



# *Trish's secret*

A novel by Jay Trott

# Trish's Secret

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TRUE  
NORTH

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*The story and characters depicted in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*



## I

### *An unpleasant surprise*

**D**OUGLAS WAS DEVASTATED when Vanessa left him. In a way difficult to recover from.

He didn't realize she married him for his money—or what she thought was his money, which was actually his family's money. Oh, there might have been something more as well, since Douglas really is very attractive in his own way. He has a nice face, often curled into a pleasant smile, if not always an entirely natural one. He is kind and thoughtful. He is not in love with money, which makes him lovable in many ways (although not to Vanessa). His greatest vice may be his walking, which he does like Thoreau, compulsively, taking from the woods the consolation that perhaps he does not find in human society.

In any case Douglas was completely blindsided by Vanessa's mercenary motives. He did not have any such motives himself, which made it difficult for him to see them in others or to believe they really did exist outside of movies and novels. In fact to this day if you happened to walk up to him on the street and said something like “she married you for your money, you know,” he would look at you with a puzzled expression and cock his head as if he were trying to figure out if you were being serious.

Douglas was a victim of his own good fortune. His father gave him a snappy BMW convertible his senior year in college as a combination Christmas-graduation present, thus achieving the twin goals of amazing his unflappable son and annoying his overbearing wife. Vanessa saw him in it at school and was intrigued. One of her girlfriends was in an accounting class with him and agreed to introduce them. She said he was stand-offish, but on their first date Vanessa realized he was just shy. She was prepared to bag a lion and was almost disappointed when he turned out to be a lamb.

Douglas was the proverbial putty in her perfectly prettified hands. To say he was not experienced with women would be the understatement of the century. Because of his shyness, and his strong moral feelings, he had managed to get through high school and most of college without ever having had an actual date. He was not exactly made for the dating game. Even if there was someone he was inclined to admire—someone who seemed interesting and sincere—he could not bring himself to approach her. It wasn't just because he was afraid of rejection. He also had very high ideas about love and an abhorrence of the types of strategies that modern courtship typically entails.

Consider Douglas's paradox. How can you approach a girl with the possibility of love and relationship on your mind if you do not know her well enough to know if you are compatible—and on the other hand how can you find out if you are compatible if you don't approach her? How can you invite entanglement and not entangle, intentionally or otherwise? How can you kindle interest without risking a fire? Douglas took love seriously. Did he have the same desires as others of his sex? We dare say he did—but his idealism (combined, as we said, with shyness) outweighed any selfishness.

Which made him the perfect mark for Vanessa. She was the first girl who actively pursued him. There were other girls in the past who *wanted* to pursue him, but they mistook his delicacy and reticence for pride. Nothing could be further from the truth. Douglas did not have a haughty bone in his body. It took someone with Vanessa's peculiar skills to unpack this. She saw he was shy. She saw he was chivalrous. It wasn't hard to make herself into someone he could dote on.

In short, Vanessa was a very attractive, popular girl who took a determined interest in Douglas and made him feel like the most important guy in the world. It was flattering and most of all it was surprising. Vanessa was full of smiles and softness and sugar. How could he *not* fall in love? Especially when he so much wanted to be in love and had so little experience. He fell hard. He lost all interest in anything else. Good thing it was his last semester at school.

He took her to the family estate in Greenwich. Vanessa was used to a comfortable home, but this was something else again. The large brick mansion on thirty manicured acres with tennis courts, pool, gardens, guest house, barns, etc., were wonderful. Douglas had his quirks, but she could definitely see herself



marrying him. Okay, so he was a little awkward. He treated her like she was a virgin, which was amusing. But it was not a deal-breaker. She could help him with that.

The window of opportunity was closing. Graduation was coming up fast and they would be returning to their home towns. She did not know if absence made the heart grow fonder, but it did expose it to dangers and distractions. Vanessa wanted to make sure she did not lose Douglas. It was surprisingly easy to steer him in the direction of marriage, a guy who was looking for his one true love and believed he had found her. They were married in July in considerable style.

