there.” She reached out a hand.

Chapter Fourteen

What did a reasonable woman wear on a trip to the funeral parlour to select her own tombstone? I decided that a reasonable woman, in her late fifties, wouldn't be going on a trip to the funeral parlour to select her own tombstone in the first place. Still, I didn't know what to put on. We weren't the first people in Chester to arrange our affairs in advance but the others were usually at least in their seventies or older. Those generations had *house clothes* and *good clothes*. The good clothes became the house clothes when they were ratty enough to just about fall apart. When they did fall apart, they became cleaning rags used for scrubbing floors until they literally disintegrated. These people were before Swiffers.

"Are we going?" Kat's voice came from the hall. She appeared in the bedroom doorway wearing ripped up jeans and an oversized black leather jacket. I had black jeans on the bottom but only a beige undershirt on top.

"You might want to wear a shirt," Kat said.

I grabbed my old dark green turtleneck. It, at least, looked serious.

"I'll be in the car and if no one else happens to be in the car in five minutes, I'll be going alone," Harold announced. He was the only man I ever heard of who made good on his threats to drive away if his wife wasn't ready. Getting dressed was never high on my priority list but sometimes my shirt would need an ironing and he would leave for the grocery store or wherever without me. I would bitterly compile a list of complaints while walking toward the destination but never actually yell at him when I got there. The walk

was often sort of refreshing which sometimes made me wonder if I was too easily satisfied.

The door to Snow's was imported from somewhere; somebody had told me about it but I forgot who. It was frosted glass with a chiselled sun setting behind a dead tree. The leafless branches were so ominous against the setting sun that I couldn't imagine the design being used anywhere except a funeral home. Inside, the walls were maroon and the trimmings were the same dark green as my turtleneck. It was dark and sombre but, somehow, I fit right in.

"This is creepy," Kat said but there was an excitement in her voice that made me nervous. In my opinion, it was much too soon after the funeral to take her to a place filled with caskets and urns but she seemed to be enjoying the experience.

The stairway was lined with framed photographs of the undertakers who had worked at Snow's over the years. The men had broad smiles as if they were posing for employee of the month photos at SaveEasy. There were only five of them but it must not have been pleasant for Dan, the acting undertaker, to see his picture mounted beside all those men who had died before he took his post, knowing that there would be undertakers mounted long after he finished. Even though I worked in a place where people were at the end of their lives, I couldn't imagine working in a place where people recently finished their lives.

It had only been a couple of years since we had the wake at Snow's for Harold's mother. We had been expecting her to outlive us all because she was the most stubborn woman on earth. Harold maintained that her will to live was prompted by the fact that she didn't know if there would be vodka in Heaven. I suppose his version of Heaven would

have been a huge library with no overdue fines and no wife to interrupt his reading. Kat's probably would have been a huge store filled with racks of black clothing where the employees tattooed their skeletons on the outside of their skin and offered complimentary facial piercings. I couldn't decide on my own version of Heaven. I was trying to suppress the idea that Richard would be hovering over a cloud in a white suit with a vase of flowers bought specifically for me.

"Intruders!" boomed a voice from down below. Dan was a huge man, three hundred pounds at least. I wondered if there were caskets large enough for a man of his size or pallbearers strong enough. He was huffing and puffing just from entering the room to greet us. You would have thought someone working so closely with the dead would have been a bit more health conscious but I supposed it was the same as those nurses and interns smoking outside the hospital.

"Dan." Harold nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"It's Dan, Dan's my man!" Kat said quietly. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Dream Phone right? My daughter had that game too," Dan said. "Now. Let's get down to business. Good evening," he made some kind of kooky Transylvanian accent. He was known for being a character. I figured that in bigger places, funny guys might become stand-up comedians but in Chester they became funeral home directors. Humour was probably the only way they could live with death everyday.

"Where are the stone samples?" Harold's head was on a swivel.

"Didn't you see all those loose rocks in the parking lot?" Dan burst into laughter. Harold didn't even crack a smile for Dan's benefit.

“Alright. Alright. We’ve got a serious one. Well maybe a little joke would cheer you up. Lemme think. Did you ever hear the one about the man with the chisel?” Dan looked at us expectantly. He vaguely reminded me of John Candy.

“Everyone knows the one about the man with the chisel,” Kat said.

“Alright. You tell it for us young lady.”

“Nah,” she said, looking down at her boot.

“Called your bluff. Those are big boots you’ve got there, planning a walk on the moon?” Dan paused. “Alright, you’re not amused. So I’ll get on with the joke, these two kids are walking through a graveyard at night. They’re taking a shortcut. Suddenly, they hear tapping and hammering coming from one of the graves. Their hearts almost stop. Then, they see this old man with a chisel pounding away at one of the tombstones. One of the kids says, *Man you scared us, we thought you were a ghost or something!* The other kid asks the man what he’s doing working so late at night and the man says, *Those bastards spelled my name wrong.*” Dan burst into a round of loud laughter, even closing his eyes. I chuckled and wondered how many times he had told the joke and whether he laughed like that each time.

“I have an inscription drafted but I would like to choose the type of stone in advance,” Harold intervened before Dan told another joke.

“In advance! You can only choose in advance!” Dan burst into another round of laughter.

There were probably ten or so caskets lined up against the far wall of the room and another section with urns lined along shelves with little spotlights shining overhead. Some of the caskets were unimaginably tacky. There was a frosty blue one with a lining

that reminded me of toothpaste and a pink one with flowers painted across the sides. Kat made her way toward an urn shaped like a football and started grinning.

“Hey, it’s every geek’s dream, an urn for a football player,” she said. I was mortified but Dan chuckled.

“That one there’s a special order. Nobody’s actually requested one yet but I just thought it was so neat I couldn’t resist offering it.” He lovingly ran his stubby finger along the surface of the awful football.

I wondered what would happen to all the people in urns down the road. Everyone in my family had been buried, but if somebody I’d never met, like my Great Great Great Aunt, was handed down to me in an urn I wouldn’t exactly want to keep her around the house. You couldn’t just throw her in the recycling bin either. I wondered what would happen in the future when people started to accumulate urns. Ashes would be scattered just because relatives wouldn’t want a variety of urns cluttering their living rooms. There would probably be diehards who would keep all their relatives arranged on shelves like books. Maybe places like IKEA would start to sell special shelving.

“I’m not interested in the vessel, just the monument,” Harold interjected. “Though I do like the idea of one of those little satin pillows.”

He had decided to select his stone sample at Snow’s even though they would carve the inscription and shape the stone at Baker’s which was a few doors down.

“Look no further,” Dan motioned toward a corner filled with little slabs of polished stone. The samples were resting on little brass plate stands. Harold walked toward the corner with his hands behind his back. He looked at everything before picking

up a piece of bluish granite with black and silver flecks. It looked like a countertop not a tombstone.

“Beautiful choice. Bute. One of the best. Not many people around here have such good taste. Then again, not everybody gets to pick his own! Think of the time we spend in our living rooms channel surfing, and then some of us spend no time choosing the stone that will mark our place on this earth for eternity. It just don’t figure!” Dan laughed again. I was beginning to wonder if he was capable of saying anything without following it with a round of laughter.

“That blue stone is just horrible!” I said, hoping Dan wouldn’t be offended.

“I quite like the unusual colour,” Harold said. It seemed as if he picked the ugliest one just to spite me. He had never particularly been a fan of blue or any colour other than tan.

“That is killer ugly,” Kat confirmed. I was fairly certain it was the first thing we’d ever agreed upon.

“Well, take all the time you need to think about it!” Dan said.

“We’re not thinking about that one,” I said.

“We’ll be in touch,” Harold concluded.

“What about mine?” Kat asked. “As far as urns go, I kinda like the football. Subvert expectations you know? Goth girl incinerated and placed in football. Seems symbolic.”

“Why not?” Dan laughed. “How about another joke before you go?” He had that eager look on his face but Kat shot him down.

“No thanks,” she said.

I wondered what it would have been like if I was born the kind of person who said exactly what was on my mind. Dan could have told me a hundred bad jokes and I would have pretended to laugh at every one.

Chapter Fifteen

I was still marvelling at the idea of little Harold punching Nelson Locke in the back when Stephen Miller, Kat's principal, called us in. The only memory I had of being in trouble at school was in Mrs. Tupper's elementary school music class. Mrs. Tupper was a big woman with an even bigger voice. During most of the classes, we just sat there and listened while she played the piano and sang at the top of her lungs. It was almost like you could see right down her throat, she opened her mouth so wide. This one time she saw me slipping Mavis a note. It didn't even say anything insulting about her off-key piano playing, it was just to make sure Mavis waited by my locker after class. When Mrs. Tupper saw, she stopped playing the piano, her eyes were still bulging from the note she had been carrying. The room was especially silent after the noise of her singing stopped. Without a word, Mrs. Tupper raised herself off the reinforced piano bench and walked straight to the special cupboard above the stacked music stands. Everyone knew what was happening because it happened whenever someone dared to disrupt her class in any way. In front of everyone, she pulled down the leather strap. She lumbered across the room, her long denim skirt swishing, and motioned for me to extend my arm. As everyone watched, she brought that strap down hard across the inside of my tender little wrist. Over and over she hit me. Mavis was also mad at me because she had to spend the rest of class sitting facing the corner wearing a pointed dunce cap. I hadn't thought of the story the other night but if Kat wasn't impressed by Harold's punching, she wouldn't be too excited about my little strap story either.

Harold was in the process of organizing the post-its stuck to his desk according to colour when I told him we were to see Stephen Miller right away.

“Today? People can’t be expected to drop everything.” He stuck a pink note next to the other pink ones.

“That does seem very pressing.” I looked down at the notes. Some of them were just reminders to buy office supplies and others were websites and books he intended to look for.

“I’m hungry. Are there any more of those veggie burgers in the freezer?” Kat appeared in the doorway. She would only eat food from the organic section of SaveEasy, but she had no idea how new the concept of the organic section was. Our parents had organic everything; the chickens were free range because they ran around the yard. All the vegetables were fresh because they came straight from the garden and we certainly didn’t grind them up to make veggie burgers.

“We’re having a family meeting,” I said.

“About what? Planning our own funerals?” Kat crossed her arms.

“Well maybe family meeting isn’t what you’d call it. I mean, because we’re meeting with the principal,” I told her.

She instantly started backing away. Before we knew what was happening, there was the sound of the closet door opening followed by the quick zip of her coat and then the front door opened and closed. That was enough to rouse even Harold’s curiosity. We both rushed out the door, expecting to see her walking down the street but there was no teenage girl on the horizon. We lowered ourselves into the station wagon without any

expectation of what might happen. As it turned out, Kat was already in the backseat. She had herself buckled in and was waiting for us.

We walked into the musty smelling classroom one after another like prison inmates. I never could figure out why classrooms always seemed to grow musty much more rapidly than any other type of room. The girl whose test Kat apparently cheated off of was sitting in the first row of desks beside her mother.

Melissa Brown was a lanky brunette with buckteeth and unfortunate ears that stuck out through her limp brown hair. The kind of girl I would have been friends with in high school because we both would have been sitting out dances on the bleachers. Stephen Miller, the new principal, was beside Betty Smiley in an orange plastic chair. The two authority figures, at the front of the room, faced the victim and her mother and turned their heads in our direction as we entered. Stephen looked silly in the little plastic chair he was sitting on, but Betty Smiley looked just as imposing as ever in her wooden desk chair. She was probably the only teacher stubborn enough not to offer the principal the decent chair.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” Stephen stood and shook our hands but Betty Smiley didn’t even twitch. Stephen was a young principal having taken the position after his father, the former principal, had a heart attack while shovelling the driveway two winters ago. It was truly horrible, even more so because Greg had a snow blower but he preferred to shovel instead of using it. His wife said he couldn’t stand the idea of people thinking he wasn’t strong enough to use the shovel anymore. Apparently, he wasn’t.

Stephen looked like a younger version of his father. It made me feel old to see Stephen as principal because I could still remember when he was a child who used to tear off his clothes and run down the street naked. His mother was always out chasing him with a blanket or towel. His adolescence was also marked by a brief period during which he would strip down and stand in the side window on the second floor of his parents' house looking out at the world. We all knew about it, but no one had the heart to tell the Millers. As far as we knew, Stephen's nudism ceased when he reached sixteen and got his first girlfriend. It seemed that once he started dating, he became satisfied with the idea that only one person would see him naked. Unless he secretly spent his vacations at a colony somewhere. I never understood the drive to be nude all the time. Nudists must be people overcompensating for a lack of stress in their lives. Personally, I have always felt exposed enough with my clothes on.

I noticed that Kat plopped down in the desk beside Melissa without so much as looking at her. Melissa started to chew the already devoured thumbnail of her right hand but her mother slapped the hand away with a quick swat. We all sat across the front row, but Harold plopped himself down in the desk directly behind Melissa. He always had to be different. On the drive over, he made it quite clear that he might attend the meeting, but he would not take part in any negotiation regarding mathematics.

Betty Smiley shuffled a pile of papers on her lap. Next, she held two tests in the air.

"Identical answers," she said slowly.

I looked at Kat who happened to be slouched down in her desk so far it seemed she might slide right off and melt into a puddle. Melissa glanced my way and we briefly made eye contact before the girl started chewing the eraser on the end of her pencil.

“Is there any way that we can avoid expulsion? She is sorry,” I said. The panic made my stomach feel like little elves were dancing jigs and stirring everything up. It was a weird thought but stressful situations seemed to make me more imaginative.

“Sorry? For what?” Instead of straightening up, Kat seemed to slump down even further.

“This lack of concern is almost as vile as the act of cheating itself,” Betty Smiley continued.

“Why don’t we allow Katherine to speak for herself?” Stephen smiled.

All eyes turned toward Kat but she just sat there with her arms folded.

“Exactly the response she gives in class when I ask a question,” Betty Smiley narrowed her eyes but Kat narrowed hers right back.

“Let’s not overreact here. Kat, what do you have to say?” Stephen was trying to give her the benefit of the doubt but Kat was like a statue.

“She doesn’t have to say a word. Her guilt speaks for her,” Betty Smiley went on.

“Where does she get these one-liners? Straight from accounts of the Salem witch trials?” Harold interrupted.

Betty Smiley was fuming. Stephen was smiling but only because she wasn’t looking. I felt like belting Harold with a piece of chalk.

“Let’s not get too...excited,” Stephen was shifting on his haunches, attempting to find a comfortable position on the little seat. “It isn’t easy being a new student in a new town.”

“There is no excuse for cheating. If she *makes* it to university they will not tolerate it.” The hair on Betty Smiley’s upper lip was gleaming under the fluorescent lights making her appear even more monster-like.

“If she *makes it* to university?” Harold piped up from his place behind us in the second row.

“Not everybody is university material.”

“Before we further our dissection of the completely Draconian methods of this institution, I would like to inquire about the customary seating arrangement in the gallows here.”

It was mortifying that Harold was making a scene. There was a stunned silence. On our way to the meeting, I had been wishing for a dashing husband who would rush to my rescue and fix everything. In the classroom, I just wanted him to shut up.

“Sorry?” Stephen said.

“Melissa Brown sits exactly where she is sitting now,” Betty Smiley explained. “And Katherine sits directly behind her.”

I turned to give Harold a frown of disapproval. The last thing we needed was to worsen the situation by talking back to Betty Smiley. We would be devoured like an Oscar Meyer pre-packaged lunch in the cafeteria.

“Well, well. The plot thickens,” Harold chuckled to himself. “You see, it seems that this desk has Melissa Brown written right on it. Right on the surface here.” He leaned

over the desk and peered down at the block lettering that Melissa must have carved in with her pencil.

“It wasn’t me,” Melissa Brown said quickly.

“Little Melissa here must have a very long arm if she can reach the desk behind hers in class and carve her name,” Harold said with satisfaction.

“According to my seating chart, Melissa sits in the front,” Betty Smiley argued.

“I took her seat to piss her off. Just the one day,” Kat finally announced.

“The language!” Betty Smiley said.

“Rat,” Melissa Brown said under her breath.

“Argyle sock loving, bucktoothed, big ear, no chest, townie,” Kat shot back.

“Melissa Emma Brown! You cheated off this girl’s test?” Melissa’s mother’s face was quivering with rage. Her eyes started to pop. Melissa looked ready to burst into tears. Even I was ready to burst into tears after that string of insults.

“Case closed,” Harold announced. I wouldn’t have been surprised at that point if he would have patted himself on the back.

“What about the language?” Betty Smiley continued.

“Kat should apologize to Melissa and vice versa,” Stephen decided.

“Go ahead,” I whispered in Kat’s direction.

“Melissa!” the mother swatted her daughter’s hand for the second time.

“Sorry,” the girl mumbled.

“I don’t want to apologize,” Kat declared.

“How about detention?” Betty Smiley asked.

“How about it?” Kat challenged.

“Wait a minute. It’s alright,” Stephen looked at me. “It’s been a long day. Helen will resolve this at home.”

“She will,” I promised. “I will.” Really, he couldn’t have said anything that would have filled me with more panic.

“My mother always said children should be seen and not heard,” Harold added.

“He sometimes just says things. He likes to make jokes. Bad jokes,” I tried explaining.

“That girl will not be getting away with any of this in the future,” Betty Smiley announced. She was still clutching the two tests like they were golden nuggets.

“Well thank goodness it’s all settled.” Stephen held his hands in the air to signal a truce.

As we headed for the car in the schoolyard, we passed three girls hanging out beside a dumpster. Two of them were blond and the other had beautiful red hair and freckles. I was pretty sure they were the girls who lived just behind the old library. They looked so different from Kat with their pastel sweaters and jeans. I was thinking that things might have been better for Kat if she would have made friends with some of the girls at school, instead of spending all her time with that Albino Kid. It seemed to me that she might have been happier if she didn’t shut everyone out.

Just as we were passing the innocent looking trio, I heard faint singing. At first I thought they might have been girls from the school choir but then I recognized the tune. It was *The Twilight Zone* theme song. Bracing myself for Kat’s response, I turned around expecting to see her kicking rocks in their direction. Instead, she was just walking toward the car with her head down.

Chapter Sixteen

While his mother panicked, Richard got a great kick out of her demand for removal over the presence of a cat.

“You would think she suffered from severe allergies,” he said over the phone.

“We had a cat when I was little for Pete’s sake!”

“Well, it isn’t so much the fact that we have a cat that bothers her,” I said. “It’s more the nature of the specific cat.”

Richard laughed. A burst of excitement went through my body. It felt good to make someone laugh. Especially someone that good-looking.

“I realize that. But it’s nonsense. A cat that predicts death. I’m sure it jumps onto beds all the time but people only notice when the circumstances happen to be drastic.”

“Well.” I was unsure whether to tell him that Tripod normally avoids human contact until the person happens to be on his or her last few hours. Richard wouldn’t have believed that Tripod’s ability to seek out those about to die was more accurate than the predictions of most doctors at Southwood. Medical professionals forget how to use their instincts because they rely on fancy equipment. Animals are different because all they have is instinct.

“Listen. Not to worry. Mother will calm down when she realizes it’s just media buzz and there’s no truth to it,” Richard said.

“Well, I wouldn’t say—”

“—I have to run. Thank you, Helen. Hope those flowers are lasting. Thanks.” The dial tone sounded before I had the chance to tell him how beautiful the flowers were.

Mrs. Wellington wasn't one of those patients with a constant stream of visitors. Other patients had grandchildren and great grandchildren visiting but Mrs. Wellington only seemed to have Richard. That was why it seemed particularly strange when she was visited by an unknown young man.

"May I ask who you are?" Ming said as he walked past reception and toward Mrs. Wellington's room. He was carrying a briefcase that must have come straight from the Sally Ann it was so battered.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Wellington," he answered.

"You must be related?" Ming persisted. The man's mouth turned into a frown and he paused as if thinking about the question.

"No. Actually I'm not."

"Well who are you then?" Ming would only play nice for so long.

"I'd rather not say if that's alright with you." The man turned on his heel with the flare of someone used to abruptly changing directions and shot off toward the room. I immediately began to worry that Mrs. Wellington had complained about Tripod to social services.

We were all milling around pretending to be busy when the man finally emerged with a handheld recorder.

"Mitchell Burns. *Frankly Newspaper*," he said. *Frankly* was a piece of locally printed trash that included nothing but unverified gossip and everybody knew it. It was strange to even hear someone call it a newspaper because it was really more of a community newsletter with blurbs about TV personalities, powerful people in Halifax

and summer socialites who came to Chester with their sailboats each summer during race week.

“I’m in charge here,” John came speeding down the hallway.

“Mrs. Wellington says she’s being held against her will in an institution with a deadly animal, what do you say to that Mr. ...?”

“Roseman,” John said with a swift nod of his head. The young man was holding the recorder in John’s direction.

“Has Mrs. Wellington’s son, Richard is it? Been to visit?” the reporter asked.

John nodded his head. There was always a side of him that relished being the center of attention. It only surfaced occasionally, usually under the influence of rum and eggnog during our karaoke Christmas parties. It was probably that attention loving side of John that prevented him from realizing how treacherous it was to deal with slimy reporters from gossip magazines.

“Would you confirm the fact that Richard is entangled in a love triangle in the city while his mother languishes away here in the country under constant threat?”

“Love triangle?” John voiced my exact thought.

The reporter nodded in a way that indicated John should do the same.

“I’m sorry. We’re busy right now. It’s time for you to go. Thank you for your visit,” Ming motioned toward the door.

“Would you say the employees are just as afraid of the cat as the patients are?”

“I’d say that visitors are afraid of me when they overstay their welcome. Do you want me to spell my name for the article?” Ming delighted in intimidating people. This

time though, it didn't seem to be working. The young man smiled and approached her desk.

"I will be forced to run this terrible story about an elderly woman being held here against her will under constant threat, unless I have more details about the lawyer. People in the city like that kind of stuff, love affairs, intrigue. It distracts them from their own boring lives. Same reason people read those drugstore romance novels."

"I thought people just bought those to look at the covers with the heaving bosoms on them," Ming's eyes narrowed.

"Women buy them, not men," the young man's eyes narrowed along with hers.

"Richard is a very nice man, I'm sure he wouldn't involve himself in any situation with more than one pair of heaving bosoms. That's John, J-O-H-N, Roseman, R-O-S-E-M-A-N."

Chapter Seventeen

Few things are worse than accidentally finding the draft of your husband's obituary. Of course, it would have been one thing if he was actually dying but try having your perfectly healthy husband writing his last words.

In the first place, I had only gone into his office in search of a paperclip to attach the epaulette shark information sheets together. There weren't any paperclips on his desk but I noticed a heavy beige sheet of paper sitting on the little table beside his printer. I figured it was one of his nearly weekly letters to the editor of the Halifax paper noting typos. It was his hobby to examine the paper for errors in spelling or grammar then write outraged letters. As I got closer, I saw that it was his obituary and that accounted for his use of the special paper. Nothing but the best for his last paragraph.

Harold Hunter Ness

A pioneer of words, Mr. Ness has regrettably uttered his last. Though his education was comprehensive enough to have ensured a successful foray into academia, Mr. Ness instead decided to disseminate his knowledge of Greek and Latin among the greater community of Chester. Rather than contend with the drudgery that accompanies instructing university-aged children, who prefer beer to Beckett, Mr. Ness took up a post in the library. During his reign at the Chester Public Library, Mr. Ness's affection for Xenophon and Thucydides, was not tarnished by the unfortunate disinterest of the library patrons who, perhaps worse than preferring beer to Beckett, preferred Steel [Danielle] to Shelley. Upon

retirement, Mr. Ness moved from Ancient Greece toward current events with the advent of his career as a journalist and obituary writer. If he could not serve his fellow community members in life, through his extensive knowledge of the greatest period of human history—Greece in the 5th century B.C.—at least he went on to serve them upon their deaths with his noteworthy obituary writing. He also made unparalleled peanut butter and banana sandwiches due to his revolutionary incorporation of sour cream.

I couldn't believe it. Instead of writing about his affection for his wife like everybody else, he wrote about his affection for Xenophon and Thucydides. Whoever they were. Xenophon didn't wash and iron his clothes! Thucydides didn't prepare his meals! It had been so long since Harold had made a peanut butter and banana sandwich I doubted he even remembered how. Besides, I was the one who taught him the trick about the sour cream. How were people supposed to react when they read about their own refusal to learn from his alleged wealth of knowledge? The sound of the door creaking open made me drop the obituary and quickly back out of the office. The paperclip was far from my mind at that point.

“Hello Mrs. Ness!” It was the Albino Kid. He had been walking in and out of our house without knocking for a month and I didn't know him as anything other than *Albino Kid*. I had surrendered my efforts when it came to barring him from Kat's room. The two were certainly just friends. When I emerged from the hallway, Kat and the Albino were standing above the shark tank. On the front of the Albino's t-shirt there was a picture of a

cow wearing a party hat. Kat was dipping her hand in the water as if trying to get the shark's attention.

"He's defective. It's ageism. They sold me a defective shark because I looked young and stupid enough not to know the difference," Kat was saying. She didn't seem to ever say anything without a certain level of harshness in her voice. Looking at her scowl down at the shark you wouldn't have believed that she was someone people copied from in math class.

"Animals can't be defective, they can only be sick," the Albino Kid told her.

"Wait a minute, what's your name?" I finally asked him.

Kat looked at me with that expression of hers that seemed to suggest the unlimited nature of my stupidity. The Albino looked confused as if no one had ever asked his name before.

"I don't really go by a name," he said.

"You're worse than Prince, at least he had a symbol." Kat leaned over the tank but looked at the Kid's reflection when she spoke.

"It's just that people don't need names," he said. "Names are just labels. People just talk to me that's all, they don't need to call me anything."

"What do you write on your tests at school?" I challenged.

"I leave the name space blank and they know that one's mine. Unless someone forgets to write their name, then I tell them mine's the one with the higher mark."

"That can't be true," I said.

He shrugged.

"So your parents didn't give you a name?" I couldn't stop with the questions.

“Nope,” he paused. “They decided to wait until I was old enough to choose a name myself, seeing as how I’d have that label for the rest of my life, but I decided not to take one.”

“That’s legally impossible. They had to put something on your birth certificate,” I figured that would get him.

He smiled and reached into the pocket of his wide legged jeans. Each leg was wide enough to fit an entire person on either the left or the right. His wallet was attached to his belt by one of those metal chains that kids think they need. As if they ever have any money in their wallets. He flipped open a plastic batman wallet and yanked out a beat-up plastic card. The corners were folded up and the plastic was creased but it was a birth certificate alright.

“See how they got around that one?” he asked. In the name space it said, *Blank Krumm*.

“Your name is Blank.” I decided to think of him as Blank from that moment on.

“No. That just means I don’t have a name. Like you said, they had to put something,” he insisted.

“You have a last name,” I pointed out.

“Speaking of names, I haven’t decided what to name him yet,” Kat looked down at the shark. “Maybe Gargantuan, he’s so lazy and defective.”

From cleaning out the tank all the time, I could have told her that he certainly wasn’t defective in the area that produced waste.

“Why does he even need a name?” Blank persisted.

“Shut up,” Kat said.

“Your name is officially Blank?” I couldn’t help but ask again.

“That’s it, his name’s going to be Name,” Kat said.

“That’s a brilliant name for a shark,” Blank added.

“That is just plain dumb. Name isn’t a name,” I argued.

“This whole tendency to name things is only a modern conception. If you ask me, it all goes back to capitalism and the exploitation of objects for capital. Do you think cavemen gave each other names?” Blank asked.

“I don’t know about names but I’m sure they had special grunts,” I decided.

“Hey Name!” Kat called into the tank. The little shark was just as lifeless as ever.

Chapter Eighteen

When Richard suggested meeting in a bar, I momentarily saw myself draped over a piano singing something seductive in a sultry voice I never had and never would have. I

Chapter Eighteen

When Richard suggested meeting in a bar, I momentarily saw myself draped over a piano singing something seductive in a sultry voice I never had and never would have. I couldn't help but associate him with all things glamorous. He was my Gatsby. Or something flashy; I never finished watching the movie and wasn't sure what happened in the end. By that point, I was thinking the suggestion of Richard being involved in some type of love triangle was absolutely crazy. Also crazy was his suggestion to meet at Gus's, but I understood that he couldn't visit his mother at Southwood until she cooled down.

So it was not that long after I had sworn against going to Gus's that I was sitting in the dark place, tapping my fingers on the greasy table and looking at the little plastic tubes of ketchup and red pepper flakes. The little plastic tubes of flakes were labelled *red pepper flakes* and down below in miniature black print it said, *ingredients: red pepper flakes*. I wondered if Richard would find that as funny as I did. Glancing at myself in the battered metal of the napkin dispenser, I felt a bit guilty about wearing the frosted pink lipstick. Beforehand, it seemed perfectly reasonable to look presentable for a business meeting but I wondered if Richard would notice. I dropped the napkin dispenser like a hot potato when I saw Twyla approaching.

"You outta napkins?" she asked wearily. I shook my head.

"Root beer?" I requested.

"Make it two rye and gingers. Doubles," a smooth voice said from behind my chair. Twyla raised one eyebrow and studied Richard like he was a stone monument. She

eventually nodded and sauntered back toward the bar. Drinking rye was both frightening and exciting because I certainly wasn't a drinker. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had rye.

"How are you this evening?" he asked, pulling out the bulky wooden chair opposite mine. He must have come straight from work because he was still wearing his navy suit and yellow silk tie. I knew the frosted pink lips were foolish.

"I like your tie."

"Thank you. Thank you very much." He seemed to be looking across at me and searching for something to compliment me on but drawing a blank. Twyla returned with our drinks and planted them on the table so hard that a portion of the light brown fizz swirled up and over the side of the glasses. That was a break, the less I had to drink, the better off I would be.

"That'll be twelve," she announced. I reached for my purse.

"Please, allow me," Richard placed his hand over mine. His hand was as cold as mine was hot. I had been planning on pulling out the ruffled ten I had stuck in my wallet but Richard handed Twyla a credit card. It was one of those gold ones.

"I'll open a tab thanks," he said with a wink.

Twyla snatched the card and lumbered away. My heart was racing as I lifted up the glass of rye and took a sip. It seemed to burn all the way down but I pretended to smile.

"Mummmm," I said.

“Perhaps we should toast something, no?” He raised his glass. I raised mine obediently. It had been a long time since I raised a glass to anything. I felt unusually sophisticated.

“To us,” Richard said. I completely froze. I couldn’t even move my glass toward his. Instead, he pushed his glass forward for the clink. As I slowly took my second sip, Richard tilted his head back and downed the contents of his glass like a shot. He slammed the empty on the table and motioned toward the bar. I wasn’t quite so sure that would get results from Twyla.

“Well. What can we do about my mother?”

Twyla appeared beside our table out of the darkness.

“Two more,” he said. “This whole cat business is asinine.”

I might have defended Tripod if I hadn’t been so distracted by the horror of having to finish my drink before the next one arrived.

“No one actually believes that crap about the cat, do they?” He picked up a packet of red pepper flakes and immediately dropped it on the table.

“Well the whole thing is, Tripod senses death but he doesn’t cause it. He’s not dangerous.” I was tempted to pick up the pack of pepper flakes and put it back in the little basket but I stopped myself.

“You can’t expect a reasonable person to believe that a *cat* is capable of making scientific calculations. You can’t believe that death is foreseeable and foreseeable by a *cat*.”

I didn’t want to make a fool of myself arguing but Tripod was never wrong. Not even once. Twyla appeared before I had to think of anything and plunked our new drinks

on the table. I tried taking a bigger sip of my first drink but nearly choked. Luckily, Richard didn't notice.

"Asinine cat," he said. "Well, I suppose the real problem is my mother."

I shook my head. It seemed best to defend her.

"I thought country people had more sense," he continued. "I thought you people knew what cats were for. Catching mice."

It was time to be insulted, but somehow I felt more embarrassed about not having finished the drink. I held my breath and downed the rest, feeling the fizz in my nose. Richard followed suit and finished his second drink. He snapped his fingers in the air and beckoned Twyla again.

Instead of coming to our table, she shouted across the bar, "Yeah?"

Richard pointed at his empty glass and held two fingers aloft. I was mortified. The station wagon was outside but I would have to walk back to the house. Inside, I felt pleasant as if there was a warm electric blanket in my chest.

"You drink slower than my ex, it used to take her an hour to finish a martini. Of course, she was always worrying about getting fat from the olives." He looked toward the bar.

"I've never tried a martini." God knows why I told him that.

"Really?" Richard's tone suggested a lack of surprise. That hurt my feelings a bit, but I ignored myself and kept drinking. I wasn't supposed to care but I was hoping that Richard didn't think of me as a Dorothy.

"You're married. What kind of man is your husband?"

The question was a spark of hope. He was asking about my love life. He was curious about my husband. I hadn't felt attracted to Harold the way I was attracted to Richard in years. Thoughts raced through my mind. I wanted to make a joke out of my marriage because that's what it had become. Richard tilted his head back and sucked out the last few drops of rye before crunching an ice cube.

"I mean, is he a rye man or a beer drinking one?" Richard added.

I looked down at the table. "Apple juice," I said quietly. Richard burst into a loud round of laughter.

"So. Is there any way you can get rid of the cat or should I speak to your boss?" he said after catching his breath.

It was the first time in my entire life stumbling through the door and it was only seven in the evening. I wouldn't have said I was drunk. I had never been drunk in my life. Everything was spinning slightly but I felt great. Better than usual. Even the shark seemed exciting. Not many people could have said they had a shark in their living room, let alone one named Name. I was almost like one of those eccentric people you read about in places like *Frankly*. I struggled to get my shoes off and knocked over the brass pot where we kept our umbrellas. It made a loud clang but that seemed kind of funny.

"Are you alright?" there was a degree of annoyance in Kat's voice which I appreciated at the time. Somehow I figured that nasty edge was what made Kat Kat. I decided not to pick up the umbrella stand.

Kat and the Albino were standing over the tank in the living room when I entered. It seemed best to stand with my hands behind my back. That way, I would look more dignified.

“Hello there Blank,” I said to the Albino. He looked unusually serious.

“I don’t really like it when you call me that.”

“This shark is broken,” Kat interrupted.

“Animals can’t be broken. Didn’t we already go through this?” In my dizzy state, I was feeling desperately passionate about the shark. It seemed as if he didn’t deserve to be condemned.

“It’s Harold’s fault!” I pointed at the tank.

“What’s actually bothering you?” Kat said in a deep voice.

“Maybe it’s the castle he doesn’t like,” I said. “I know how he feels. Underappreciated. Overlooked. He wants better furniture.”

“Told you there’s always something screwed-up over here,” Kat said to Blank.

“I mean, he researches everything,” I swung my arm toward Harold’s office.

“Why didn’t he find out the problem with the shark? He could have been working on that instead of writing obituaries without mentioning his wife?”

“Did I miss something?” Blank asked.

“What have you been drinking?” she asked. The haze that seemed to have settled over my field of vision made it look like there were two Kat’s confronting me.

“Rye.”

“I like rye,” Blank said.

“How old are you?”

“What do you think Kat, should we tell her?” He looked from me to Kat. Three doubles and I was part of their club. They were going to tell me something. A secret that I might otherwise have never known.

“She’s cool,” Blank said. “Let’s just tell her.”

“No!” Kat practically screamed.

“Secrets get you nowhere,” he continued. “One time, my uncle had this dog that was almost five-foot-five. I think it was the tallest dog of its’ breed ever born, but my uncle wouldn’t call Guinness. So you know what happened? Nobody ever knew that my uncle once owned the tallest dog in the world. Five-five. Sitting down.”

“Give me a break. You’re full of shit,” Kat said.

“Tell me what?” I felt like bouncing up and down but tried to keep my body under control. They both probably thought I was nuts but at that moment, I wasn’t concerned.

“*Nothing*,” Kat glared at Blank before turning back toward me. “Where have you been? You know what we had for supper? Peanut butter and banana sandwiches with sour cream.”

“Sour cream?” Blank made a disgusted face.

“That meanie!” I wanted to burst into tears. Harold could have made it for me but he never did. I was nothing more to him than a glorified chef and tank cleaner. His obituary proved it. Apparently on his way to the kitchen, Harold suddenly appeared in his maroon housecoat, hair frazzled.

“You meanie!” I shouted.

“Are you quite alright?” He studied me like a zoo animal. My liberation was squashed. Instead of feeling giddy, I began to feel incredibly sad. It was like someone unplugged the electric blanket but it was still wedged in my chest.

“Why wouldn’t I be alright?” I stared at the floor. The sound of his slippers padding across the floor meant that all he wanted was a snack.

“You seem a little off,” he said.

“I’m a little off!” I was filled with rage. “Who’s the one drafting his own obituary?”

“You seem to be slurring,” Harold said.

“She was drinking rye,” Blank added.

“You left me out. I’m not in your obituary.”

“God. What a bunch of weirdos,” Kat said.

“He professed his love and affection for every Greek but said nothing, not even one word, about me. The one person who looks over his bananas for bruises! The one who told him about the sour cream and peanut butter! He didn’t know that combination even existed before he met me!”

“It doesn’t exist. Really,” Blank said.

Harold opened the freezer door and I was annoyed by the humming noise of the freezer. He pulled out the ice cream and placed the entire container of mint chocolate chip inside the microwave. Standing directly in front of the microwave he watched the container spin around on the glass plate. No matter how many times I told him that it spread bacteria when he heated the ice cream container, he did it anyway. I collapsed on the sofa, feeling completely exhausted.

“You put ice cream in the microwave.” Blank seemed to reasonably assume Harold was tired and unaware of what he was doing.

“He knows,” I hung my head between my legs and the sensation was refreshing. It felt like a carnival ride. I was slowly spinning.

“Ice cream was meant to be consumed in a semi-soft state. We eat it outdoors in the sunshine and I am merely recreating the optimal condition for consumption,” Harold explained.

“Old people have sensitive teeth. Cold stuff gets them every time,” Kat said loudly.

“I most certainly do not have sensitive teeth thank you. Helen, I suggest you take a cold shower before coming to bed.”

I heard what he said. I listened to the microwave door pop open. There was the sound of Kat and Blank laughing and the clink of the metal ice cream scoop as Harold placed it on the counter instead of in the dishwasher. With my eyes closed and head still dangling, I imagined being on a Ferris wheel and throwing snowballs of grape nut ice cream at Harold who was standing down below. In my vision, I could only see the top of his head. He was smack in the middle of a bundle of colourful balloons, reading a book. He had always hated grape nut ice cream because the nuts got too chewy when heated. His bald spot was my target.

Chapter Nineteen

The next day I had a splitting headache and my tongue felt like sandpaper. Even though it was to be a day off, I was called into work because John was in a panic. As soon as I walked in the door, he demanded to know why I hadn't told him about the meeting with Richard. I shrugged. Something prompted me to be a bit secretive about the whole thing. I imagined Richard and I were partners, like Bonnie and Clyde without the gun fights. I did have a beige tam, even if I'd never worn it before.

"He wants us to remove Tripod. Can you believe that?" John was scratching his bald scalp furiously. It was a nervous habit of his. You could tell whenever he finished resolving a dilemma because of the red streaks across his scalp where he had been scratching.

"Oh really?" I felt a bit guilty for attempting to play it cool.

"And what are we supposed to do? Where will we put him? Does he think we can just put an ad in the paper? One free cat, will eventually reveal your impending death just in time to say goodbye to relatives," John continued.

"Sounds convenient when you put it that way," Ming said. She was in the process of rolling a lint brush all over her bright pink dress.

"Now this is what they call bad PR. They say there is no such thing as bad publicity. It doesn't work that way for care homes," John kept scratching his head. It was funny to hear John, who thought red suspenders were the height of formal wear, speak of PR. Part of me didn't want to see Tripod go. He was part of our family in a strange way.

“What if we put him out on the streets? Do you think he could walk down a street and cuddle up on the porch of somebody about to die?” Ming smiled.

“This is not a joke. It just isn’t,” John said seriously.

I felt bad for John. His younger brothers were both rich because of the electrical business they started years before but John seemed doomed to spend all his days at Southwood. While his brothers were hailed as local gems for fixing power outages, John was held in contempt for running a care home that took the last pennies from their senile relatives.

“Well the cat did just show up here out of the blue, he must have sensed something,” Ming swiped the lint brush across the shoulder of my cotton blouse. Just as I was about to examine my shirt in greater detail, we heard the blare of a patient alarm. Plugging our ears, we advanced toward Mrs. Wellington’s room. When we passed Mr. Cantwell in the hallway, he said hello as if nothing were happening. He couldn’t hear the alarm sounding without the hearing aid which he always left on his bedside table. He shuffled slowly toward his own room as we rushed past.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed with her little black patent purse in her hand. Instead of wearing one of her candy coloured suits, she was dressed all in black. Her face was unusually pale and her lips were smeared with what looked like multiple coats of red lipstick. This time though, there wasn’t a smudge on her chin. She must have sat there painstakingly applying the lipstick before pushing the panic button.

“I would like to inform you that this is the end of the world as we have known it.” Her expression was grim, her head held high as usual. John looked puzzled.

“I’m sorry.” He cupped a hand behind his ear.

“I said, this is the end,” she repeated.

John still hadn’t heard her. He held up a finger.