Unfortunately this was the high point of the relationship for Vanessa. Even on the honeymoon she began to notice things that troubled her. She did not know this man she found herself with on the fabulous beaches of St. Lucia. He turned into a slobbering puppy. He seemed to cling to her. She did not like that, especially in public. She tried to get him to stop, but he thought it was funny.

They bought a house in town, helped by a generous down-payment from his father, and Vanessa began to see more of the family. This too was troubling. She realized that Douglas was not the favorite son, at least not with his mother, even though he was the oldest, which raised certain unfortunate thoughts in her mind. Helen Lendell made no bones about her preference for the adorable Roger, and Helen ruled the roost.

Then there was the job. She understood why Douglas wanted to find employment as soon as possible after graduation—but what a job! He went to see a friend of his mother who had a sleepy little accounting firm in town to get some career advice and the guy had the temerity to hire him on the spot. His first paycheck came as quite a shock. She kept staring at it where he left it naked on the kitchen table as if it were nothing to be ashamed of.

Vanessa landed a better job herself a month later with almost no effort at all. She was just getting started in the corporate world and needed to buy her outfits where she needed to buy them, if you know what we mean. She loved nice things and going out and traveling. Her starting salary was much gaudier than his. Was he expecting *her* to carry the weight? It was not what she had in mind.

By then the puppydog act was starting to wear thin. She got it; he loved her. But all he ever wanted to do was “spend time” with her. He seemed to have no interest in going out. Domesticity is

fine, in small doses, but she had no intention of giving up the night life that she loved so much. And his money worries didn't hold water. Go out and get a better job!

Vanessa began to suspect she had sold herself short. She had beauty and brains and ambition and deserved a guy who was on his way up, not someone who was content to lie down. It was also just about this time that she was thrown into the orbit of a dashing office prodigy who was bucking for an associate director spot at the tender age of twenty-eight. Her cube was right down the hall from his office. He often stopped by to chat. She caught him staring at her on more than one occasion, or her ankle.

It was not her fault if she found herself thrown together with him for ten hours a day. It was not her fault if he invited her to his meetings even when they didn't seem to have anything to do with her. It was not her fault if she wound up on a business trip with him to San Francisco, or that they had adjoining seats on the plane, or that his leg happened to brush up against hers as they went through their in-flight rituals. In short, it was not her fault if she didn't find true love until she had already been married.

Unfortunately Douglas had no idea of any of this. He thought things were getting better. Vanessa finally stopped scolding him about his job. She even let him play his trombone, sometimes. How was he supposed to know this newfound tolerance was a sign of already having checked out of the marriage?

Hence he had no idea how to react when he came home early from work one foggy evening in November and found the front door wide open. He meandered up to the porch and stood there as she bombed out of the house with her arms full of clothes. He watched her cram her burden into the car and croaked out a "hi" as she breezed by him again, but she just waved, looking annoyed.

Was she mad at him about something? If so, he could not imagine what. He felt guilty but didn't know why. He was afraid to ask for an explanation because he was afraid of the answer she might give. So he stood off to the side, in the shadow of the soft November night, as if a stranger in his own yard—which in a sense he was, since they had only been in the house a few months.

Down she came again in the same flouncing Joan Crawford manner with her arms full of stuff. She stopped and looked at him.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"Are you going somewhere?"

“You’re so perceptive. Yes, as a matter of fact. I am ‘going somewhere.’ I’m moving out.”

“Why?”

“Because this was a mistake, and it’s better for everyone if we just rectify it right now before it gets any worse.”

“I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“No, of course not. Call me when you get a clue. On second thought—don’t.”

“Can we talk about this?”

“No, we can’t. It will just make things worse. There’s no point in dragging it out. Believe me, it’s better to make a clean break and get on with our lives.”