“One minute. Can you just hold on? Ming will turn this thing off.” He waved Ming out of the room indicating for her to deactivate the buzzing alarm at the desk. If it sounded for longer than five minutes, an ambulance would show up and we would be billed five hundred dollars to send it back to the hospital. When the buzzing stopped, everything sounded so much quieter than it had before.

“Now, what did you say, Mrs. Wellington?” he asked.

“Do you know what my son said to me this morning?” She slowly crossed one withered leg over the other and I noticed her sheer pantyhose had been replaced by transparent black ones.

“When I phoned my son’s office to discuss the situation here, his secretary put me on hold and came back with a message from Richard—he was in the middle of handling an important murder case and this probably wasn’t the best time. Now, what do you think about that? I told that little girl that he would be handling his mother’s murder case soon. Naturally, she thought that was a big joke.”

“She’s right, he *will* be handling her murder case if she doesn’t stop setting off that alarm,” Ming said in my ear.

“Ha!” Mrs. Wellington’s eyes popped. Ming never learned that our patients *never* heard what we wanted them to hear, but *always* heard exactly what we didn’t want them to hear.

“What are you suggesting we do here?” John asked Mrs. Wellington. He gave his head a light scratch.

“You don’t have to be afraid of Tripod,” I couldn’t help but say.

“My dear, what makes you think you’re safe from harm? He could just as easily jump up on your lap.”

“Mrs. Wellington as you are perfectly healthy, you have nothing to worry about,” John said.

“I can assure you that I will not be well for long under such stress and I am demanding that something be done immediately.” She was staring straight at John like a nun with a whip. John let his head droop down toward the floor and shook it slowly from side to side. He did that whenever he was at a loss for words.

“Mrs. Wellington, the cat isn’t really dangerous. It’s like an angel cat. A cat who likes to comfort people in their final moments,” I tried again.

“Well, it wouldn’t be much comfort to me. I hate cats. Always have. Plus, I think I may have developed an allergy to the fool things.” She scrunched up her nose as if just thinking about cats made her allergies flare.

“How about we make sure to keep the cat away from you?” Ming proposed.

“If you people care for that cat so much why don’t you try having it in your own living quarters?” Mrs. Wellington snapped again.

For some reason, John and Ming both looked in my direction.

“Helen already has one unusual pet, what’s another added to the menagerie?”

John flashed me his hopeful smile. Everybody in town had heard about the shark. Since they seemed to find it so interesting, I didn’t mention that the creature was basically lifeless.

“John, no. I mean, I’d really rather not.” As much as I hated to see Tripod go, there was no way I could imagine bringing him home. Harold was unpredictable enough. Besides, we couldn’t have a shark and a cat living under the same roof.

Chapter Twenty

The day John asked me to take Tripod, I kept thinking about how Kat might react. I wasn't sure what to say about the whole situation. She clearly had an interest in those dark kinds of things, but there was a difference between enjoying creepy Goth music and living with a cat labelled as the *Grim Repurr*.

That evening, Kat didn't come home for supper. When she had first arrived, I tried to test every vegetarian dish I could find figuring there had to be at least one that Harold wouldn't complain about. Quickly, I figured out why vegetarians are so thin; they go through a lot of effort just to make one dish. There are carrots, zucchini, celery and other things to chop, potatoes to be peel, onions to be minced, not to mention all the time you spend walking around the grocery store trying to locate unusual kinds of produce or obscure spices. And I also started to wonder why they called eggplant *eggplant* in the first place. It's a purple vegetable that has nothing to do with an egg. It's not technically even egg shaped. Harold generally hated any dish containing melted cheese because he detested the stringiness but he had been forced to eat a lot of vegetarian lasagne since Kat's arrival.

"We could have had steak," Harold said as I passed him a plate of eggplant lasagne. It didn't usually respond well to reheating after having been frozen but it would have been too complicated to make after work.

"I wish she would call." I worried whenever Kat didn't come home after school. She had been missing lots of dinners and I wondered what she was eating but, more crucially, what she was doing. She wasn't exactly the type that did after-school sports

practices. I couldn't stop thinking about the secret Blank had been on the verge of telling me. Whatever they were up to, I hoped it wasn't illegal. It could have been bootlegging. There was no shortage of older people who couldn't get out and got others to deliver their booze but it was technically illegal for the delivery people to charge them extra. Technically, they might not have been old enough to buy liquor but they could have had fake ID's for all I knew. The whole thing made my head ache.

"When you went to the tavern the other night, were you receiving some type of legal advice?" Harold was in the process of buttering his third roll. He generally ate three or four rolls and only a few bites of eggplant lasagne whenever I served it.

"It was a work-related meeting." I felt a surge of delight at the thought of myself having a meeting outside of work with another man.

"What was the topic?" Harold popped the last bite of the roll in his mouth. He was attempting to be casual about the whole thing but it was clear that he was dying of curiosity because he never asked me questions about work.

"Different issues came up." I took a bite of the lasagne and felt that it tasted better than ever.

"Such as?" Harold went for his fourth roll.

"Oh I don't know. Life, cats, drinking."

"Are you joking?"

"Sorry," I giggled. Whenever I tried to sound vague and mysterious, whatever I said ended up sounding ridiculous.

“Helen, is there something you want to tell me? I’d like to hear it sooner rather than later.” He looked so serious that I wondered if John had phoned and asked *him* about adopting Tripod.

“About the cat?”

“I will come right out and ask, what kind of a lawyer is this man? Does he happen to be a divorce lawyer?” Before I could even laugh, he continued. “I redrafted my obit, obituary, rather. You are now mentioned as you should be.”

“Oh,” I nodded slowly, fully aware that I wasn’t answering his question.

“I can show you,” he actually seemed slightly shy about the whole thing.

“If you want.” I felt suddenly powerful. He fished out a crumpled up piece of computer paper from the pocket of his plaid dress shirt. It was written by hand instead of on the computer. He cleared his throat as if about to read it but then quickly passed it to me instead.

Harold Hunter Ness,

Harold was absorbed by his work. Like most of the greats, he often failed to credit those who contributed to his success. Helen was a Penelope, in beauty and wit, and Harold, not much of an archer, was lucky to have captured her affection at all.

My amusement faded. Penelope meant nothing to me. She was just a character in another one of his books. Why couldn’t he have compared me to someone people actually heard of? Elizabeth Taylor in her younger days. Not that even my toenail resembled Elizabeth Taylor in her younger days but it would have been something. He

was still professing his affection for Xenophon and Thucydides, whoever they were, probably the two men with the longest and most complicated names. It was just like him, not living in reality but in books.

He was looking at me expectantly when I dropped the thing on the table beside our napkins. I couldn't imagine why he thought it was an improvement.

"You don't like it?" he asked.

"You know what the worst part is? Having to ask to be included in your husband's obituary; it's like asking to take part in your own wedding."

He looked dejected but he still didn't say he was sorry. He slowly reached across the table and picked up the piece of paper. Painstakingly, he folded it just the way it had been folded before and slipped it back in his pocket. Without looking back at me, he picked up his fork and took a huge bite of the lasagne. I wasn't sure what he was doing. He certainly wasn't a stress eater but he began taking forkful after forkful off his plate. It put me in mind of those eating competitions on television, the speed with which his fork went toward his mouth. It looked dangerous.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He glanced up before devouring another mouthful. "Not too bad," he said between bites. I was fed up with his antics.

"Will you please?"

Instead of stopping, he scooped some of the sauce onto his roll and consumed the entire thing.

"What are you doing?" I repeated.

“Are you going to eat yours?” he asked. I shook my head in disbelief as he reached across the table and began to shovel my dinner in his mouth.

“Are you quite alright?” I asked.

“Yes.” He kept chewing, “Thank you for asking.”

I stayed up late that night, satisfying my hunger with bacteria infested ice cream. It was hard to stop thinking about the germs that might have spread through the container due to Harold’s heating. They advise you to throw away your ice cream when the power goes out because it’s dangerous to melt and re-freeze. Every bite was tasty but suspect.

The doorknob didn’t turn until it was almost eleven o’clock, and I was half-asleep by the time Kat came in.

“You missed supper.” I was trying to stifle my yawn but it came out anyway.

“Well yeah,” she laughed. She dropped her backpack on the floor and it landed with a thud. It made a sharper sound than usual when it hit the floor, and I noticed the army-issue bag had been replaced by a black bag with metal spikes sticking off all over it. It looked more like a medieval implement of torture than a schoolbag.

“What is that?”

“What?”

“The thing with the spikes.”

“A gift.”

“From Blank?”

“Stop calling him that.”

“That’s his name isn’t it?”

“I doubt it. He’s such a liar.”

“Then why are you friends?”

“It’s no different from reading a book.”

“What?”

“When you read a book you suspend your disbelief. Same with talking to him.”

She started for the kitchen.

“That’s different. You could call if you’re not coming home for supper.” I decided not to get up from the sofa because I didn’t want her to know I was waiting up for her. On any talk show devoted to parenting, they advise one to make the teenager believe she has freedom. They would also say that showing interest is generally good.

“Where were you anyway?”

“Out.” She opened the fridge door and I could hear her shuffling things around.

“Out where?”

“Out out.” She closed the fridge.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“No.” She pulled the bread from the cupboard and began to smother it with jam.

“Do you want a sandwich?” I would have made her something better than jam and bread.

“No! I can make one myself alright?”

I decided to back off. If I pushed her too hard, she would become even more aggravated and distant. I went back to reading *Women’s Digest* as if I had been having a wonderful time relaxing instead of staring at the clock for three hours.

“Waste of trees,” Kat said with a mouthful of jam sandwich.

“What?” Her bedroom door was closing when I looked down and realized she meant *Women's Digest*. I couldn't help but think how wrong she was. I especially liked the laughter for therapy page with all the jokes. Flipping through, I read the first joke on the page, *one strawberry said to the other strawberry, if you weren't so fresh, we wouldn't be in this jam*. I thought that was cute. Kat wouldn't have.

Chapter Twenty-one

When the phone rang around ten in the evening, I had a bad feeling. We were normally fast asleep by nine. In fact, Harold was in bed and snoring like a tractor as I raced toward the phone. There was really no point in rushing, as far as Harold was concerned, because he wouldn't have woken up if there was a bagpipe competition taking place on his eardrum. It was Nancy, one of the regular night nurses.

Mrs. Wellington was missing.

It was a clear night and I raced under the stars to arrive at Southwood as quickly as possible. If a raccoon had scampered into my path, he would have been a goner. Road pizza as John often said. When I jumped out of the car, the crickets were humming as if nothing had happened. I felt like telling them to just be quiet. Inside Southwood, Nancy was running around like an ant in a bowl of sugar. Her cheeks were wet from crying. The other night lady, Ethel, was outside with a flashlight.

"I might have dozed off for ten minutes in the sitting room but other than that I was making the rounds," Nancy explained.

Everyone knew that Nancy often napped in the sitting room; in the mornings there was often a wet little puddle of drool where her head rested against the back of her chair beside the window, but it wasn't nearly late enough for the night nurse to need rest.

"Is there anything missing from her bedroom? Did she take anything with her?" I asked, thinking about her cartloads of makeup and stacks of hat boxes. Nancy shrugged and began to sob out loud. She always treated every problem like a personal tragedy.

“Let’s go check.” I put my arm around her and envisioned Southwood being sued by Richard if anything happened to his mother under our care.

Mrs. Wellington’s room was neat as a pin. The blankets were pulled tightly across the bed and her pillows were fluffed as if she hadn’t been to bed at all. Her hat collection was still neatly stacked in the corner of the room and her violet plants sat innocently on the window sill. It seemed as if everything was in order. Then, I noticed the photograph of Richard and his ex-wife was missing.

Richard was on his way in no time. Apparently, his important murder case was suddenly less important. For some reason, I was struck with the idea that Tripod might also be missing. I could see Mrs. Wellington shuffling through town wearing one of her bright coloured suits while heading for the water with Tripod and a block of cement in a big burlap bag, a sinister smile spreading across her heavily made up face. When I reached the alcove by Tripod’s usual window, I saw the orange ball of fur sleeping soundly.

We heard the screech of Richard’s car before we even realized that it wasn’t the local kids slamming on their brakes to make tracks across the road. When the door swung open, a red faced Richard stormed inside.

“Where is she,” he demanded. Even the tips of his ears seemed red.

“I’m so sorry,” Nancy said between sobs. She was clutching a disintegrated wad of Kleenex and her face was blotchy.

“Who is this woman?” Richard asked as Nancy wrapped her arms around him.

“That’s our night nurse, Nancy,” I said.

“Why is she hugging me? Why did she say sorry about my mother? She hasn’t passed away!”

“I’m sorry,” Nancy continued. “I said I’m sorry because it’s all my fault she got away. I’m the one who fell asleep.” Richard squirmed and Nancy released her grip but didn’t let go. Her pale fleshy arms looked even flabbier against the black of Richard’s suit jacket. As she rested her head against his chest, I held my breath thinking about what her tears might do to his nice silk tie.

“What do you mean, got away? She’s not an animal. She’s not a mental patient,” Richard stepped backwards and wrenched himself away from Nancy.

“I’m so sorry about this misunderstanding sir,” John walked toward Richard with an air of authority that I didn’t even think he possessed.

“What do you mean *misunderstanding*? My *understanding* is that you people have no idea where my mother is. Have you ever heard of duty of care? That means you are responsible.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry. It’s all our fault. Well, if you want to really be technical, it’s all Nancy’s fault,” John cast a quick glance at Nancy who had her hands clasped together over her chest. “You see the night nurse is responsible for watching everything at night.”

“Startling concept,” Richard said.

Nancy burst out crying before John could say anything more. He silently passed her his own cotton handkerchief. He always carried a handkerchief. The design varied according to the season but apparently there wasn’t anything special for fall because Nancy got one with little black and white cows all over it.

“It was all your talk about that idiotic cat that scared her,” Richard turned on me.

“I’m sorry about all this,” I knew it wasn’t my fault and it was terrible of him to blame me but I apologized anyway. Nancy tried to hand Richard a handkerchief but he waved her off with a disgusted look on his face.

“What is being done? Have you called Search and Rescue? The police?” Richard turned his furor on John who looked stunned. Then, Richard extracted a cell phone from his pocket and proceeded to dial 911. He paced across the lobby, his black dress shoes clicking as he went back and forth. He came to life like a cartoon character the minute he got someone on the phone.

“Yes. Hello. What’s my emergency? I’ll tell you what my emergency is. My mother was supposed to be cared for at Southwood Nursing Home but the night nurse was asleep on the job and she’s missing. No! Not the night nurse, my mother. Yes, elderly lady in her seventies. White hair. I don’t know how tall she is, she must have shrunk about a foot in the last few years. How much does she weigh? Stop asking useless questions and start searching.”

John snuck toward me, “I didn’t want this to make the news. After all the stories about Tripod, they’ll want to shut us down. No one will want to send their relatives to a place with both a death cat and an escape record.”

“Maybe it won’t make the news if they find her quickly enough,” I said. Of course, sometimes it seemed there was such little going on that it made the news if we had an extra millimetre of rain. When Richard finished his call, he started shaking the phone in the air.

“This is completely ridiculous! They’re sending an ambulance to search along the sides of the roads. How fast do they expect her to go?”

“I guess all we can do is wait.” John used the same strategy to solve all problems.

“I’m not going to wait here like a helpless moron while my poor mother wanders the dirt roads of some backwater town. I’m going to look myself.”

“Maybe someone should go with him?” Ming suggested. I noted that she wasn’t volunteering.

“Helen, you better go with him. Make sure he doesn’t get lost too,” John said.

Even though it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, I could hardly say no. It just didn’t seem safe to be screeching around in a convertible trying to locate a woman who would probably kill us both if we found her. She was furious enough whenever the cook served french fries instead of baked potato.

I clutched the door handle as Richard roared out of the parking lot. ABBA was playing on the radio and I couldn’t help but pray that if we were killed in a car accident, *Dancing Queen* wouldn’t be the last song I ever heard.

“Goddamned outdated place.” Richard switched off the radio. The convertible top was down and I was trying to keep a lookout along the sides of the roads but my hair kept blowing over my face and I couldn’t see a thing without using my hands to separate the hair and make a peephole. It was the first time I’d actually been in a convertible but I decided not to point that out.

“What’s that?” Richard said. I looked to the right and saw a large raccoon on the side of the road. A family of four little racoons had started crossing in front of us.

“Raccoons,” I answered, thinking that he saw the group in the road. I was too paralyzed to shout anything as we headed straight for them. The black eye patches and furry little heads of the baby racoons stared straight at us.

“Jesus Christ!” Richard shouted. He swung the wheel hard to the left and we just missed them by a hair. My body slammed against the hard plastic between our seats and the seatbelt felt like it was going to cut me in two. It was only seconds before I heard the noise of the car hitting the gravel on the shoulder of the road. I wanted to close my eyes but everything was happening too quickly. Just as Richard was able to slam the car off the shoulder and back onto the road, I saw the ambulance coming for us.

“Jesus,” Richard said again as he pulled the wheel hard to the right. My body instantly slammed against the inside of the car door. The ambulance just missed us. Finally, Richard slowed the car down and pulled onto the shoulder. Instead of asking if I was alright, he started yelling at me.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” he demanded.

“You said you saw them!” My heart was still racing. I decided it would be my last ride in a fool convertible. His eyes were wild.

“I saw the big one on the side of the road, not all the little ones in the middle of it!” he paused yelling at me to glance at himself in the rear-view mirror. “You lose my mother, then you almost get us killed.”

I was too stunned to even move. Almost right away, there was a light shining on us. It was one of the paramedics from the ambulance that had almost killed us.

“Are you folks alright?” Harvey Williams asked. I knew the kid drove an ambulance but I still couldn’t believe he was old enough. His face was covered with freckles and his cheeks still had that rosy glow just like when he was a boy. When he smiled, I couldn’t believe how white and perfect his teeth were. It seemed like he should have been sitting down to a tall glass of milk rather than rushing to accident scenes.

“Why are you wasting time with us?” Richard turned on him. “You’re supposed to be searching for my mother.”

“I’m sorry, sir. It looked like you might need some help that’s all.”

“Thanks Harvey.” I discovered my ears had popped and my own voice sounded miles away.

“Mrs. Ness? I haven’t seen you in a while.” Harvey’s smile was restored. He pointed the bright flashlight directly at my face and I had to cover my eyes to keep from being blinded.

“Great. A reunion. How about you two catch up later? Harvey, go do your job before you get yourself in trouble.”

Harvey nodded toward Richard who just scowled. “Goodnight Mrs. Ness,” he bowed his head before turning away. I was mortified by the way Richard treated him.

The rest of the drive was silent. I didn’t say a word to Richard and he didn’t say a word to me. When I realized that conversation just wasn’t going to take place, I stopped attempting to hold my hair back and let it whip wildly around my face. Richard didn’t have to worry about his hair but I wondered how he could possibly enjoy the cold air blasting at us.

Luckily, there were no more animals in the road but then there was no Mrs. Wellington either. I couldn’t imagine where she’d gone. In the city she could have jumped on a bus but there was nothing like that in Chester. Of course, if anyone was tough, it was Mrs. Wellington. She was the kind of woman who could have scared the ghosts out of the graveyards. Still, it was terrifying to think of what could happen to an

elderly lady alone outdoors in October. The evenings were getting much cooler and she likely hadn't worn anything very warm.

It wasn't long before Richard made it clear that he was perfectly capable of continuing the search for his mother alone. He seemed to be in a hurry to get rid of me because after screeching his car to a halt in front of the house, he reached across and unfastened my seatbelt.

Knowing that sleep would be impossible until we heard some news about Mrs. Wellington's whereabouts, I sat down beside Name's tank. He had hardly moved from his spot beside the ugly black castle in his tank.

When I looked at the clock and saw that it was half past twelve and Kat still wasn't home, part of me wanted to avoid confrontation by just floating down to Name's little castle and sleeping peacefully beside him in a bed of bubbles. I wondered whether it was the exposure to such strange animals that gave me bizarre thoughts. It seemed reasonably safe to assume that normal people didn't sit around yearning to disappear into the fish tanks in their living rooms. As sleep started to cloud my head with visions of giant plastic tank decorations all over the front lawn, I was jolted awake by the sound of the door banging open. Kat never did anything gently. Whenever she came into the house, the door flew open and smashed into the wall, contributing to the dent in the plaster she created almost immediately after arriving.

"You look tired," I said.

"I'm not the one dozing on the sofa."

“What about your homework?” It had dawned on me that if she didn’t want to eat dinner with us that was one thing, but she must have had homework she should have been doing instead of whatever it was that she was doing. As usual, the only response to my question was the rustling of her clothing as she attempted to pull off her boots and retreat to her room as quickly as possible. I may as well have asked the shark a series of questions because it seemed about as likely that he would answer me.

“Homework?” I repeated.

“What about it?”

“Is it done? Aren’t you hungry?” I was determined not to let her eat another jam sandwich for supper.

“I ate.”

“What?”

She grabbed the metal bag of spikes and headed for her bedroom.

“What did you eat?” I followed her like a puppy toward her room. My casual act didn’t seem to be working.

“What did you eat if you already ate?”

“Stuff,” she paused in the doorway with her back to me. I heard one of her signature exhales.

“What stuff?” I asked.

“Not that it matters but I had a portobello burger with sweet potato fries and homemade mayo at The Beige Bean Sprout Bistro.”

“Wasn’t that expensive?” I knew full well that the owners of the new bistro were from the city and they charged like they were too. We gave her a small allowance every week, but it wasn’t enough to pay for dinners at the Bean Sprout every night.

“Goodnight.” Instead of answering my question, Kat closed her bedroom door.

I prowled through the kitchen and wondered if Mrs. Wellington was hungry, wherever she was. She sometimes refused to eat dinner, depending on what was served. Hamburger was out. That was *food for kids at drive-in movies*, she would say. We didn’t tell her that the last drive-in movie theatre in the province closed long ago. I looked at my reflection in the plastic fridge door and realized that something had to be done. The Search and Rescue were still out looking but I couldn’t sit around and do nothing. I sprang toward the counter and snatched the car keys. By the time I made it to the living room, the burst of energy had decreased a bit. It was really dark outside and I wasn’t used to driving at night. Going into the bedroom, I hovered over Harold who was snoring, though more lightly than usual.

“You’re snoring!” I said loudly. He moved his head slightly on the pillow but didn’t wake up.

“Harold, you’re snoring!” I repeated a bit louder. His eyes flicked open then closed again.

“I snore,” he said.

“Can you come with me?” I asked in a quiet voice. He didn’t move.

“Get up!” I pulled the covers completely off of his still body. His eyes shot open and he rolled into the fetal position.

“What’s going on?”

“I need you to help me,” I said jingling the keys in the air.

Harold didn't bother to put pants on. He just threw his coat over the striped cotton pyjamas I'd given him for Christmas one year. I thought it might be chilly but being lucky enough to get him out of bed at all, it didn't seem wise to point that out.

I was driving slowly and scanning the sides of the roads even though it was highly unlikely that she had wandered that far from Southwood.

“Who is this woman?” Harold removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“The one from the city.”

“What kind of woman is she?” He yawned again and I was glad to be the one driving, even if it would have been nice if he had offered.

“She's spunky. You might say she's more of a Sally than an Eleanor.”

“Her interests?”

“She doesn't seem to like anything.” I knew how ridiculous that sounded. It struck me that we should have been taking more of an interest in our miserable patients than our happy ones.

Before I knew it, Harold's head was drooping forward. He was fast asleep with his mouth wide open just like his mother used to be in front of the television.

“She has a large collection of hats,” I said loudly.

Harold's head slowly tilted upwards. “Hats? That doesn't help much.” The head went back down and the mouth opened again.

“Keep on the lookout!” I said loudly.

His eyes opened. “Affirmative,” he said.

There just didn't seem to be anything along the sides of the roads.

When we finally got home, Harold was sound asleep. I had to practically batter him with my purse so that he would wake up and get out of the car. It was approaching one in the morning and we were both normally fast asleep by that time of night. It was really a wonder he had even agreed to get out of bed in the first place. He looked so funny shuffling up the walk in his blue and white striped pyjamas with the crumpled coat overtop.

Inside, the answering machine was flashing. I hurried over and pressed the button while Harold went in and crashed. There was a rustling before John's voice sounded on the machine, "Hello? Helen? Oh. I guess you're not there. You're not there? It's late. Well, maybe you're sleeping. Good news. We found her. Richard found her. She took a taxi back to the city! She was waiting outside Richard's apartment when he got home! Can you believe that? From what we gather, she called one of those airport taxi companies because no local drivers would go all the way to the city. Helen? Oh. I thought I just heard you. Anyway this is John, by the way. I suppose you could tell. Oh no. Am I doing it again? I am. I'm doing it. I always leave messages that are too long. I can't get used to these things. Oh. This is only making it longer. Will this be erased? I hope not. Anyway, don't worry, everything is under control. Sort of."

Chapter Twenty-two

Three days went by and there was no word from Richard. Ming bet that he was preparing a lawsuit. I thought he was most likely powerless against his mother. No matter how stubborn a man you were dealing with, his mother was almost always kryptonite. Either way, we had to know whether she would be returning and if not, where to send all those hats and bottles of wrinkle cream. There were also enough padded suit jackets to clothe the cast of *Dynasty*. As it turned out, Richard gave John a call detailing his mother's commands. She would not return if the cat was still present. If the cat was not removed, Richard promised to find a loophole in some subsection of the law, under duty of care, and sue us.

We were sitting at the round table in the social room. Old Burt Wilkie was singing a terribly loud rendition of *Danny Boy* in the other corner even though his audience had dwindled to just Phyllis Rodgers who could hardly hear or see. Burt was always singing, but it was better for everyone when he did it in his own bedroom with the door closed. In his working days, he was a carpenter, but ever since turning seventy three and moving to Southwood, he had become a singer. He would stand up in front of everyone with his eyes closed and the veins popping right out of his pale neck. The few remaining strands of white hair on the top of his head stuck right up sometimes.

"Helen, can we all just focus here?" John leaned away from the table and raised his voice. "Burt! Can you stop that for a minute?" Old Burt went right on singing. Whether it was a case of selective hearing or not wasn't clear, but I suspected that he would have stopped if he could have heard himself.

“We’re depending on you, Helen,” John went on. It was hard to imagine why he thought I should be the one to negotiate with Richard. Of course, maybe it had something to do with those flowers. Everyone assumed the lilies were a thank-you gift from Richard for taking such good care of his mother. I hadn’t bothered to correct their assumptions by explaining they were rejected by his mother and merely re-routed to my house.

“Sorry John, but I probably shouldn’t be the one to try and talk reason with Richard.” In fact, after the way he had treated poor Harvey Williams, I didn’t want anything to do with him.

“Helen, I’m not talking about Richard. I’m talking about Tripod.”

“Well I probably can’t talk reason with him either.”

“No, no. We’ve mentioned it before, you’re the only one who can take the cat home. I can’t possibly have a pet with the white carpet Barb put in,” he explained.

“You don’t have a shark,” I pointed out.

“I have enough mouths to feed without buying Fancy Feast,” Ming said.

“What about Nancy?” I asked. “She loves cats!”

John and Ming shook their heads in unison.

“Why not?”

“She already has five cats, including that outdoors one, and we don’t know how Tripod gets along with other cats. He’d probably give them a little smackdown,” Ming explained.

“Smackdown?” I asked.

“Sorry, the kids are into wrestling these days.”

“He wouldn’t eat the other cats, he’s not a tropical fish!” I argued.

John reached across the table and patted the top of my hand as if to comfort me in the face of an unavoidable tragedy.

Chapter Twenty-three

Despite all the guessing about Tripod's origins, we had no idea whether he had ever been in a car before or not. He was sleeping in his usual spot by the window when we approached in a group. As usual, there was no recognition on Tripod's part. He just continued to sleep with his little orange head buried underneath one paw. It was hard to believe that something so cute could inspire so much terror.

"You put him in the car," Ming ordered John.

"Helen is his owner now, she'll take him," John said. He was scratching his head.

"Where's Nancy?" I asked.

Conveniently, Nancy was just heading down the corridor pushing the dolly of afternoon pill trays. John had switched her from night duty shortly after the incident with Mrs. Wellington. When she came into view, Ming laughed. Nancy was actually wearing a cotton Johnny shirt with neon cats printed all over it. Their rainbow bodies sprung across the shirt as if suspended in mid-air.

"Those pills can wait a minute Nancy. Can you give us a hand?" John gave her a friendly wave.

"The pills shouldn't wait. It might throw them off," Nancy frowned. As if any of the patients would have been upset. We regularly had to open their mouths and check to make sure they swallowed their pills instead of hiding them under the tongue.

"It will only take a minute," Ming placed a hand on Nancy's shoulder. Nancy hesitated but pushed the metal tray against the wall. Her puffy cheeks were flushed.

“Is there something wrong with the little fella?” She bent down and put her face right up to the sleeping Tripod.

“No! Don’t worry, nothing’s wrong, we just need you to put it in Helen’s car,” John announced.

“You mean pick him up?” Nancy’s brown eyes widened.

“That would probably be the most effective means of transportation,” John said.

“Has anyone ever picked him up before?” Her eyes were wide.

As far as I knew, unless Tripod was the initiator, he would scamper away at the first sign of human contact.

“He won’t bite,” John said with a nervous chuckle.

“He won’t bite but he might kill you!” Ming burst into laughter. She was able to laugh at the expense of others with immunity because it was a known fact that no one could force Ming to do anything she didn’t want to do. She just wouldn’t. If I was more like that, I wouldn’t have ended up agreeing to take the cat in the first place. We cleared a space for Nancy to get through and grab Tripod. As she advanced, Tripod continued sleeping. I held my breath. Sure, I never feared the cat at work but I wasn’t sure what it would be like to hear him lurking down the hallway of my own home, if I were to hear the soft click-clicking of his paws coming down the hallway at night and toward my bedroom, it would be horrifying. Or I could be taking a shower and he could slip past the door and jump up onto the toilet and then I wouldn’t know whether he was just thirsty or if I was about to die. I hated myself for not being able to say no, for being the kind of person who didn’t see through people like Richard right away. If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t have had to remove Tripod at all.

“Just watch out you don’t press on his stomach too hard,” Ming warned Nancy.

“Why?”

“You might release the curse.” Ming smiled.

Nancy looked terrified.

“There is no curse. It’s simply hormonal. He can sense death,” John said.

I was thinking about what Tripod might do to the lifeless shark. It was too much to worry about. Nancy reached out a finger and ran it over the cat’s head as if testing the water at a public pool. There was still no response from Tripod. He obviously couldn’t sense his own expulsion. Next, Nancy ran her hand over his spiny back. We fed him regularly but his spine still stuck right out. Certain angles were worse than others. As she patted him, Tripod lifted his head. He glanced around, as if to say *I see you. Now leave me alone*, then put his head back down and closed his eyes. Nancy took a big breath and managed to wrap her hands around the little orange body but Tripod wouldn’t budge when she tried lifting him.

“He’s making himself go limp. He’s doing it on purpose! Snowball does that when I try to get her off the kitchen counter!” she said. I made a mental note to never eat any food prepared in Nancy’s kitchen.

“Just lift,” John ordered. He had stopped scratching his head but one hand was still resting on top of it in anticipation.

“Heave ho!” Ming said.

“I can’t get him up.” Nancy’s face was strained.

“That’s one thing I never said in my younger days,” Ming said. We ignored her. Nancy released her grip and stood over Tripod. It was never so difficult for a group of

people to lift up a cat. I was beginning to think we were tampering with some kind of cosmic fate by even attempting to move Tripod.

“Maybe Helen can get him,” Nancy suggested.

“Give him another yank,” Ming motioned toward Nancy.

“Alright but I don’t think he’s gonna budge.” Nancy bent over and we could see the outline of her oversized panties through her pink cotton pants. Tripod had stretched himself out across the floor as if he were half-dead, his little body was elongated in both directions with his paws as far apart as possible. It was a strange sight. Nancy didn’t know how to approach lifting him in that position. As soon as her hands touched his body, Tripod began to howl. It was a low growl at first that grew more high-pitched toward the end. It was a shock because normally he didn’t make any noise at all. The only other time we’d heard him howl like that was when Mr. Purcell’s family wanted him removed from the room during Purcell’s last moments. When we tried to get him off of the bed and out of the room, Tripod went wild. He didn’t scratch but he let out a loud yet low-pitched kind of howl. The family was even more terrified at the spectacle. Even when we managed to drag him out and close the door, Tripod scratched the bottom of the door to pieces and continuously let out agonized yelps like a cat in heat.

“Sorry folks.” Nancy released Tripod.

We all took a step back and Tripod stopped growling, put his head back down and closed his eyes.

“Maybe we could slide him onto the pill dolly and wheel him out,” Ming said.

She was only joking but John got this look on his face that meant he was considering it.

“Why don’t we just lure him out with a can of Sheba?” Nancy suggested.

John was already headed for the pill dolly.

“What about a leash or something like that?” I asked. We never did get him a collar in all the years he was with us. He seemed too powerful to require such a domestic constraint.

When Nancy returned from Bill’s Store with the collar and leash, we had to decide who would attempt to put it on the cat. Tripod obviously wasn’t too concerned about our operation because he was still sleeping peacefully in the same spot by the window.

“Go ahead John,” Ming said. John swiftly turned around and headed for the kitchen. I didn’t know what he was planning, until he returned with a bright yellow pair of dishwashing gloves.

“In case he scratches,” he explained.

Nancy handed him the collar. It was pink plastic with a little bell in the middle, exactly the kind of thing that suited a cat who could detect death. Nancy was never the sharpest. On the other hand, it did seem that the bell might have been useful in alerting us about Tripod’s whereabouts as he lurked around the house. John advanced slowly looking completely silly with the yellow dishwashing gloves, the little pink collar in his hands and an expression of utter concentration on his face. He bent down slightly and addressed Tripod.

“Hi there buddy,” his voice was slow and steady. There was no response from Tripod. He didn’t even open one eye.

“Would you like to go for a ride in the car?” John continued speaking to the cat in his bizarre and gentle voice.

“Stop talking and clamp it on ’em,” Ming spoke for all of us.

“I’m just warming him up. *Shhhhhhh*.”

Tripod must have been startled by the *shhhhhh* because his ears stood straight up and he immediately jumped up and took off. We were left standing there in shock when he disappeared down the hall hopping at top speed.

Mr. Eisnor was hobbling down the hall toward the TV room when the cat went barreling right for him. He was unsteady enough with the walker but he was only using his cane for support.

“Watch out!” Nancy screamed.

Mr. Eisnor didn’t hear her, he just kept moving along down the hall. The cat dodged the cane and ran right between his wobbly legs. Mr. Eisnor noticed the group of us running toward him and gave us a slow wave and smile. He hadn’t even noticed the cat.

“Where’s it going?” John shouted.

“Toward Mrs. Wellington’s old room,” I guessed.

We peeked our heads in the room but didn’t see anything. John thought it went toward the front door but even if that were the case, there was no way he could have escaped. Ming thought he might be sitting on her chair behind the reception desk but there was no sign of him there either. We knew the cat couldn’t have just disappeared but after an exhaustive search, we found nothing. Nancy thought we should call him Houdini

Cat but we all ignored her suggestion. After all, Houdini died when he was young. There was something about Tripod that seemed almost immortal.

Chapter Twenty-four

“Just to get this straight, you want us to take in a cat that cuddles up to people who then proceed to die without fail?” Harold asked.

We were sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. By the time I got around to telling Harold about John’s proposal, Tripod had been missing for three days. We were uncertain as to whether he would show up again or not. If he was hiding somewhere in Southwood, we figured he would have emerged by that time.

Harold put down the book in his hands and looked at me. The wrinkles on his forehead creased slightly.

“Ever since I started writing obituaries I’ve been waiting for that cat to strike again because it’s just so peculiar. But now you’re telling me its coming here? It won’t strike again until one of us is ready to die?”

“You’re making it sound worse than it is!” I argued.

We were both surprised to hear the door open. Kat hadn’t arrived home for dinner in weeks.

“Hello?” I called.

We both listened but there was no reply. That meant it was Kat. A few minutes later, she appeared in the doorway wearing a t-shirt that read, *Only a Vampire Can Love You Forever*. I would have remembered seeing that, I didn’t recognize the tight black jeans she was wearing either.

“Just in time to hear the wonderful news!” Harold said. He held his arms out to dramatize the announcement. She dropped her bag and it smacked hard on the floor.

“News?” she said in a bored voice.

“We might be getting a new pet,” Harold made an artificially happy television announcer kind of voice.

Kat raised an eyebrow ever so slightly then went toward the cupboard for bread. She didn’t bother to ask what kind of pet we were getting. That’s when I realized that curiosity is at its height during childhood because kids are experiencing everything for the first time. Then, for some reason, there is a complete reversal during adolescence. Teenagers don’t seem curious about anything. I could have knocked on Kat’s door and told her there were aliens shaped like popcorn kernels standing in the front yard waving glowing swords and she wouldn’t have bothered to look out the window.

“You can’t live on jam sandwiches,” I was tired of repeating myself. “Let me make you something.”

“I don’t live on jam. I’ve been eating out, like, every night at The Sprout.”

“The Sprout?” Harold asked.

“The Beige Bean Sprout Café,” I explained.

“Why must this young generation abbreviate everything? Not even restaurant names are sacred. Furthermore, are you running a tab for whatever vegetable things you’re eating because it seems to me that your stipend wouldn’t cover such expense,” Harold said.

Kat shrugged and started twisting off the top of the strawberry jam.

“You sure you don’t want me to make you something?” I rose from my chair.

“Yes,” Kat said in a low voice of annoyance. I sat back down.

“What do you think about cats?” Harold leaned back in his chair and laughed.

“I think people who have cats are totally pathetic. Stereotypes exist for a reason. Old ladies with apartments full of cats are pathetic.” She rolled her jam sandwich into a tube and inserted half of it in her mouth.

“Ha!” Harold pointed at her like he was solving a puzzle. “I thought you were such an animal lover you couldn’t eat meat.”

“I said I don’t like cats, not *I want to eat cats for dinner.*” She rolled her eyes but instead of retreating to her bedroom, leaned against the counter. The conversation must have been slightly amusing.

“We’re not just getting any cat,” Harold went on.

“What, you’re getting one of those freaky ones without fur? It’s not like you really have to worry about getting hair on this furniture.” I figured all along that she hated the furniture! It *was* old and worn out.

“It has fur but it might kill you,” Harold said. Kat shoved the rest of the jam tube into her mouth. Nothing seemed to surprise her.

“Is it a lion or something?” Kat turned toward her bedroom.

“Why are you home so early tonight?” I asked.

“I can go back out if you want me to.”

“No, no. I just wonder where you go every night when you don’t come home until late.”

“Yes, illuminate us with the, no doubt, fascinating tales of your adventures,” Harold said. I couldn’t believe my ears when he said that because it meant that he was on my side for once in his life. Kat stopped and leaned against the kitchen door frame. I noticed she was always leaning against something, as if standing was something tricky.

“You can’t be at that café all night, where do you go?” I asked.

“Nowhere.”

“What are you doing when you go nowhere?” Harold asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“How productive,” Harold said.

“Seriously,” she shifted and planted one foot behind her against the wall. “What kind of weird shit are you guys talking about?”

“We’re just taking an interest. We care about where you go and what you’re doing. Don’t use the s-word.” I knew the heart-to-heart was ruined by my s-word warning but I couldn’t help that.

“No. I mean, this killer pet. What is it, like, a piranha or something?” she asked.

“One just never seems to know what kind of aquatic creature might be delivered to the door completely out of the blue,” Harold mused.

“Who would win? A shark or a piranha?” Kat looked toward the tank in the living room.

“A goldfish could probably challenge our little guy without too much trouble,” I said.

“An amoeba could take him,” Harold added.

“You guys are harsh,” Kat said. I could tell that she was finally amused.

“Anyway, you know that cat you saw on the news? Tripod?” I asked. Kat was in the process of making a second jam roll when she paused and looked up.

“Cool,” she said.

“We have to find him first,” I added.

"I'm hungry," Harold announced. I groaned at the thought of making dinner.

"Anyone up for Gus's?" Harold raised an eyebrow.

"Is that a joke?" I asked. You could never be sure with him.

"Yes it is."

We all laughed. Even Kat.

Chapter Twenty-five

When we saw the convertible pull up and the top wasn't down, we figured pretty much right away that Mrs. Wellington was inside. Sure enough, we saw the ivory cane swing out from the passenger's side before the thick black shoe and the bright purple skirt. She naturally wore a bright purple jacket to match the skirt but she topped it off with a wide-brimmed red hat. Overall, the look was startling even for Mrs. Wellington but at least she was returning in style. I wondered if she was the first patient to ever escape a care home by calling a taxi.

As we all watched with our faces pressed against the front windows, Richard emerged from the driver's side of the car with a stressed look on his face. Instead of helping his mother walk to the door, he walked swiftly without her as she wobbled along with the ivory coloured cane she sometimes used. As he got closer, we scampered away from the door and pretended to be busy except for Ming who rushed behind the front desk and pretended to file her nails. It would have been completely unnatural if she actually was busy. I was in the process of checking the potted plants on the windowsill to see if they were dry and John bent over and made like he was tying his shoes.

"My mother will be returning here and I have to speak with someone about her demands," he announced. Instead of the usual suit, he was wearing a black leather jacket and a pair of blue jeans. It put me in mind of one of those Ralph Lauren commercials with the frowning models.