Vanessa sped off, tires peeling, and he went into the house and sat down in a daze on the sofa she insisted on buying with the money they didn’t have. What was he going to do now? For a long time he just sat there with a blur of garish images storming through his brain. He saw her flying by with arms full of items that may or may not have been hers. He saw the sneer on her face as she unloaded her final snark.

It was like a dream, like someone else’s story. He fantasized about her coming back. She was not coming back. Events had been set in motion and could not be diverted from their course. His wife of four months had deserted him and he was naked in his soul and all alone in their new house. He wanted to call somebody to protest—but whom? He could not call his parents; there would be no sympathy there, unless his father answered the phone, which he never did, since the calls were always for his mother.

An hour passed, two hours, with him still sitting there in the same spot, glued there, unable to move. The door was still wide open. The neighbors’ miniature poodle bounced in and bounced around the living room and onto his lap. He just sat there and stared at him. The little ball of energy bounced out the door and still he just sat there. He did not get up to close the door. It was balmy for November, but the furnace was running. He didn’t care. He did not want the door to be closed.

## II

### *Aftermath* *A father's kindness*

**B**UT HE COULD not prevent it. Vanessa was not coming back. He was in shock and could not understand why. He knew there were some things that bothered her. There were differences over money. Case in point: the overpriced hunk of fashionable wood and fabric upon which he was then sitting. He wanted to save up and pay cash, but that was not Vanessa's way. He wanted to wait for a sale but she was impatient. He didn't say no, exactly, but he rained on her parade.

Actually money was the cause of most of the friction between them, now that he thought about it. There were the expensive restaurants she insisted on going to, the concerts, the Broadway show, a lot of it being charged even with both of them working. He looked at the ever-expanding credit card bills and felt ill. This upset her. He knew she was unhappy about his penny-pinching.

It was also the main reason why she was upset about his job at Callahan's. The paycheck was not impressive. He was not sure he would call it "pitiful," as she did, but he knew she had high expectations, and he could not really blame her. She was simply echoing the high-flying culture of Fairfield County.

Douglas came to two mortifying conclusions, sitting there on the sofa he didn't want. First, he was an idiot when it came to women. He had completely misread Vanessa. Second, he did not have what it took to make a woman happy. He knew what her expectations were, but he could not rise to such exalted heights.

Douglas had grown up with wealth and had no illusions about its power to provide happiness. He knew wealthy people from his parents' circle of friends and none of them were happy. His parents

were not happy. "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" These words were meaningful to him.

Whatever happiness was, it did not have anything to do with the American dream of amassing a fortune, at least not to his mind. The empty mansions of Newport were proof of that. It seemed he was looking for happiness in his own way, but how could he expect anyone to follow him? What right did he have to try to pass himself off as a husband in an age of five-thousand square foot homes and two Audis in the driveway?

Douglas took after his father. Bill Lendell had been a promising young business whiz early in his marriage, or at least that was the path his family had put him on, but then one day he failed to get out of bed and go to work. He hated it so much that he could not force himself to go in. He threw it all away and went back to school and got a history degree and started teaching.

Poor Helen never recovered from the blow. It was not because he couldn't provide; Bill had more money than he knew what to do with. No, it was because the thought of him being a teacher was embarrassing. Helen was well on her way to becoming chief counsel at a large corporation. People deferred to her naturally. It was that way even at church, like the queen walking into a room. Eventually she had twenty-five lawyers working under her, most of them making at least twice her husband's salary.

She could be grateful for teachers, as long as they stayed within their sphere, but it was hard to accept one as a spouse. Picture her with her peers at a cocktail party. Nothing pained her more than having to say "he's a teacher."

The point is that Douglas knew all about his mother's disdain for his father. She considered him a failure. He could not live up to her expectations and didn't even seem to try. It occurred to him that he was his father and Vanessa was his mother. The difference was that his father had money.