"Demands?" John seemed particularly timid as he stood facing both Richard and Mrs. Wellington.

“I will not return to a place with that *you-know-what* running around. There are other changes I wish to make but those can be discussed once my first demand has been met.”

“Not to worry. We have removed the *you-know-what* from the premises already,” John tried to sound reassuring.

“Just to be clear, the *you-know-what* is a cat,” Richard said.

Mrs. Wellington didn’t seem to be scowling as much as sometimes and I couldn’t help but wonder if spending a few days with Richard was worse than being with us. It was terrible, the way he had charged straight from the car without even looking back at his mother. She could have fallen flat on her face and he wouldn’t have noticed. It’s such a shame how we all end up losing our balance. In life, we start out wobbly and end up wobbly.

Mrs. Wellington cleared her throat loudly in an effort to get our attention.

“While I am at it, I must point out that breakfast should be served at a more convenient hour. Why should we all rush around getting dressed for a seven o’clock breakfast when we have nowhere to go for the rest of the day? Does that make sense? It certainly does not.” It was almost a relief when she answered her own questions because it meant we weren’t expected to respond.

“Alright, let’s go mother,” Richard tried to usher her back toward her room.

“And another thing, I don’t appreciate the dreadful singing that goes on outside of my room!”

“Singing?” I asked.

“She means Burt. Burt Wilkie!” Ming said.

“Whatever the poor fellow’s name is, someone needs to clamp his jaw shut,” Mrs. Wellington concluded. “I’ve heard midgets sing better than that.”

As she shuffled past us, Richard followed with the little suitcase she had packed to take on her escape mission.

“Poor Burt,” I said with a laugh.

“Where does she think she heard midgets singing?” Ming asked.

“You never know what some of them might have done in their younger days,” I pointed out.

When it was time for afternoon tea, I made an especially hot cup for Mrs. Wellington. After entering the room, my first instinct was to drop the tea and run.

It was a frightening sight.

Mrs. Wellington was fast asleep in her blue armchair. Her head was tilted back and her arms were dangling off the plush arms of the chair. On her lap, Tripod was fast asleep. He must have been hiding somewhere in Southwood all along.

I figured if Mrs. Wellington woke up, we’d all be goners but we knew that if anyone tried to move Tripod, he would growl and screech. At that moment, his eyes were closed just as tightly as Mrs. Wellington’s. I glanced around the room for some tool but all I saw was the large-brimmed red hat on the bed. Figuring that John wouldn’t know what to do either and fearing that the smell of the tea might somehow rouse Mrs. Wellington—who always bragged about her superior sense of smell—I knew that something had to be done quickly.

First, I swivelled my body around so that I faced the small table just beside the door. My plan was to put down the cup as noiselessly as possible. Lifting the steaming hot tea off the tray, a wave of liquid sloshed over the side and across my fingers. It was all I could do to keep from screaming. I gritted my teeth and bit the inside of my mouth. Getting myself under control, I gently placed the cup down on the table. The rectangular orange tray, I slid onto the bed. When the plastic made contact with the bedspread, there was a faint slithering sound but not enough to wake her. She was snoring faintly and, upon closer inspection, it seemed as if the cat was also snoring slightly. Of course, the scene would have been heartwarming under other circumstances, a slumbering elderly lady with a similarly sleepy cat nestled in her lap. If Mrs. Wellington were to wake and see the cat we told her was gone on her lap, there was no telling what mayhem might ensue. The problem was, that as soon as my hands were free, I had no idea what to do with them. How could I manage to get the cat off her lap without waking either one of them? There was no telling which was more fierce. Just as I was nearing the armchair, my foot hit Mrs. Wellington's purse. It wouldn't have been so bad except that the strap was covered in some type of decorative metal which made a terrible scratching noise against the hardwood floor. I figured I would be accused of trying to kill her *and* take her purse. Just as the snoring halted, I lunged forward and grabbed the wide brimmed hat off the bed and threw it toward her lap. It mostly covered the cat.

"Sorry, I was just delivering tea, go back to sleep," I said in a whisper. Her eyes were blinking slowly and she sucked in a few deep breaths of air. Her limp hands sprung to life and patted the hat on her lap. Of course, her vision was foggy after napping but she could apparently feel the weight of the cat.

“What in the name of Henry?” she grumbled.

I thought I was finished. She lifted up the hat and there he was, sleeping just as he was before.

“Get that cat off my lap,” she screamed.

Before I could react, John and Ming rushed in. Once the initial horror of the situation wore off, I felt intensely sorry for Mrs. Wellington. She didn’t deserve death. She may have been a bit of a crab but she had seemed perfectly healthy all along and we certainly didn’t wish her any harm. Of course, if you believed in Tripod’s innate ability, Mrs. Wellington’s fate would have been the same whether she was still in the city with Richard or back at Southwood. It was the first time Mrs. Wellington had ever been unable to speak.

“Oh Nelly,” John said.

“Where was it?” Ming asked.

“Lord knows,” I said.

“What do we do?” John may have been the boss but he was never a born leader.

“Phone Richard?” I said with a sense of dread.

“Yeah, right,” Ming laughed. Of course, it was a customary part of the procedure. In a sense, Tripod let us know when to call the patient’s families but, of course, with Mrs. Wellington’s recent re-arrival, it seemed a bit tricky to phone Richard and tell him that the cat we said was gone had crawled out of the woodwork somewhere and jumped onto his mother’s lap.

“Maybe we can somehow destroy the evidence.” John was desperate. I was fairly certain he meant the cat but it seemed as if there was no way of moving Tripod. We all

knew what happened the last time we tried to remove him. He was vicious. Mrs. Wellington's face turned white as the cup her tea was in.

Before any of us knew what was happening, Ming let out an animalistic yelp that would have frightened the Devil himself. It was like some kind of high-pitched samurai banshee noise. I was convinced that no other human had ever made such a sound. Tripod immediately jumped off Mrs. Wellington's lap and bolted from the room. There was stunned silence. Mrs. Wellington seemed frozen with her hands in the air as if she were holding them above the cat's slumbering body. I had my hands clasped in front of my chest and John still had his ears plugged. After a while, John slowly uncovered his ears.

"That worked. I have no idea what it was but it worked," he said.

"I was watching an A&E special on Haitian voodoo the other night. They have special sounds to ward off evil," Ming explained. She smoothed her blouse down and looked back at us as if nothing out of the ordinary took place.

"Do you think that warded off the evil?" John asked. Apparently too shocked to scratch his head, he was rubbing his elbow instead.

"I just thought it might startle the cat, that's all. I don't actually believe in evil," Ming said.

"My eardrums are still be vibrating. What a racket!" Mrs. Wellington piped up.

We all nodded. There was no telling how long Mrs. Wellington had to live. Tripod normally appeared three to four hours before the patient's death. It was just after three in the afternoon, meaning that most likely Mrs. Wellington would be dead just after seven in the evening. Instead of cursing us up and down, Mrs. Wellington closed her eyes and slowly opened them again.

“Could I have a blanket?” she asked in a quiet voice.

We scrambled in every direction until Ming pulled a folded blanket out of the closet and draped it across Mrs. Wellington’s lap. She immediately pulled the edge right up underneath her chin like a frightened child might have done. It was strange to see her acting so needy.

“Is there anything else we can get you?” John asked.

She looked at each of us with a strained sort of expression. There was a look of sorrow in her eyes that I had never seen before. It seemed that as much as she resented what her life had become, she wasn’t ready for it to end. Or maybe she was having regrets. I wondered what my regrets would have been if all of a sudden I only had three hours to live. John lightly tapped my arm and tilted his head toward the hall.

“Ming will stay with you, Mrs. Wellington and we’ll be right back, okay?” I tried to be as reassuring as possible.

Outside of Mrs. Wellington’s room, everything looked the same. That was the weird thing about the tragedy of losing a patient, Southwood was always changed but ultimately it was still the same. John kept asking what we should do. I maintained the only solution was to phone Richard.

“He will sue us. We’ll be charged with murder! Or what do they call it? Manslaughter?” John was in panic mode. He was clearly struggling to suppress the urge to pace up and down the hallway.

“He doesn’t believe in the cat anyway.” I had a flashback of Richard’s scorn at the bar when I mentioned Tripod’s ability.

“That’s worse! If he refuses to come, she could die alone. I mean, without any family beside her.” John was right; Richard was all she had.

“All we can do is notify him. Other than that, we’ll stay by her side and give her whatever she wants. It might only be a matter of hours,” I said.

“Get rid of that cat,” John seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me, “We have to get it out of here before he shows up!”

We couldn’t risk having Tripod escape for the second time. There were four of us working, John, Ming, Nancy and myself, but with our constant supervision of Mrs. Wellington and the others, we just didn’t think it was possible to get Tripod into the carrying case without extra hands. John dug the animal case out from storage himself while Ming and I sat with Mrs. Wellington. The case had only been used once and that was after Tripod first arrived, to make sure he didn’t have any diseases.

“Maybe we should call the fire department,” Ming raised her eyebrows. She had a thing for firemen. Above her desk there was a calendar the local fire department made for charity featuring our local boys scantily clad.

“We don’t want word to get around about this. After the article about Mrs. Wellington fearing the cat, what would people think if they found out the cat jumped on her lap and she died!” Ming burst into a fit of laughter. Her whole body shook.

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s not funny,” she laughed. “It’s just so damn weird.”

It was a surprise when Harold didn’t cite the million useless activities he had planned for the day but instead said he would be right over. I did begin to suspect that he had an ulterior motive, such as the opportunity to write a particularly strange obituary but

there was no time to worry about it. He said there was a message from Betty Smiley about Kat on the answering machine but I told him we didn't have time to worry about that either.

When Harold arrived, John presented him with the yellow dishwashing gloves to protect him from scratches. Harold pulled them over his hands with a gravely serious expression on his face. It was hard to be discreet and avoid attracting the attention of the other patients with Harold wearing the elbow-length gloves and creeping through the halls with a blue scrub bucket. The idea was that he would throw the bucket over the cat and we would somehow slide it toward the cage. It wasn't an extremely well thought out plan but we didn't have any time to waste. We crept into the sitting room where a group of patients were playing bridge. They were all hunched over their cards in deep concentration when Mr. Gillis looked up and saw Harold with the scrub bucket.

"Spring cleaning?" Mr. Gillis asked even though it was October. The others in the sitting room all looked up from their cards. Their white hair looked especially bright on the damp day.

"Is this one of those dinner theatre productions? I hear they're lovely," Lily said to Grace who was sitting next to her. Lily was often confused but somehow she was always sharp enough to play bridge.

"Don't peek. We wouldn't want to spoil it for you," Harold said with a wink.

"Then you should practise somewhere else," Frank said gruffly. "Bridge is a game of concentration, you know."

"We'll only be a minute." I flashed him a hopeful smile.

"At my age, every minute counts," Frank said.

We tiptoed around the room in order to avoid frightening the cat but he didn't seem to be anywhere. He wasn't nestled among any of the sofa cushions or underneath the low tables. He wasn't on the windowsill either. Harold had never seen Tripod but a three-legged orange cat was fairly hard to miss. We were just about to leave the bridge players before arousing further suspicion, when a slight rustle sounded. The noise was coming from the fireplace. We never actually used the fireplace in the sitting room because the heat was always turned up full blast for the patients, so it was clean as a new cow bell. Harold advanced with the bucket.

"Careful," I warned.

As soon as the cat saw the yellow gloves, it bolted out from the fireplace. It must have been a housewife in another life. Harold made an attempt to throw the bucket over its fleeing body but it just clattered toward the floor as the cat escaped. Harold practically jumped over the low coffee table and pulled the door shut before the cat escaped completely. Tripod turned and ran back toward the fireplace. I lunged forward but he kept running, heading for the bridge players who didn't seem to notice the cat at all. Harold turned and ran toward the table himself. When Frank saw him coming, he clenched his fists.

"I've had enough of this commotion!" Frank slammed a fist on the handle of his walker and it made a dull painful sounding thud. Next, he reached for his walker and, before long, started shuffling toward the door.

"No, no, no!" I screamed. "Stay away from that door!"

“What the devil’s got into her?” Frank asked the others. Grace and Lily were still squinting down at their cards. I decided they might not be as concerned about the cat as I had originally thought.

“We’re just trying to round up the little puddy.” It was time to come clean before Frank opened the door.

“That cat. Is it out to get one of us?” Lily asked. She clutched her baggy wool sweater over her frail shoulders.

“Jiminy cricket. I’d shoot that blasted cat if I had my gun!” Frank said. His glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose and he shoved them back up with force.

“Nobody has to worry because we’re actually removing the cat from Southwood,” I told them. Harold, who I thought would be working on cornering the cat, was standing there mesmerized watching our little discussion.

“What are you doing?” I snapped at him.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about the cat’s potential innocence.”

“What did he say?” Mary cupped one hand around her ear. She was always cupping the wrong ear, the one without the hearing aid.

“Who is that man?” Lily snapped. She was often frightened by new people.

“He must be a dishwasher,” Grace said looking at the yellow gloves.

“I’m her husband!” Harold pointed at me. It felt strange to hear those words. I supposed it was because we didn’t get out much but there was something slightly romantic about the moment.

“He’s married,” Lily said to Grace.

“Too bad,” Grace replied with a flash of her dentures. Every time we had a new man, Grace would be the first to welcome him with a gift. Of course, she couldn’t get out to buy things, meaning the gifts were usually just personal possessions like plastic combs or boxes of Kleenex. When William first arrived, she presented him with a vase of flowers that she had removed from the lobby. It took us a while to figure out what happened to them.

“Get the cat. We have to get it before Richard shows up,” I said.

Grace perked up. “Richard? Is he married?”

Frank gave his walker a shake in Harold’s direction. “Get to work young feller.”

“Young?” Harold looked at me with a slight smile.

The cat had already hopped through the chairs positioned near the doorway and I turned just in time to see him heading toward the open window on the far side of the room. As he prepared for lift-off, I dove forward and just managed to grab his little body. Harold dropped the bucket but my wrists were in the way, and I didn’t want to risk letting him go.

“Close the window you dummy!” I shouted.

“Dummy?”

He actually laughed before pulling it shut.

“Good work, you dummy!” Lily said from across the room.

Harold grabbed the carrying case and we somehow managed to shove the cat inside. It was a surprise that he didn’t put up much of a struggle.

“Where’s the dummy going?” Lily said to the others as we headed for the door.

“It’s your turn. Pay attention damn woman,” Frank ordered.

We drove home with the cat in the carrying case. Tripod was silent the whole ride over which somehow was more unnerving than if he had been howling and clawing at the metal bars. Harold thought we should have let the cat run free through the house but I worried Tripod would somehow free himself and return to Southwood just as Richard arrived. If that happened it would be *The Cat Came Back* gone wrong. At that point, I wouldn't have put it past Richard to mow down the cat with his fancy convertible. We would have just stayed home but John insisted that I be there for damage control when Richard arrived. He was convinced that Richard would throw a fit and they wouldn't know what to do without me. By that time, Harold seemed to be part of the action so he returned with me and we decided to leave the cat in the cage until we finished at Southwood. He seemed to be content in there anyway. There was also the shark to consider, though I was beginning to wonder if the shark had long to live himself because he still didn't seem to be moving around very rapidly.

Mrs. Wellington seemed to be getting worse by the time we arrived back at Southwood. Her breathing was shallow and she kept complaining about being parched.

"I feel like Lawrence of Arabia," she said.

John was holding up a large glass of water and she was drinking from one of those neon party straws. We used those straws because they were bigger and easier for the patients but at the time, the neon pink seemed grossly inappropriate. Ming was sitting on the bed fanning Mrs. Wellington with a *Macleans Magazine*.

"Did you call my son?" Mrs. Wellington asked.

"He's on his way," John told her.

I looked at Harold who was hovering in the doorway. He never made eye contact with people or stopped fidgeting. He wouldn't have admitted that without a book in his hand, he was terrified of encountering people. I couldn't even get him to go to the staff Christmas party. I was glad he was there.

John took a deep breath and put his hand over Mrs. Wellington's.

"Do you have any last...Is there anything else we can get you?" he asked.

"I would like to be wearing one of my hats." She waved a limp hand toward the stack of hat boxes near the closet.

"What colour?" I asked.

"Anything but black." It was a surprise that she didn't want to go the traditional route and wear a black hat, but I decided it was best to be as cheerful as possible and handed her a straw sunhat with pink cotton daisies sewn all over it.

"Helen?" Ming looked at me like I was insane. "You can't give the woman that hat to wear *now*."

"Excuse me. I am perfectly content with this selection. One is always best advised to keep on the sunny side and if I am to die at least it will be with a little whimsy."

While everyone else laughed, I worried that if I looked behind me Harold would have his notebook out and he would be frantically scribbling things down for the obituary. Instead, when I looked, he was smiling at Mrs. Wellington.

Next, we heard rapid footsteps leading down the hall.

"I'm here Mother," Richard was attempting to push past Harold who hadn't noticed him and was blocking the doorway.

“Sorry,” Harold mumbled as Richard almost tripped over his foot. I watched as Richard crouched down beside his mother’s armchair.

“Don’t listen to these people, Mother, you’re going to be fine. A cat sat on your lap, that’s it! Just a cat.” He let out a chuckle. “The garden hat!” He looked at his mother’s hat and smiled almost like a little boy would have smiled.

“We’ll let you have some privacy,” John said.

“Fine. Not that we need it, she’s going to be fine,” Richard said. John gave him a sympathetic smile and we all filtered out of the room, except Ming who was still sitting on the bed. John cleared his throat loudly and Ming slowly got up and followed.

“She probably only has an hour at the most,” she whispered.

“Quit it,” Richard said in a threatening tone.

I couldn’t blame him. No one wanted to accept the fact that they were losing their mother.

We sat in the visitor’s lounge on the big comfy sofas that were actually too low and too soft for our patients to sit on. Once they got down, their joints weren’t strong enough to hoist them back up.

“Where is Dr. B?” Ming asked. It always took a while for the hospital to send over Dr. Benson. Verna, at the hospital, assured us Dr. Benson would be there as quickly as possible but there was no telling how long that might take. Dr. Benson was a short man who loved sailing and always showed up looking like he just stepped off a yacht. He was never without his deck shoes, polo shirt and the brown glowing skin that he somehow maintained throughout the winter. We knew he went to those tanning beds, but he didn’t go anyplace local or we would have known where. It seemed strange that a

middle-aged man would roast his own skin on a bed of bright lights—pay money to cook himself like a turkey—but Ming said when she got her nails done at TanRite, there were usually more men going in for tanning than women.

“Poor Richard, you can’t blame him for being in denial,” I said.

“When it’s all over, I hope he doesn’t throw away her hats,” Ming said. “I wonder who she’s leaving those to.”

“What a terrible way to think.” I hit Ming’s arm.

“I wonder if she was ever a happy lady. When she was younger.” It was different to have John wondering such things.

“People get more demanding as they age. Take me for example,” Ming rested a hand on her collarbone.

“People only get meaner because they can’t do the things they used to do. They’re frustrated,” I looked at Ming. “I’m not sure about your case.”

“Where I come from, older people are always put first. You live with your elderly parents and take care of them; you would never send them off packing to a place like this,” Ming looked at John. “No offense.”

“I wonder if Dr. Benson will even make it in time,” I said looking at the clock.

“We need to buy cat food,” Harold said out of the blue.

It was typical. Whenever we were thinking happy thoughts, he would be thinking about death but the minute it was actually sensible to think about death, Harold was focused on cat food. Instead of frowning, Ming and John had wide smiles thinking about Tripod at our house. I would have been laughing too, if he was at one of their houses and not mine.

“It might be advisable to procure canned tuna instead of regular old cat food. We don’t want to get on his bad side,” Harold mused.

“Or fresh salmon cooked in a light cream sauce,” Ming said.

Harold didn’t get the joke. “Well that could work but I’m thinking the canned tuna may be best.”

At Southwood, Tripod first lived on kitchen scraps but after awhile we started buying him food. Just no-name cat food in a plain yellow can. Once at the staff party, John brought him Fancy Feast as a treat but he turned up his little nose and would eat nothing but the no-name brand. The only flavour he would ever eat was salmon, making us think that wherever he came from, he was a Maritimer.

“Look Helen, you weren’t scheduled to stay. Why don’t you go home and see what’s happening with that cat?” John suggested. I was reluctant to leave even though there was nothing I could do in particular.

“Thanks for your help,” John said to Harold who was clearly still contemplating something because he was looking into space and hardly blinking. He snapped out of it and gave John a swift nod.