Crushed, wounded, beaten down, Douglas was determined to retreat from the social world of love and marriage. He wanted love, he wanted marriage, but he lost all confidence in himself and all trust of women. He swore he would never allow himself to be hurt that way again, never put himself in a position where he could be plunged at a moment's notice into misery and despair.

Meanwhile Vanessa pursued divorce with inhuman precision. It was a clean break on her side, and he was the one left broken—in

more ways than one, since he did not have the strength to fight over money. The proceeds from the sale of the house were divided equally with no mention of her helping to pay back his father. The credit card debts for things he never wanted were also divided up evenly.

To be fair, there was a little bit of the martyr creeping in here. Douglas got it in his head that he could salvage some shred of dignity from the disaster by being noble. But in this case his notions of nobility got mixed up with self-pity and maybe a little pride and the result was a whole lot of debt. Nor did his generosity soften Vanessa's heart toward him. It made her think he was weak.

Divorce was a long dark voyage into winter for Douglas. First there was the overwhelming sense of failure and shame. He went to bed with it and woke up with it again in the morning—that is, on the nights when he slept at all. It was like a blaring noise in his head. He idealized marriage, and he had failed. Not just with a slow drip but spectacularly. He felt like the whole world was laughing at him. He knew his mother and brother were.

Time went by and he managed to square his debts, but he was still thinking about what Vanessa had done to him. He would be doing something at work, minding his own business, and all of a sudden he would see her scornful face and the complete lack of anything resembling tenderness or regret. He could not get revenge, and he could not get past the pain of rejection.

There were things to keep him occupied. He joined a brass band. He was a very talented trombonist. He could play all the brass instruments, but he gravitated to the trombone because it was the middle voice. It was not the star, like the red-faced trumpet. It was about blending in. It was the glue. This appealed to him. He liked the idea that he was helping to hold things together.

He had his Mets in the summer and Rangers in winter. He had his books. He got together occasionally with friends from school—although less and less as they married. Most of all he had his walking. He spent a lot of time walking. He knew all the wooded parks near the shore and extended his reach up to the Berkshires. He was never happier than when he was walking through the deep woods or climbing a mountain on a sunny day.

After the divorce his father offered him the guest cottage as a place to stay while he got back on his feet. This was a wonderful gesture, but it had unintended consequences because he grew into

the cottage like a plant. He spent most of his time alone and told himself he liked to be alone. There was no way for someone to hurt you if you did not let them in.

He renovated the entire cottage. It wasn't his intention. He started with one room and kept on going. His father often helped, which was good fellowship for him. He learned some new skills along the way—carpentry, cabinet-making, plumbing, molding, paper-hanging. He took his time. There was no hurry. He didn't have anywhere to go.

The years went by and Douglas was still living in his little cottage and going to work every day and taking long walks and playing his trombone. His father became his best friend, often dropping by to share a beer and talk about history or sports or politics. He cherished this relationship and came to think of it as the most important one in his life.

But during all of this time Douglas was still obsessing over Vanessa. It took three years before her scowling face stopped being the first thing that popped into his head when he woke up in the morning. It was five years before the hurt became resignation. It was eight years before he began to feel any peace.

And what had he been doing, romance-wise, during all of this time? Very little. What could he do? All the women at work were married. All the girls at church were too young. He was not a bar person and could not imagine trying to ingratiate himself to a stranger in such a setting, no matter how desperate he might be. His only dates during those eight long years were the ones his mother arranged for him.

But the women she sent his way all reminded him of Vanessa—a little hard.

### III

*Douglas meets someone*  
*A merry mix-up*

**T**HAT WAS WHEN *Trish* came into his life. Ironically, she was the runaway bride. The story was that she had a big wedding planned at a nice place on the coast and never did make it to the altar.

She made it to the church on time, she made it to the little room downstairs with her bridesmaids, but then for no apparent reason she started crying and became angry and said she “couldn’t do this” and she was being “pushed into it” and “people didn’t understand what she was going through,” etc., and left them standing there with their mouths open and an estimated thirty thousand dollars washed down the drain.

This storied act made her a cause célèbre to Douglas’s brother Roger and his band of merry men. They had seen this sort of thing in the movies, but having it happen to someone they actually knew was delicious. *Trish* became an unwitting heroine of the self-appointed iconoclasts and opponents of conventions of all kinds, including marriage. They had hardly noticed her before—she was not part of the in-crowd at prep school—or at least not the in-in-crowd—but they rediscovered her after all these years.

*Trish* became one of “the group,” as they called themselves, and was somewhat bewildered to find herself invited to parties and dragged along to the bar or whatever—bewildered because she did not know how she had acquired this new status in their minds—and if she had known she never would have gone along with it, since she saw the whole fiasco very differently from them and did not think of herself as a heroine at all.

Roger was almost the opposite of his shy and retiring brother. He was always the life of the party, the center of attention. Why he had never noticed *Trish* before he did not know. They were herded



together in school, in many of the same classes, but he was in a special group, and he and everyone in that group knew it, and somehow Trish never quite found her way in, although she was close; she was on the cusp, he said, hindsight being 20/20.

Douglas met Trish at one of his brother's famous parties. Mom and Pop Lendell were at the house in Provence for a couple of weeks and it was July and very hot, so Roger took it upon himself to invite a large crowd over to his parents' house to take advantage of the pool. It did not occur to him to include his socially inept brother, even though the guest house could be seen from the pool, but Douglas could not help noticing the festive hordes descending on the estate on a sunny afternoon, car radios blasting.

He saw them whooping it up by the pool and had very mixed emotions. On one hand, he was not necessarily a party person. He was one of *those people* who are said to find parties enervating. It was hard for him to meet people casually because there was nothing casual about his feelings and because he was highly self-conscious. Also it was Roger's friends, which automatically made them suspect.

And yet—sigh!—there was a side to Douglas that very much wanted to be part of the party. It hurt him that he lived there and had not even been invited. He went outside to trim the boxwoods that didn't need trimming and heard people laughing and talking and he heard—girls—and oh how the poor fellow longed to be at the party, even though nothing good could come of it.

He decided he needed to get away. He drove over to the Arboretum and walked and walked. Okay, so it wasn't his normal long walk, but it was pretty long! He thought he had done enough. He had washed the annoying party sounds out of his ears with the songs of birds. Three hours had passed with the driving and the ice coffee he picked up on the way home.

But the party was going just as strong when he returned. They were laughing and shouting at the diving board and having a grand old time. He smelled charcoal—they hadn't even started grilling yet! It was going to be a long night. Douglas could not make up his mind whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. To tell the truth he was so lonely that he was partying with them vicariously. They laughed and he smiled. He couldn't help himself.

He went out in the yard again and weeded where there were no weeds and retrimmed the boxwoods he had already trimmed. He

meandered into his little victory garden and pinched the suckers off the tomatoes. But this fake industriousness was to no avail. No one noticed him from the party and invited him to come over. Well, they may have noticed him, but they didn't invite him.

Finally his curiosity got the best of him. He decided to do some scouting by making a pilgrimage to the pool house for a certain beer he and his father had recently discovered—Bourbon County Stout, if you really must know. He walked through the grove and emerged into the opening below the pool and looked up at the well-lighted gaggle. At that point he lost his nerve and might have slinked back into the woods if he had not been spotted and hailed in a loud beery voice by Blake D. Hamilton, III.

Douglas soldiered on, weaving through the crowd with the mistaken impression that everyone was watching him. He found his way to the pool house. Roger was there, stacking a tray with packages of brats and frozen hamburgers. He smirked when he saw his brother. Jeff was also there, among others; Douglas gave him a friendly wave and they exchanged the usual grunts and greetings. Then he went to the refrigerator and found what he was looking for, popping the top off and taking a sip.