Chapter Twenty-six

I refused to allow Harold to stop at the SaveEasy for cat food, primarily because I knew he would insist upon reading the label of every type of cat food on the shelf no matter how many times I told him to just grab the no-name salmon. I rarely took him to SaveEasy under normal circumstances because he had this habit of scrutinizing the ingredient list on every product. It was the most embarrassing in the water aisle. He insisted that bottled water was incredibly diverse and in need of examination because only certain companies infused the water with fluoride, while every brand contained different vitamins and minerals. Whether he wanted fluoride in the water or not depended on the latest newscast. According to Harold, the reporters seemed to take a different spin on the fluoride issue each month. The water debate was just another one of Harold's weird habits that made us look strange to everybody else in the store. Nobody else stood there scrutinizing the nutrition labels on the backs of the water bottles. I would always say, *It's water!* It was precisely why he shouldn't have retired at sixty. People need to be occupied.

"If we don't stop now, when will we get the tuna?" he demanded.

"I thought you were joking about the tuna. I told you, he won't eat tuna." I knew if that didn't get him, the extra cost would, "Besides, do you know how much it would cost to buy a cat tuna instead of cat food?"

"We are responsible for the preservation of a scientific wonder and I am of the opinion that our duty shouldn't be taken lightly," Harold said with force.

“Fine. Spend your pension on tuna and tombstones.” I pushed my foot down on the accelerator a bit harder than usual as we passed the SaveEasy. He could go tuna shopping on his own time as far as I was concerned.

When we got home, the blue plastic carrying cage wasn't near the entryway where we left it.

“Kat?” I called. There was no answer. I was actually getting used to feeling my heart beating relentlessly and it started again when I pictured Kat letting Tripod out of the cage to run free. I hadn't expected her to be home around suppertime or I would have left a note, *Caution! Please do not release feared cat into neighbourhood. P.S Veggie burgers in the fridge.* I checked again to see if the cage was where we left it. It wasn't. I looked at Harold. He bent down and looked under the sofa as if the cat was capable of contracting itself into a two inch pancake.

“That cat could be halfway back to Southwood by now for all we know!” I rushed toward the shark tank. The sun was shining through the living room window and illuminating whatever impure grains were saturating the water in the tank. I made a mental note to check the filter. Luckily, there was no orange cat balancing on the edge of the tank and dipping his paw into the water.

“Is that the cage over there?” Harold pointed.

We discovered that the cage was somehow behind the sofa instead of where we left it near the door. We walked slowly toward it. There was no noise or movement coming from inside the cage and I was still worried that Kat had freed Tripod before kicking his cage behind the sofa to get it out of the way.

Harold bent down to look inside the cage and as I hovered above, I was hit by a sudden burst of tenderness for him. The feeling seemed to come out of nowhere. It certainly wasn't prompted by the view of his bottom sticking out from underneath his beige pants as he crouched down. Moments before I had been thinking about clubbing him over the head with a can of tuna. Then, suddenly, as he put his face up to the metal wiring on the cage, I had this warm feeling. No matter how much I hated the way he threw away the centers of his cinnamon rolls or that maroon housecoat of his, we were husband and wife. Somehow, we were in it together. Without him, I would just have been a crazy care home employee trying to win over a teenage girl. A woman with a shark and an infamous cat in her living room. I never imagined that Kat would take to Harold before she took to me but there was something about him that seemed to get her going on these bizarre topics of conversation that they both enjoyed, like postmodernism. I still didn't know whatever that was, postmodernism, but Kat told Harold she had older friends in university, a couple who got matching tattoos, the girlfriend's tattoo said *Po*, the boyfriend's said *Mo*. That got a rise out of Harold but I pointed out that it was very foolish for young people to get matching tattoos because the likelihood of the relationship lasting was slim to none. Kat admitted that the couple broke up and that the boy ended up having an extra *m* tattooed, so that *Mo* became *Mom*. Harold made some comment about how flattered the mother would have been to know she came second to modernism and Kat laughed. That annoyed me, the fact that they seemed to have these moments of understanding. As Harold stuck his finger through the metal on the front of the cage, I decided it was better that one of us had some type of strange connection with Kat than neither of us.

“The cat seems to be sleeping. His eyes are closed anyway,” Harold said. There was still no explanation for how the cage wound up so far from where we left it.

“Do you think he was clever enough to throw his body weight against the side of the cage and drag it away from the door?” I asked.

“Predicting death is one thing but you can’t be suggesting that he can also levitate,” Harold smiled.

“Are you alright?” he suddenly frowned, “You seem a little out of it.”

“No, no. I’m just in shock,” I said.

That was when we heard footsteps on the front porch. Not that I was one to believe in all that Helen Creighton kind of stuff but I couldn’t help but think of Mrs. Wellington and wonder if it was her spirit. It was something almost as unusual as a spirit from another world. It was Kat with a newspaper in her hand. It wasn’t the *Bulletin* picked up from off the porch either, it was one of the city papers because of its size. It was funny to see someone carrying a newspaper in one hand and a bag with metal spikes in the other.

“What?” she asked.

“How long have you been out? Did you move the cage?” Harold asked.

“What cage? What is this, a circus?” She dropped the bag on the floor and it thudded as it hit the ground. There was a wild rustling sound inside the carrying case in response. It dawned on me that even though Kat seemed intrigued about Tripod earlier, she might have changed her mind. Not everybody could take as much delight in the possibility of living with such a controversial cat as Harold did.

“We’ve brought *you-know-who* back from the nursing home. Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“Better than a stupid kitten.” Kat went toward the cage. Before I could tell her not to lift the metal hinge that clamped the door shut, Tripod was bouncing around the living room on his three legs.

“Holy. That’s a creepy fucking thing.” Kat swiftly stepped away from Tripod. The cat, whatever you thought, *was* a tough little bugger. It was odd to see a cat with three legs manoeuvring around but there was something admirable about his determination. Harold seemed to be studying the cat with deep concentration. I worried about Kat’s language but decided not to harp. Though I still considered it vulgar to swear, even under shocking circumstances, Tripod was creepy at first sight. It’s not everyday you see a cat jumping around on three legs who knows when you will die.

“Shit! Do you see this? Shit! Shit! Shit!” Kat backed away. She was still clutching the newspaper in her hands. From my perspective, it was a wonder that Tripod had been able to propel his cage across the room but even stranger that Kat happened to be carrying a newspaper. I hadn’t seen her reading the newspaper once since her arrival. I could only surmise that she planned on using it as a weapon if the cat got too close.

Tripod didn’t take many hops before settling down on the carpet and turning his head in all directions. His eyes darted from corner to corner and settled on objects for a few seconds at a time. First, he studied the potted fern near the doorway, then, our ugly gold and brown sofa, next, the shark tank and eventually he seemed to be looking at Kat’s bag of metal spikes. It probably reminded him of the time John took him to get neutered. He didn’t look up at any of us but that was probably a good sign. The doorbell chimed

loudly before I could usher Tripod into a room or back into the cage. The doorbell rang so rarely that its' loud chiming startled me half to death. Tripod was hopping down the hall when the bell rang for the second time.

“Someone grab the cat while I answer the door,” I said over my shoulder.

“Yeah right,” I heard Kat’s sarcastic voice behind me.

Whoever it was rang again before I even made it to the entryway. They must have thought one of us stood directly behind the door at all times in case the bell should happen to ring.

“Get the cat!” I called before swinging the door open.

Betty Smiley was standing on the porch with her arms folded and her glasses dangling down over her chest. She was wearing one of those chains people use for their glasses, only hers was decorated with glass beads and little plastic apples.

“I was beginning to think you were making a point of avoiding me,” she began.

“Oh, hello,” I managed. I knew it would have been best to actually have addressed her statement but I was preoccupied wondering if Harold had shut in the cat. Since we couldn’t have him escaping, I closed the door behind Betty Smiley. She seemed startled when I shut her in but it wasn’t the time for explanations.

“I have left messages on your answering machine but perhaps Katherine erased them herself.” She fingered the apple chain around her neck and scanned the living room. I was certain that teachers in the city didn’t make house calls; it was only Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds* who was always knocking on the door of some drug dealer’s house to lecture his son on reading Shakespeare. I wondered what Michelle Pfeiffer would have looked like wearing Betty Smiley’s baggy apple themed wardrobe.

She probably would have won an Academy Award if they could have made her that unattractive.

“Have you not received my messages?” Betty Smiley asked again. Her mouth was set into a tight little line. From the corner of my eye, I saw Tripod hopping toward us slowly. He didn’t seem to be in any rush.

“Well, things have been a little hectic lately.” I stepped sideways in the hope that it might shield Tripod from view.

“There is a serious situation I aim to address. Perhaps we should be seated?”

“I’m just in the middle of something,” I said. That was the truth. I was hoping we could have our talk quickly and Tripod might hop on past the entryway and into the living room without her noticing.

“I should also be going out shortly,” I added. “For tuna.”

Immediately after I said that, Tripod hopped into the entryway. He stood directly in front of Betty Smiley and looked up at her with his wide green eyes.

“What is that? Is that *the* cat from Southwood?” She backed toward the door but was not too frightened to stop herself from putting on her glasses for a better look. Tripod tilted his head to the right as if studying her.

He hopped toward her.

“My goodness. Fudge, fudge, fudge!” Betty was against the door when Tripod stopped his advance.

“Sorry about this.” I realized that I didn’t want to try lifting Tripod at that moment. Besides, it was funny seeing Betty Smiley squirm. Until her hand reached for the doorknob.

“Don’t open the—” I didn’t have to finish because Tripod took a flying leap and bashed his head against the mail slot. He seemed to be convinced there was a way of contracting his body enough to slip through the opening and make an escape. I didn’t know what to do. After a few more painful lunges against the slot, the cat skidded to a halt in front of Betty Smiley, raised its little orange head and wild green eyes, and hissed loudly. Her hand was still on the doorknob.

“Don’t open the door!” I said.

“Get that thing away from me!” She waved her hands in the air as if they were wet and there were no towels around.

“Sorry. Sorry!” I kept repeating.

“A dangerous animal in the midst of the neighbourhood.” She shook her head as if I should have been ashamed.

Tripod’s little mouth closed and he hopped back into the living room.

“Sorry, what was it that you wanted to discuss? He won’t come near us again. I am sorry about that,” I said.

Betty Smiley was clearly shaken because she seemed to be groping around for the glasses which were already on her face.

“Katherine has been writing obituaries for the grade tens and elevens,” she said.

“Pardon?” I tried to take her words in.

“She has been writing obituaries for the grade tens and elevens,” she repeated.

“She has?” Harold piped up. I wanted to belt him for having such excitement in his voice.

“No matter what she might encounter at home, this behaviour is obviously completely unacceptable at school. We had another student, a few years back, who thought she wanted to be a mortician but we found her request for a co-op position similarly unnatural.”

“How can you write obituaries for people who aren’t dead?” I asked as Harold appeared beside me. He just had to hear the word *obituary* and he would come running.

“What if she’s just being creative?” Harold interjected.

“Be quiet,” I hissed.

“Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery,” he had to add.

“Such behaviour could potentially encourage something as serious as suicide.”

Betty Smiley looked at Harold then settled her glare on me.

Harold laughed out loud. “Suicide?”

“If the students are satisfied with their obituaries, they might get the idea to harm themselves in order to make use of the write ups,” she explained.

“What’s the difference between these obituaries and a year book write up? It’s the same thing isn’t it?” Harold almost looked like he was trying to puff out his chest as if that would make him more intimidating.

“There is a huge difference and I am disappointed that you cannot seem to grasp that,” Betty Smiley said.

“What do the kids do with these mock obituaries?” I asked.

“They have been taping them to their locker doors but I have passed a rule making the removal of such things immediate or else.”

“Why would she do such a thing?” I asked wondering if it was best to summon Kat from her bedroom and let her explain it herself.

“Money,” Betty Smiley said. She slowly removed her glasses and let them dangle by the apple chain once again.

“She makes money?” Harold sounded even more impressed than he was initially.

“More than I can say for some of us,” I added. Harold did his *obits* for free.

“I can understand how such things develop,” Betty Smiley looked straight into the house at Harold. “For your information, Katherine will be barred from the library where she has been conducting her interviews, and I will be forced to take measures to have her expelled. No excuses this time.”

It seemed like a good time for me to come up with a better explanation but absolutely nothing came to mind. Before turning the knob to let herself out, Betty Smiley looked in all directions for any sign of Tripod. It was no wonder he wasn't around, a perceptive animal like that could sense whom to avoid.

Outside, she spun back around at the bottom of the steps. I had already closed the door but pulled back the curtain to watch her go. There was no point in being risky and leaving the door open too long. She seemed to be saying something about warning the neighbourhood about our new pet. I could see her lips moving but it was impossible to hear what she was saying through the door. Eventually, she seemed to get the picture because she whipped around and continued on her way without glancing back at the house.

“Have a nice evening,” I said in the entryway as she walked to her car.

The situation didn't seem as horrendous as it might have been if we weren't preoccupied with Mrs. Wellington's condition. At least, I would have been much more upset by Kat's little job if there weren't more pressing issues at hand. Harold, of course, was clasping his hands together like a proud parent might have done at a graduation ceremony.

"She could be in serious trouble," I told him.

"She hasn't done anything wrong," he argued.

I headed straight to Kat's bedroom. The door was shut tight, but there wasn't any pounding music coming from inside. Normally I would have knocked and gone through a whole routine where she pretended not to hear the knock or said she was busy with school stuff before I finally persuaded her that I wasn't going away unless she opened up but I decided there would be no fooling around that day. There was no telling when John would call with the news about Mrs. Wellington. Besides, one obituary writer in the family was enough. If she was interested in journalism or writing for the school paper that would have been one thing, but these weird write ups had to stop, whatever they consisted of. When I flung the door open, she was sprawled across the bed on her stomach with the newspaper spread open over the comforter.

"What are you doing?" She looked up in anger as I entered the room.

Without asking, she had affixed glow-in-the-dark stars and skulls to the ceiling above her bed. A big poster had also materialized above the bed depicting an angel with a skull for a face. It certainly wasn't anything that I would want to lay my head down underneath. There was also a little black lamp with wispy black feathers sitting on the

nightstand which I had never seen before. The feathers around the shade seemed to me like a fire hazard.

“You could knock,” she said while continuing to read the paper. I could see that it was spread open to Harold’s favourite section.

“What are you reading?” I asked anyway.

“Maybe if I had a lock on my door like everyone else, I could have some privacy.”

“That is not the issue at hand young lady,” Harold interrupted. He was standing directly behind me in the doorway. The last thing I needed was intervention from the King of obituaries.

“Issue at hand? You guys are seriously the ones with issues.” She snapped the paper closed.

“Tell us about your obituaries,” I decided it was best to ignore her outburst and get straight to the point.

“When can I get a lock on my door?”

“We are here to discuss your motivation,” Harold announced.

“No. We’re not. We’re not discussing your, *inspiration*. We are telling you that it has to stop.” I was slightly impressed by my own firmness.

“Now, now,” Harold patted me on the shoulder condescendingly.

“Don’t *now*, *now* me!” I wiggled out of his grasp.

“What’s the big deal? You do it,” Kat said to Harold.

“He writes obituaries for dead people, not live ones!”

“What’s the difference?” she wanted to know.

“The difference is that Betty Smiley thinks you might encourage kids to do bad things,” I explained.

“Like what? They’re going to look at the write up and realize they should do the things they want to do in life instead of getting old and dying with all these regrets like most people.” She looked up at the stars and skulls on the ceiling.

“That is quite fascinating: This could be big news at the conference in Nevada. A whole new market emerges as the next generation of obituary writers gather. Obituaries for the living!” Harold was smiling like an idiot.

“They have a conference for obituary writers?” I couldn’t believe there were that many freaks in the world like my husband.

“Of course. Obituary writers are coming into their own. Did you know that Jim Nicholson was awarded a Distinguished Writing Award by the American Society of Newspaper editors for his obits on ordinary Philadelphians?” Harold had grabbed a book from the table on his way to Kat’s room and was flipping through it.

“Oh. Of course, Jim Nicholson,” Kat said sarcastically.

“This isn’t the time.” I tried to close his book but he kept his finger wedged between the pages and flipped it back open.

“Listen to this one by Nicholson,” he read, “*“I had unfortunately burned up my cat Smokey in the dryer. Lou gave me a book, 1001 Uses for a Dead Cat. You loved him and at the same time you wanted to strangle him.”*”

“That’s wonderful,” I wasn’t convinced. “Now let’s get back to the issue, she can’t do this kind of thing at school.”

“Why can’t I?” Kat asked.

“How much do you charge by the way?” Harold asked.

“Five bucks each. Unless they want a picture superimposed, that’s ten.”

“No more,” I said.

“She happens to be an entrepreneur and I don’t think the teachers should discourage it,” Harold said.

“Would you call a drug dealer an entrepreneur?” I shot back.

“She isn’t selling drugs, she’s selling dreams,” Harold said.

“For Pete’s sake, she doesn’t work at the lotto booth.”

“Fine. Okay. I’ll stop.” Kat held her hands in the air as if surrendering. I was suspicious about whether it would be that easy, but there was no sense in pushing our luck.

“I don’t think this is just!” Harold said.

“Drop it,” I ordered.

Harold continued flipping through his book of obituaries. “What about this one?”

“Forget it,” I said.

Harold and I started searching for the cat to see where it had gone after our little discussion with Kat. After a lengthy inspection, we found him blending in with the hue of our bed, which hadn’t been adorned with new cushions since I won the orange pillow covers and matching comforter at the garden party fifteen years before. You practically had to squint to see the rise and fall of Tripod’s little body which was nestled between the orange cushions.

“We can’t sleep here now,” Harold muttered.

“Shhhh. You’ll wake him.” I leaned over and saw that his little eyes were glued shut. He was sleeping on his back with his four paws suspended in the air like a corpse of a cat, as if he were playing dead. That’s when I began to wonder if he had a sense of humour or if it was just a coincidence.

“I’m not sure what would be worse—inhaling cat fur all night or fearing that I may never wake up!” Harold continued. He took a step back from the bed but his eyes were fixed on the cat.

When the ringing phone jangled through the quiet house, Harold jumped about a foot in the air. Tripod didn’t even twitch. I thought it was most likely John calling with the bad news about Mrs. Wellington even though it had only been an hour since we left Southwood. As soon as I picked up the phone, I heard John’s hysterical voice on the other end. “He’s leaving!” Not that it had a masculine pitch to begin with but his voice was much more high-pitched on the phone.

“Who’s leaving?” In all the confusion, I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. When John got excited he tended to leave out many of the important details in his stories. He was once questioned about a robbery he witnessed at the bank and he described the thief as wearing a white t-shirt and no hat but the security tape ended up proving that the man was wearing a plaid shirt with a bandanna.

“Richard!” John paused. “He’s threatening to leave!”

“Has Mrs. Wellington passed?” I nervously tugged on the phone cord.

“She isn’t dead! He doesn’t believe she will be,” John said.

“Did you tell him that Tripod has never appeared more than four hours before we found people? Did you tell him the cat has never been wrong? I mean, maybe if he heard it from you,” I suggested.

“That man will not listen to a pathetic little care home manager,” John’s voice dropped.

“Oh come on John! Don’t say that about yourself, Richard is an asshole! What did Dr. Benson say?” It felt exhilarating to have called Richard an asshole. It was the first time I had ever called anyone a name like that.

“It was strange. Dr. Benson said her vitals were fine but you know Benson, he was wearing his deck shoes and I think his teeth were bleached an even whiter shade than last time we saw him.”

There was a noise in the background.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Richard’s actually leaving. He’s going for the door right now!” John said.

“Stall him!” I had to get over there and stop Richard before he abandoned his mother on the evening of her death.

When I pulled into the parking lot, there was no convertible in the yard. That was the first bad sign. When I poked my head into Mrs. Wellington’s room, she was limp as a French fry cooked in olive oil. Her head tilted against the back of the chair and her eyes were completely closed. Ming was sitting on the edge of the bed, which was sagging toward the floor under her weight, and John was standing near the door fidgeting with anything he could reach. He looked at me and shrugged slowly. I knew right away it

meant I was too late and Richard was already gone. As if she knew exactly what we were thinking, Mrs. Wellington suddenly piped up in a weak voice.

“I’m still here.” Of course, when people are dying their words take on double meanings and I wasn’t sure if she meant that she was still at Southwood and Richard was gone or she was still here as in alive.

“I want one thing,” she announced. We all waited silently to see what the request might be. She may have been almost intolerable when in perfect health but under the circumstances, we were ready to jump at her every command.

“Am I speaking out loud or just thinking?” she asked when no one responded.

“We’re ready. What is it we can get you?” Ming asked.

Mrs. Wellington closed her eyes and I studied her limp face. Throughout life, she must have frowned with her mouth instead of her forehead because there were deep lines dividing her cheeks from her mouth but her forehead was almost smooth. The eyebrows she pencilled on every morning were an upside down u-shape rather than a straighter line, making her look semi-shocked all the time. I often tried to picture our patients as they were in their younger days with smooth cheeks, glossy hair and young limbs. Mrs. Wellington seemed like the kind of woman who was always dignified.

“Whatever you want, Helen will get it for you,” Ming put her hand over Mrs. Wellington’s.

We didn’t know what she might request but the only place you could buy anything after eleven o’clock at night was Johnny’s Convenience, and it wasn’t like she was going to be needing a lottery ticket.

“I will be requiring a new dress.” she said with determination.

My heart sank when I realized she wanted a new dress for her burial. I hadn't a clue where we would ever find such a thing either. Mrs. Wellington already possessed the biggest and most expensive wardrobe we'd ever housed at Southwood. There wasn't a shop for miles with the kind of fancy clothes that she wore. My wardrobe was exclusively from Bargain Bob's Tickle Trunk, just down from the SaveEasy. Once in a while, when I happened to pick something up, I didn't even bother trying it on. Ming thought it was terrible but I could basically tell if it was going to fit by holding it up in the mirror. Besides, nothing was more than five dollars so it wouldn't have been a huge loss if it didn't fit. It was a sin and a pity that someone like Mrs. Wellington would be depending on me to choose the dress that she would spend eternity in. People think their wedding dresses are important but you only wear that one day, while the burial dress is forever. Then again, you have more pictures taken in your wedding dress.

"Don't you worry. We'll tell Richard you need a new dress, honey," Ming decided.

Mrs. Wellington seemed to straighten a bit in her chair. "He's too busy. I need a woman's touch to choose the dress. You girls will have to do."

"Looks like I'm off the hook," John said.

"I wouldn't wear anything selected by a man in scarlet suspenders. Not even if it was that interviewer fellow. What's his name? Larry King," Mrs. Wellington said.

Ming and I looked at John. He seemed offended. He thought very highly of the suspenders.

“Come on John, have a sense of humour!” Ming said. He looked at us defiantly and ran his thumbs along the insides of the suspenders before stretching each side away from his chest and letting the elastic smack.

“Ow,” he said. Ming hooted. Mrs. Wellington didn’t seem to notice.

“Naturally, I will provide you girls with enough money to purchase something suitable. Of course, I don’t want anything oriental.” She looked at Ming. I held my breath, but Ming just chuckled. She always overlooked racist comments made by patients. They came from a different time and she accepted it. Being the only person in the room she hadn’t insulted, I wondered what was coming next.

“I want simple and classic. Like Jackie Q,” she said.

“You mean Jackie O?” I asked.

“Have you ever been on your deathbed? Perhaps you wouldn’t be as sharp as usual either. No offense dear.”

The problem was that simple and classic to Mrs. Wellington was a suit with a matching hat and matching gloves, while simple and classic to me was a comfortable sweatshirt and old jeans. To Ming, it was more like a tight neon shirt and three-inch synthetic nails. We sat silently in the little room while Mrs. Wellington slept. Her snoring sounded more like a sit-on mower than the feeble wheezing you might expect from a dying woman. A couple of times she woke and demanded to know if we were all there. Many of our patients were afraid of dying alone but I almost thought it would have been different with Mrs. Wellington since she wanted to be left alone most of the time anyway. She had been repeatedly asking the same questions all night and we figured it was all part of the delirium that accompanied her decline.

“What are we going to do?” I whispered to Ming eventually.

“Nothing to do but wait for the big one.”

“I mean about the dress!”

“She won’t know the difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll just use something she has. No point in wasting time and money getting something new.” Ming was completely serious but I figured that Mrs. Wellington would have haunted us for sure if we broke the promise. I looked to John for help but he closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping against the doorway.

“You can’t make a promise to a woman on her deathbed that you don’t intend to keep,” I said desperately. Just then, Mrs. Wellington started to stir and I was certain she probably heard our negotiations. They say even unconscious patients can hear people talking and process what they’re saying, it’s just that they are unable to respond. That was beside the point anyway; if the woman wanted a new dress, we would get her one.

“Are you all here?” Mrs. Wellington’s eyes opened and she squinted in our direction.

“We’re here,” Ming said.

Mrs. Wellington clutched her fleece blanket underneath her chin. From underneath the blanket, she raised a shaky hand and began to touch her chest. I was worried that her heart was fluttering.

“Can you breathe? Are you alright?” I leaned closer.

“I just. What am I wearing now?” Her eyes were half-open as she started to grope herself and pinch wads of fabric in order to see her blouse.

“You’re wearing a very simple and classic blouse,” Ming said.

“Very. Very classic,” John added.

“No. No. I need something new. Open casket. I need something new.”

“Helen will get you something very nice. Some sexy little number,” Ming said.

Mrs. Wellington started drifting back to sleep mumbling about a smart looking suit.

“*Sexy little number!*” I slapped Ming’s arm. “I shudder to think what you might want to be buried in.”

“Pasties.”

“What are those?” I asked.

“Never mind,” she burst into a round of laughter.

Mrs. Wellington’s eyes opened again slowly and I figured she was really going to let Ming have it for telling jokes over her deathbed. Instead, she looked up with wide eyes and said in a whisper, “You girls might as well call me Eleanor.” Before we could respond, her eyes were closed again.

None of us knew what to make of the situation when the first streams of sunlight poked through the blinds and Eleanor was still alive. No one else had even come close to lasting through the night after an encounter with Tripod. I looked down at her cherry-red toenails, which she must have had done in the city, and I didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified. The phone was silent on its cradle. It was hard to believe that Richard could go home and have a good night’s sleep when everyone here expected his mother to pass away during the night. I supposed that Eleanor would still want the new dress. Choosing a new dress for anyone else wouldn’t have been as nerve-wracking, but

the woman was so damn particular about her appearance. The cherry toenails were the least of it. If the crease in her pants happened to be a fraction off from the center, she would snap. *These slacks must be steamed and re-ironed. They are certainly not fit to wear. In fact, dry cleaning is the only way to properly treat a garment. I refuse to believe that this institution cannot send our clothing to the drycleaner's with all the money we're paying. They certainly aren't spending it on the food.* Naturally, Eleanor was the only patient to ever request dry cleaning. Many of the others weren't even interested in getting dressed in the morning and, if we had allowed it, would have stayed in their pyjamas all day. As it was, we had a rule that made it mandatory for all patients to at least wear comfortable cotton slacks and sweaters instead of pyjamas. John said the rule was in place to make everyone feel better about themselves. Many of our patients felt they had no reason for getting dressed in the morning and John gave them a reason. Superficial as it might have been.

I watched Eleanor's eyes flick open. She slowly raised one hand and patted her opposite arm as if testing to see if she could still feel.

"I'm still here," she said.

"Someone better get dress shopping!" Ming nudged me with her elbow.

At that point, we didn't know how long she had or even if she would be alive when I returned with whatever happened to be available in the line of burial dresses. It was a relief to see her doing so well. Still, I couldn't help but think, in the back of my mind, that if she passed before I got the dress, there would be no opportunity for her to object to my selection. In that case, I would still be fulfilling my promise to get her

something new just by finding the right size. The problem, obviously, was that she was very much alive and ready to scrutinize.

Standing in front of *Veronica's Vintage Vogue*, I couldn't help but notice the vintage paint job. The shop was chipped all over with weather-beaten gray patches of wood poking out from underneath the deep purple paint that had once covered it completely. *Veronica's Vintage* had been in operation for years even though it was so seldom frequented that it was more like a museum than a shop. The owner, Alice Hutton, somehow kept it going with money she inherited after her sister's death and money she made during tourist season. Alice was never beautiful or even pretty but she always loved glamour. You didn't have to be an expert in that kind of thing to see that she put it together all wrong. At the carol sing one year, she wore a brown mink fur coat with a white rabbit headband. The sheer amount of fur completely smothered her small frame so that she looked like a person attacked by wild animals instead of a woman who was wearing them. Her name, naturally, wasn't Veronica either, but she named the shop *Veronica's Vintage Vogue* because she thought it sounded glamorous. It was truly the only place for miles around with formal dresses. The garments themselves were all a few decades behind the current fashion as Alice got most of her stock from Church rummage sales and then raised the prices. I decided to get something there, no matter what. Eleanor was in her seventies and the last thing she wanted was cutting-edge, not that we had any cutting-edge clothing stores in Chester either but that was beside the point.

When I pulled the door open, a chime made of brass high heels jingled. Alice was standing behind the counter shoving gaudy rings with fake gemstones over her large

knuckled fingers. A ratty looking red feather boa was draped around her neck. It was a bit much for a Tuesday morning but you couldn't blame her for playing dress-up between customers, which were far and few between in the off-season.

“Oh dear! You caught me,” she spluttered. “You'd think I'd be over costume jewellery at my age, wouldn't you? Well you don't get over it if you never get the real thing.”

It had been a while since I last saw Alice at the SaveEasy and it was astounding how much she seemed to have aged. Her face, which was always plump, was now creased with wrinkles that seemed even deeper than they were before and her body seemed to have doubled in size making her look like an inflated version of her old self. Despite this, she seemed to have retained her sassy attitude.

“I'm looking for something for one of our patients,” I told her.

“Oh how wonderful! Which patient? Let me guess, Lily Slaunwhite wants something new. She was such a clothes-horse when she was younger. I always wished I had her shiny brown hair,” Alice looked at a spot faraway. It was strange to think of Lily being envied for her hair which had turned snow white over the years and hard to imagine that a woman who refused to wear anything other than her blue elastic waist pants was ever interested in fashion. I certainly didn't have the heart to tell Alice that Lily was usually confused enough that she wouldn't have noticed if we dressed her in a plastic bag.

“It's actually a lady from the city, Eleanor Wellington,” I explained.

“What is the occasion? It must be something very special because I don't think you've ever been sent here by a patient. This is simply wonderful!” She unravelled the

feather boa from around her neck and stepped out from behind the counter. As she waited for an answer, I suddenly realized that it would be a big mistake to tell her the truth about my mission. The minute Alice found out that the woman from the city was on her last legs, everyone else in town would almost immediately know and it would just create unnecessary commotion. With all the articles about Tripod in *Frankly* making it sound like we were harbouring a dangerous Death Cat, the last thing we needed was everybody thinking that Tripod had struck again and that we allowed it to happen. They wouldn't believe it was out of our hands and that Tripod was just doing his thing. Even if I did want to explain what happened, there was always the possibility that Alice would think I was losing my mind. At that point, I didn't rule out that possibility either.

“Did I already mention that I'm looking for a dress?” I looked nervously at the mannequin standing in the entryway of the shop.

Alice had a grin plastered across her face. “You're looking for a dress! Honey, you must know that different occasions require different dresses.” I could tell she was looking over my baggy wool sweater disapprovingly. It was one of my old favourites even though Kat once said it made me look like a bourgeoisie yeti.

“I have some sweet little day dresses and some very va-va-voom evening ensembles,” Alice continued, “Is the dress for daytime or evening?”

I had the urge to tell her that you might say it was for both. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest and I saw that a ring was stuck halfway over the knuckle of her pinky finger. She must have followed my gaze because she looked down and gave the ring a useless tug. It wouldn't budge.

“Don't mind that. Just tell me what the dress is for and we can get started.”

I wandered into the front room with Alice right behind me. There were racks of clothing everywhere and it all looked so daunting. I was thinking that if I saw something right away, I wouldn't have to tell her what it was for but everything looked so jumbled.

"It's just that, I'm in a hurry." I thought maybe that would satisfy her. The air in the shop smelled like mothballs floating in orange juice. My eyes were starting to water because of the dust particles I could see floating through the air in the light filtering through the window. Alice ran her fingers lightly along one of the racks.

"I have a beautiful linen suit in a champagne rust and a light cotton dress in a toasted pistachio," she continued. It sounded like a foreign language to me, for one I couldn't imagine rusty champagne nor could I picture the colour of a toasted pistachio, I thought people only toasted almonds. I suppressed a sneeze by holding my nose and closing my mouth but my ears popped and Alice's voice sounded far away.

"If you simply reveal said occasion we can get you out of here more quickly." Alice gave me an innocent look but I knew she was a fierce gossiper. She belonged to a group everyone called the Golden Girls, after the TV show I supposed. They were a group of elderly ladies who had never lost a certain zest for life. While others would be home baking cookies for their grandchildren, the Golden Girls would be drinking rum on somebody's wharf and tanning their wrinkled bodies in the direct sunlight while telling the latest gossip about so and so. I didn't want Eleanor to get torn apart by the rumour-mill because of me. Still, I couldn't risk getting something too casual either. The occasion had to be special.

"Well. Actually, she's getting married. She needs something dressy." I felt instantly guilty, and a little bit excited. I was sure that Eleanor would rather have people

believe she was getting married rather than passing on. By the time the rumour spread, Eleanor would mostly likely be gone. People would find her death even sadder in light of her engagement.

But there was one thing I hadn't thought about when I blurted out about Eleanor getting married.

"Who is the lucky man? I always say that at my age all the men want is a nurse with a purse! I told my daughters, you should always go younger because with older men, you end up changing their diapers eventually. But anyway, good for her. You have people to change his diapers anyway. Who is the mystery groom?" Her face was glowing as she leaned toward me, the first to hear the news.

My mind went blank, the only man I could think of was Frank. There had to be somebody else. Any rumour would spread twice as quickly if Frank's name was involved. I wanted desperately to think of someone else, anyone else, but I knew it would seem suspicious if I appeared to be thinking about it for too long.

"Frank," I said.

"Frank! That old bugger. I might have known! If he were an ox, he'd win every pull in the exhibition," she said. That was something I didn't want to imagine.

The problem was, you couldn't mention Frank casually. He was the only man in Chester who used to have both a wife and a girlfriend. Years back, it created a huge scandal when the girlfriend, Tippy, moved right in with Frank and his wife. After thirty years, Tippy outlived the wife but eventually old Frank outlived them both. It was his choice to move into Southwood. He said after spending all those years with two women, he couldn't stand the quiet of an empty house. When he arrived, we had twenty women

and only one other man and Frank said he liked those odds. Though I wasn't thinking about it at the time, Frank was actually one of the first patients to welcome Eleanor after she first arrived. All through the first week I watched him roll his brownie or cookie from lunch inside a napkin and attempt to treat Eleanor with the extra sweet during afternoon tea. I was in her room delivering tea the last time he tried it. Eleanor told him in no uncertain terms that she wasn't the least bit interested in raising her blood pressure sky-high nor was she interested in conversation. Frank was muttering as he left the room but he wasn't heartbroken enough to throw away the raspberry tart because I saw him eating it later that day.

"A wedding dress!" Alice was frantically sliding clothes hangers along the metal racks.

"She needs something very formal but nothing white. Something classic," my voice was extremely high-pitched because I wasn't used to telling lies. It didn't seem like Alice noticed.

"Let's see. I have a fig leaf coloured dress that drapes to the floor and also a maraschino cherry dress that hits just below the knee," she said. I had no idea there were so many colours apart from the primary ones and the combinations of the primary ones, like plaid. I felt like the walls were closing in. Even the window ledges were cluttered with faded evening bags and shiny clip-on earrings.

"Cherry. Cherry sounds good." I didn't really know if it sounded good or not but I couldn't remember any of the other colours she mentioned.

“Now, I’m not sure if maraschino is entirely appropriate for a wedding. Especially considering, Tippy used to wear a lot of red herself. We don’t want to make any unpleasant associations with the past.”

“It’s alright. She doesn’t know much about his past.”

“Oooo. How juicy,” Alice said.

“This is not for anyone else to know about,” I said knowing full well that secrecy was a hopeless cause.

She pulled an alarmingly bright red dress from the rack in front of her and held it out as if I were supposed to admire the thing. I looked at it and couldn’t imagine a single person in the universe who would want to put it on.

“I still simply cannot believe this wedding!” she exclaimed.

“Neither can I.”

The whole thing was getting to be a bit too much. I was about to come clean and just admit the truth when she shoved the dress into my hands.

“I really don’t think this—”

“—Hold on. I can tell you don’t like this one but don’t worry it isn’t the maraschino dress I was talking about. That one is more of a fire engine on a bright day kind of colour. Just hold it while I look here.” She continued digging through the racks while I stood there with the fire engine on a bright day kind of colour dress in my hands.

“Here we go.” Alice extracted the maraschino dress from among the racks of jammed clothing. It looked like an oversized version of something that one of those rich old ladies on the show *Dynasty* might have worn. The top portion of the dress was relatively triangular because of the shoulder pads and then it tapered in a bit at the waist.

“Great I’ll take it.” I couldn’t stand being in the shop any longer. I felt suffocated by the mothball smell combined with my own lie.

“Now wait a minute what’s her size?” Alice pulled the dress back before I could grab it.

“What size is that?” I asked.

“Size eight.”

“She’s eight.”

Alice frowned. I couldn’t tell her that it didn’t matter what size the dress was because Eleanor wouldn’t be standing up in it. If it was too snug, they would just cut the back of the dress open and lay Eleanor in her coffin. Ming once said it was a cruel fact of life that a woman’s size only stops mattering once she stops breathing.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I decided to go home rather than immediately dragging the dress over to Southwood for Eleanor's approval or, more likely, disapproval. There was also the impending threat of a wedding rumour and the possibility that Frank himself might hear it and get excited. As soon as the house came into view, so did the Albino Kid. He was sitting on the porch like some kind of strange modern sculpture you would see in a magazine. No matter how many times you saw the kid, the contrast between his neon polyester shirts and his white skin was shocking. On this occasion, he was wearing a loose button-up polyester shirt with a wizard on the front. Perhaps a wizard wouldn't have been so terrible except this one had glowing purple eyes. He was shooting a blue flame from the crystal ball in his hands which was somehow hypnotizing the half-naked fairy girl hovering near the armpit. For a little fairy, she had a very ample bosom and sculpted midsection. In our day, boys with bowl cuts like The Beatles were banned from classrooms. A risqué shirt like that would probably have caused a riot in the faculty room. My first instinct was to pretend I forgot something somewhere and drive away; you had to be in a certain mood to cater to the Kid's warped sense of reality. I figured Harold was at the library looking up articles on cats and clearly Kat was out somewhere, or the Kid wouldn't have been sitting there alone. Strangely enough, the screen door was open. As I approached, he started talking.

"I solved your shark problem."

"What problem?"

"His lethargy."

“His what?” I asked.

“He’s so docile because epaulette sharks are primarily nocturnal, they normally feed at night.” He had a pleased expression on his face and appeared to be waiting for praise.

“How do you know?”

“Internet. I didn’t have time to look up anything about cats though. In fact, I owe my life to a cat.” He looked at me with a grin and waited for further questioning. The way he told such tall tales, it wouldn’t have been surprising if he said his mother was part cat.

“A cat rescued you from a tree?” I asked.

He was deadly serious, “Even better. Thing was, we used to be on well water. One day, Gregory T. Hans refused to drink—”

“—Who?”

“Our cat, Gregory T. Hans. My father kept saying animals get too spoiled when you take them in and give them middle names but Gregory T. Hans was a smart cat. This one time, he refused to drink our water. My father made jokes, said it was nonsense checking to see if the cat drank eight glasses of water a day. He said if the water was good enough for him, it was good enough for the cat. My mother insisted that we have the water tested and sure enough, there were traces of E.coli in it. If it wasn’t for that cat, we would have all been dead right back there in the woods.”

“That’s great. I’m going to hang this up.” I held the dress in the air. Alice insisted that luxury items come with garment bags and she shoved the dress inside a battered looking beige plastic covering. There was a small transparent spot near the top of the bag, and I could see the bright red colour didn’t seem any less bright in the natural light

outside of the dim store. That wasn't really much of a worry because nobody I knew wore brighter clothes than Eleanor. I was more concerned about the shoulder pads.

"What's that?" the Kid asked.

"A dress." I startled myself by responding with a one-word answer like Kat usually did.

As I pulled the door open, I cursed Harold for going out and leaving it unlocked. He did it all the time, claiming he would rather the robbers just enter the house instead of bashing the windows to get in. He always said that replacing whatever they would take would cost less than replacing the broken windows. He wasn't one for sentimental value unless you were talking about books, but those weren't usually first on the agenda during home invasions. He was even paranoid about parking the car in the city with books on the backseat. He would argue until I asked how many times the library was broken into at night. Or how many times the bookmobile was hijacked. I could just see men in black suits with masks over their eyes stuffing metal briefcases full of hard covers.

As I carefully hung the dress in the hall closet, I glanced around the living room to see if there was any evidence of Tripod's existence. He was nowhere to be found. I was guessing that he had crawled back onto our pillows and was sleeping in the bedroom.

"Tripod," I called into the silent house. He wasn't the type of cat to trot into the entryway and rub himself against your legs but I thought there might be some kind of rustling coming from wherever he happened to be. In the bedroom there was only the outline his little body made on Harold's pillow along with a light dusting of orange cat fur. Since he hardly strayed from his windowsill at Southwood, it seemed especially odd that he wasn't on the pillow. During the night shift, I had been curious about Tripod and

called Harold to see what was happening. I hooted when Harold told me he was afraid of moving Tripod from the pillow and had decided to sleep on the sofa in the living room. I wasn't sure what we were going to do but there was no way we could let a cat kick us out of our own bedroom.

“Tripod! Tripod!” I called.

Name was just floating at the bottom of his tank as usual. I leaned over the side and even asked the shark if had seen an orange cat. The situation was making me crazier by the minute.

“Tripod!”

When I pushed the front door open, the Kid was in the process of idly ripping leaves off the rhododendron bush beside my steps. Normally that would have been appalling but all I wanted was to know where the cat had gone. He looked up at me with a slight smile forming across his lips.

“Were you calling the cat or just looking for a camera stand?” he asked.

“Have you seen him?” I wasn't in the mood for bad jokes.

“He wanted to go out.” He twisted a small branch off the bush and threw it into the yard.

“He can't go out! Stop tearing my bush! You let him out? Where did he go? What direction?”

It was almost too much to take. Not only did I have the new wedding situation to deal with, I had let the killer cat loose in a neighbourhood of superstitious country folk. I didn't like to see one crow, one crow being sorrow, but others went in for the whole thing. People went to great lengths to avoid seeing the new moon through glass, throwing

open their front doors to peer up at the night sky or rolling down their car windows to look out. Half of them refused to leave their houses on Friday the thirteenth. Not that Tripod exactly fit into any specific category of superstition; thank goodness he didn't have black fur, but they would be uneasy none the less.

“Sorry about the bush, I always have to be doing something with my hands,” the Kid said.

“The bush! Forget the bush! You should be sorry about the cat! Where is he? Where did he go?” I kept repeating myself hoping there was an answer out there somewhere. John would kill me if he knew the cat was at large.

Chapter Twenty-eight

For the longest time Harold refused to get a cell phone because he was sure it would result in brain cancer. *Everyone in the modern world has a cell phone!* I told him one day. *Everyone in the modern world will have brain cancer except for me,* he had said with a smile. *What will you do by yourself then, when everyone has died of brain cancer? Write their obituaries?* I remember saying. Strangely enough, he finally consented to get on a cell phone plan *because* of the obituary writing. After a while, he needed the phone for scheduling and sometimes rescheduling interviews. Thank goodness he had the cell phone when the Kid let Tripod on the loose. Rather than telling me to pick him up at the library, Harold acted strange and said he would wait for me outside of the school. When I questioned him about whether he had a surprise meeting with Betty Smiley, he said he would explain the situation later. I was in a state of extreme panic when he emerged from the school's main doors and jumped in the passenger's side.

"The cat could be anywhere? What if it goes back to Southwood? If Eleanor sees the cat again, Richard will sue us for infliction of mental suffering or something like that." As I craned my neck to look over the seat while backing up, I momentarily worried about running over the cat even though he was nowhere to be found.

"Eleanor is still alive?" Harold asked. It was around three when I picked up Harold, meaning that twenty-four hours had passed since Tripod cuddled up on Eleanor's lap.

"Yes, nothing like this has ever happened," I said.

“How exceptionally strange that we find it bizarre that a woman is not dead after a cat jumped on her lap twenty-four hours ago. Imagine if all cats incited such a level of panic. People would be terrified of barns and trash cans or anyplace cats might be hiding,” he said.

“This isn’t the time.” I just couldn’t handle his musing.

“Fine. You may be pleased to hear that I have taken it upon myself to remedy Kat’s dilemma.”

I was driving at 30 kilometres per hour and scanning the ditches and lawns for any signs of Tripod. It was distracting to have Harold chattering on in the seat next to me.

“Just forget about whatever you’re thinking. We’ll deal with that after we find the cat,” I said.

“I already solved the problem.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw him reach down to insert one of his polka CD’s.

“Hold it right there,” I said. “What do you mean you solved the problem?”

He inserted the CD anyway but was considerate enough to turn the volume down low. The frenzied accordion was still irritating as background but it suited my mood at that point.

“I struck up a deal with Stephen Miller.” He made it seem like a court case.

“He understands the importance of the obituary as a form, especially after I explained the artistic merit and how a writer can use the form to breathe life into the deflated. I even read him one of Jim Nicholson’s best obits.”

I had noticed he was clutching a book in his hands when he came out of the school.

“Jim who?” I decided to humour him.

“I told you before, he was a pioneer in the field. Here it is, Jim Nicholson, he writes, ‘*Society today does not assign extraordinary attributes to a 35-year-old heavy-equipment mechanic who is living with his parents and whose possessions do not appear to much exceed a Miller Light and a pack of Marlboros on the bar before him, a union card in his pocket and a friend on either side.*’ Isn’t that poignant?”

“I wasn’t listening. Sorry. I just can’t listen when you read. And I’m driving. What happened about Kat? Poor Stephen having to listen to you.”

There was a brief pause from the passenger’s side. Harold was looking out the window but I guessed he was hardly even searching for the missing cat even though I felt as if my life depended on it.

“Never mind,” he finally said.

“Oh don’t sulk over your stupid obituaries,” I said.

There was no reply. I felt frustrated beyond reason. He could never just give it a rest and focus on the problem at hand. There was always something more interesting going on in one of his books.

“Stop the car,” he said. We were on our own street, about four houses away from home. It would have been ridiculous to stop then.

“Why?” I didn’t stop.

“Please pull over,” he repeated.

“We might as well pull into our own driveway.”

“Stop now!” he said with a forcefulness I didn’t realize existed in him. By that point we were in front of our neighbour’s house. Not Mr. Hicks but Verna Hennigar on

the other side. As we sat there I could imagine Verna looking out from behind her lace curtains and wondering what we were doing. She often sat in the window knitting but everyone knew the knitting was just an excuse to watch whatever went on.

“Please do not interrupt what I am about to say. I tried writing it down but it didn’t work so I’m just going to tell you,” he began.

“Tell me what?” I felt impatient. It seemed more important to either continue the search or at least put our car in the driveway.

“There you go interrupting already,” he said.

I stared straight ahead through the windshield as he went on, noting that we would have to get someone to check out the left wiper because there seemed to be a detached piece of rubber.

“I feel irrevocably—”

“—If you want me to listen, just use normal words. We’re in a rush here,” I said.

“Alright. Not that irrevocably is that unusual, but anyhow. When I thought about turning sixty, it felt like the end of the road was looming. Writing the obits and seeing Eleanor on her deathbed, or maybe she wasn’t but that’s beside the point, made me think about the end and how I want it to be. I’m not going to choose my tombstone yet,” he said.

“Great. Let’s go,” I reached for the key in the ignition.

“Wait, I didn’t say it yet.”

“Say what?”

“The point.”

“You have a point?”

“I love you.”

“What?” He hadn’t said that in years.

“I don’t treat you like I do. It’s because I love my routines and my work. Reading some of these,” he tapped the book on his lap and shook his head. “I realized that people sometimes don’t even know how cared about they are.”

I nodded trying to process what was happening and not really believing it. Inside, I felt happy to know there was something keeping us together. It was similar to the burst of affection I had experienced the day before when he stuck his fingers through Tripod’s case, only it felt fuller because I knew it wasn’t just me holding onto memories of cozy breakfasts and arguments over outdated furniture. I couldn’t have put my feelings into words. It seemed like a natural time to kiss but it had probably been over a year since we had and even then it was only a peck on my birthday. I felt sort of shy like I was a teenager again doing wild things in the car. Only I had never done wild things in the car when I actually was a teenager. He didn’t seem to be making a move so I leaned toward him a bit until the seatbelt forced me backwards. He turned his head toward mine and there were tears in his eyes.

“Kiss me, you dummy. I’m stuck,” I said.

He leaned forward. Before our lips could meet, there was a loud knock on the driver’s side window. We sprung back into our seats. Kat looked irritated and she was making circles through the air with one hand. I realized she was motioning for me to open the window. Fumbling for the window button, I realized the car had to be running in order to open an automatic window. I opened the car door instead and it swung open and hit her legs.

“Ow!” she said.

“Sorry,” I said through the crack.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Just talking,” I said.

“I have negotiated with your principal!” Harold leaned across the seat and yelled.

“I know. I am not doing that!” she yelled back theatrically to mock him.

“Do what?” I asked.

“The stupid yearbook write ups. Give me a break. What the fuck?”

“Enough with the fuck!” I said.

They both laughed.

“One minute please,” Harold held up a finger. He reached across the seat and pulled my door closed. Before I knew what was happening, he planted a hand around the back of my neck and pulled my face to his. The kiss felt strange at first but as our lips rubbed together, it felt warm and nice. I could hear Kat groaning with disgust outside the car, but it seemed almost like just the two of us existed.

“There,” he said when we pulled apart. He reached over again and turned the key in the ignition.

“Roll down the window and tell her to watch her feet,” he said.

In a daze, I wasn't sure what he meant but I nodded and drove forward. It was too late by the time we felt the car bumping over Kat's feet.

“Fuck!” she screamed.

I pulled into the driveway and we both jumped out of the car.

“You ran over my foot!” Kat screamed.

“Sorry! I’m sorry alright but I was just kissing my husband and if you knew how long ago it was since I could say that, maybe you wouldn’t be so surprised that I ran over your foot.” I felt triumphant.

Harold ran over my foot once but there was no damage done and I wasn’t particularly worried about Kat. She seemed fine after the initial burst of swearing. Her feet were probably cushioned by the big black boots anyway.

“Gross,” she said.

“If it makes you feel better, you don’t have to be on the yearbook committee. It was my suggestion in the first place,” Harold said.

“Stupid suggestion,” she said.

Chapter Twenty-nine

After an exhaustive search of the neighbourhood, Harold and I couldn't find Tripod anywhere. Even Kat helped by searching around the SaveEasy, though I think she really just wanted to pick up gelato. That was another thing that changed in our household, we would never again have ice cream that melted slightly in the microwave and then froze again because Kat had us eating hazelnut gelato. For some reason, Harold could eat gelato cold.

When I returned to Southwood with an offering of hazelnut gelato, Ming and John were both exhausted from sitting with Eleanor and constantly expecting the worst to happen at any minute. John made an exception to his resolution not to put Nancy on night duty so it was the two of us working with Ethel doing the front desk and cleanup duty. Nancy was sitting beside Eleanor when I arrived.

"Oh good, someone I know. It was getting tiring, sitting here with a stranger," Eleanor said when I entered. It was ten o'clock and many of the other patients were fast asleep but I couldn't exactly blame Eleanor for wanting to stay awake. According to our calculations, she would already have been gone the night before.

"Sorry," Nancy said to Eleanor. She was always unnecessarily apologizing for things.

"Did you bring my dress?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes and I brought you some gelato as well," I said loudly. It seemed as if she wasn't wearing her hearing aid.

“What in the devil’s name is that?” She had more colour in her cheeks than I expected. All things considered, she looked pretty good.

“It’s like ice cream,” I said.

“You know what I want?” Her eyes opened a bit wider as if she were about to tell me a secret.

“What would you like?” I was hoping the request was not clothing related.

“I haven’t had one in years and my mouth is so dry. It would be so nice to taste a milk shake.” She closed her eyes as if imagining a time when she might have sat in a shiny car with a chrome bumper beside a young boy sipping milk shakes and eating French fries. I knew that Ali had an old-fashioned malt machine at the Convenience, but John wouldn’t have appreciated my leaving work for such a purpose, especially if anything went wrong while I was away.

“We could make her one,” Nancy said.

“How?” I couldn’t imagine.

“We’ll mix some of your ice cream stuff with Ensure,” she said.

That seemed like a brilliant idea. The day of the Tripod incident, John said Eleanor refused supper and she hadn’t eaten anything since. We were going to have to give her Ensure anyway. Some of our patients practically lived off Ensure, a milky drink in a juice box that had enough calcium, iron, vitamin D, zinc and selenium to keep them going. We decided it would be smooth and creamy if we mixed the hazelnut gelato with the chocolate Ensure. Eleanor seemed suspicious about gelato even after we told her it was just the Italian version of ice cream.

“I dated an Italian once and he never mentioned this gelato stuff,” she said.

“I’ll bet he didn’t talk about spaghetti all the time either,” Nancy said.

“He was a car salesman. Johnny Fortunato. Always wore a nice suit but I hated his cigar smoking. He used to tease me about it too. He would say, *Thomas Edison smoked them and you don’t have anything against electricity do you?* We used to bowl together. I was a real dish in those days.” It was one of the first times I really saw her smile. She was still holding the Ensure milkshake we had poured into a Styrofoam cup but her mind was back at the bowling alley with Johnny Fortunato.

“What happened to Johnny?” Nancy asked with a giggle.

“Oh. Poor Johnny died of cancer. Probably from those blasted cigars. I told him but he wouldn’t listen. One time he got me to smoke one.” She looked down at the cup. Or maybe she was looking at her delicate fingers and the raised veins running over their surface.

“Did you like it?”

“I told him it was like setting fire to dirty socks and putting them in your mouth. That’s what I said. He couldn’t get enough of that one.” She took a sip of the milkshake. We waited in anticipation but she must have liked it because she swallowed and took another sip.

“Not bad at all. Whatever you said this stuff was called,” she said. I had the feeling that no matter how many times we told her about gelato, it would never really sink in.

“Now let me see the dress.” She looked at me. I wanted to please her but, in the past, it had never been as easy as the milkshake. The dress was concealed in a beige plastic garment bag which I unzipped. The red looked even brighter and more shocking

amidst the gloom of the beige walls at Southwood. It was practically glowing it was so bright. We were all holding our breath.

“Looks like a Christmas bow,” Eleanor said. That didn’t seem to be a good sign.

“Bows are pretty,” Nancy added. Her wide eyes seemed to indicate that she found the dress shocking.

“The shape is very nice,” Nancy added. “And the fabric is nice too.”

“You don’t think it’s a little bright for an old lady like me?” Eleanor asked. I almost choked when she said that because her closet consisted entirely of bright suits and huge hats.

“Don’t look so shocked, I’m only kidding,” she said.

“You know, Dr. Benson was over earlier and he said her vitals were fine,” Nancy said. I looked at Nancy and she looked back.

“Really?”

We were both completely stumped. It seemed like it was going to be Tripod’s first error. For some reason I thought about how Tripod scrambled after Ming’s screech and how she said the screech was some kind of Haitian thing to scare off evil spirits. That was too far-fetched to consider but it did seem like a funny coincidence.

“Maybe you won’t need the dress anyway,” Nancy said.

“God only knows,” Eleanor took another sip of her milkshake.

I wanted to ask her more about Johnny Fortunato and his cigars but she had already given us more personal information than she’d told us in six months.

Chapter Thirty

Harold finally did some research and confirmed that our shark wasn't defective as Kat suggested; he *was* actually nocturnal. She didn't seem impressed.

"They should have told me that when I bought it," she said.

"Where did you get the money for the tank and the shark and all those things that came with it in the first place?" I finally asked.

"My parents bought me a motorcycle before they died but I sold it without telling them. I knew they'd feel shitty about it, so I decided to get them a pet, to sort of make up for it."

We were standing beside the tank and I had the urge to put my arm around her. I extended my arm but feeling like she would scowl and jerk away, quickly put it back down.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I smiled and put my arm over her shoulders. She didn't exactly hug back but she didn't move away either.

"Thanks for not forcing me to do those shitty write ups for the yearbook," she said.

"You shouldn't use that s-word. The yearbook thing was Harold's idea," I pointed out.

"It got her out of trouble, if I do say so myself," he said.

"Yeah, but now I have to do a twelve page research paper as punishment. And the weird thing is, it's for Mr. Miller. Why would the principal want to read a research paper

that I write?" She slipped out from underneath my arm but didn't retreat toward her bedroom.

"What is the paper on?" I asked.

"He said I could choose."

"What did you choose?"

"Jim Nicholson," she said.

"Really?" Harold said excitedly.

"No. Not really. I'm doing it on cat superstitions."

"Really like black cats?" I asked.

"Oh come on, have an imagination," she said. "There's more to it than that. Like, I was reading that in the mountains somewhere, the Ozark Mountains I think, there's an old tradition that if a girl got a marriage proposal and she wasn't sure if she wanted to marry the guy, she would take three hairs from a cat's tail and fold them up in a piece of paper. She'd put the paper under her doorstep overnight and in the morning check the paper to see if the hairs folded themselves into a Y or an N. Like, for yes or no."

"That's fascinating because it happens to be exactly what I did with Helen," Harold said.

"And he got a Y," I added.

"No, the piece of paper blew away."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I was annoyed.

"It means that I was so sure it was a Y, I didn't need the piece of paper."

"Oh give it a rest," I rolled my eyes. His romanticism was just as bad as his sense of humour.

“It couldn’t blow away anyway because they put the paper underneath the
doorstep,” Kat said.

Chapter Thirty-one

Even if it were possible to keep Tripod's disappearance secret, it didn't seem possible to keep the Southwood wedding rumour under wraps. Not that Richard knew anything about it. Frank never had any children with his wife and none with his girlfriend either. His siblings were, of course, elderly themselves but well enough to live on their own, but we did get a call from his niece Amanda wondering if the rumour she heard about her uncle's wedding was true. I told her it was just a rumour, possibly started because of Frank's charisma. When Frank himself heard the rumour, he was outraged.

"If I was getting hitched again it wouldn't be to an ice queen like that broad," he said as loud as you please to the others in the social room.

I still have no idea how Eleanor managed to hear the ruckus down the hall, but somehow she did, and somehow she managed to hobble down to the social room with her walker and shock everybody with her own announcement.

"Just so that we are all clear on the matter, I would rather have died with that cat on my lap than have married a crude and foul man like Frank," she said. Though her voice didn't have a lot of power, she spoke with conviction. A few of the ladies even clapped their hands and laughed at Frank. For his part, he actually seemed impressed with her sudden burst of spunk.

Though she still didn't frequent the social room, Eleanor would allow Frank to sit with her during afternoon tea. They weren't about to get married but they sat together all afternoon telling stories. He told her about pleasing both a girlfriend and a wife and she told him all about her adventures in bowling alleys and elsewhere. Ming said we better

watch that nothing funny happens in the room, but they always kept the door open. We knew from past instances that one never got too old.

Chapter Thirty-two

The enormity of the past few months has only just struck me. Strangely, it all leads back to the cat. Harold finally snapped out of feeling gleeful over death when he saw Eleanor in her chair waiting to pass, shortly after Tripod fell asleep on her lap. I finally snapped out of wanting a man like Richard after he practically left his mother to die in her chair, also shortly after Tripod fell asleep on her lap. Kat finally snapped, at least partially, out of her teenage aloofness when I ran over her foot with the car and that was shortly after Tripod's disappearance.

Here at the graveside, I'm standing next to Kat whose hair is whipping all over the place in the wind. My feet feel like they're freezing inside my sneakers. Across the grave, the Albino Kid looks pretty broken up.

We were lucky to get Morrison Fraser to conduct the funeral ceremony. He's doing his thing now, reading a passage from the Bible, but I can't focus on whatever he's reading. My mind keeps wandering back.

Across from us, Ming has on her pink suede jacket and John is wearing his red suspenders, so that the two of them together remind me of Valentine's Day.

"Do you want a Kleenex or something? Your nose is running. It's gross," Kat says. I wait for her to hand me a tissue.

"I didn't say I had any Kleenex. Just that you need one," she whispers. The only thing I can do is discreetly bow my head and wipe my nose on the back of my hand.

There is a gruff noise next to us and I realize Harold's coughing. If it wasn't for him, we might never have found Tripod. Of course, we might have smelled his body after

a while. Harold had been clipping the rhododendron bush beside our steps when he thought he saw something underneath the porch. Turned out, Tripod had crawled under there to die.

Maybe I wouldn't be thinking about everything that happened if we weren't at the graveside of a cat. Human funerals are supposed to put everything into perspective but you're so busy with the details of the planning, the visitation, the service, then the tea and lunch afterwards that you almost forget about the person who has passed away. I know it sounds silly but standing here in a Pet Cemetery is reminding me of how everything changed so quickly. A few months before, *Frankly* was spreading panic about the Death Cat. Now, Tripod is gone. Kat's theory is that Tripod was so embarrassed after being wrong about Eleanor, that he crawled into a hole and died. I'm not so sure. It is possible, after all, that Tripod knew he was going to die and cuddled up to Eleanor because *he* wanted comfort and not the other way around.

Of course, I don't know why Tripod died or why Eleanor lived. All I can do is concentrate on the first draft of my own obituary. I can't wait to get something down on paper so that I can get the whole story out of my head. Right after this service, I plan on writing. I may even do some research on diagnostic intuition in the future.

Harold may be the writer in the family but I can type with two hands.