In this self-cinematic mode he suddenly became aware of a dark-haired young lady coming through the open door. He looked at her and felt a disturbance in the force. She had a cute smile and intelligence in her eyes and kindness. He found himself drawn to her instantly, in a way that he had not been drawn in some time. In fact he couldn't remember ever having been drawn quite like this before. He almost dropped his beer.

Roger spotted the unknown girl as well. A big smile spread over his handsome face.

"Trish!" he exclaimed, in a tone that bode ill. "Come meet my famous brother. You two have a lot in common. His bride ran away, and you're the runaway bride."

Roger said this to embarrass his brother. He succeeded. Douglas turned bright red and went into one of those zones that only people like him can fully understand, where it feels like the entire universe is made up of eyes. He could not stay there. He had to get out, no matter how strongly he was attracted to this girl. In fact the very presence of the girl was a major incentive to flee.

"Congratulations," he said coldly. "You always did have a knack for making your guests feel at home." And with that *mighty riposte*

he stormed out and strode back to the cottage, beer in hand.

Trish did not storm out, however. Something had just happened to her, something completely unexpected, and she did not know how to react. "Is that your brother?" she said.

"Douglas? That's him," Roger said with a snort. "Family recluse. Pretty much barricades himself in the guest house, which for some reason he seems to think is his."

"What did you mean by 'his bride ran away'?"

"You don't know about that? I thought everybody knew. Yeah, believe it or not he was married once. Didn't work out too well. I'm pretty sure it wasn't *her* fault. She was great."

Roger carried the tray of meat out to the grill, leaving Trish with decidedly mixed feelings, or to be more precise, quite confused.

Jeff approached her sympathetically, one of the few friends from Roger's inner circle that she liked and trusted. "I can't believe he called you that," he said with a grimace.

"It's not the first time," she said. "I guess he thinks it's funny."

"Actually he probably thinks he's giving you a compliment."

"Then he has no idea how *I* feel. But that's not surprising, since all he seems to think about is himself. Do you know his brother?"

"Of course! I spent a lot of time here over the years. He is probably the nicest guy you'll ever meet. I was supposed to be Roger's friend, but to tell you the truth I almost felt closer to Doug. He didn't mind that I was two years younger, always treated me like an equal. And he's the most loyal friend you could possibly have. Never has a bad word to say about anyone."

"Unlike Roger, you mean."

"Believe me, he's completely unlike Roger. It's hard to believe they came from the same mother. Not that there's anything wrong with Roger, but Doug is a wonderful guy, and it seems like he's always getting the short end of the stick around here. Family dynamics and all that."

"So what happened with this girl?"

"Vanessa? Ugh. That was terrible. They were married for four months and he came home one night to find her packing. He was completely crushed. Which, by the way, is the real reason why he's living in the guest house; not because he's a 'recluse.'"

"But why is Roger so hard on him?"

"That is a very good question. I never understood why Roger dislikes him so much. But their mother is very hard on him as well.

Maybe that's where he gets it from."

This was all quite fascinating. Why? Because Trish *felt* something in the brief moment when she and Douglas glanced at each other. She was interested in him, and she had the impression he was interested in her as well. What Roger said was typically annoying, but Jeff's words were impossibly sweet. She would have loved to hear more. She didn't have the courage to ask.

She was not terribly deterred by the revelation that Douglass was divorced. According to Jeff, he had been abandoned. There was a difference in her mind. She did not see it as a defect or fault, like Roger. In fact it made him a romantic figure. She pictured him in this guest house they were talking about, crushed by the loss of love. Her heart went out to him

It was extremely annoying that Roger called her the "runaway bride." She was not the runaway bride in her own mind. Okay, she did run away, but it was not what people thought. The business about the \$30,000 was a lot of baloney. She would never spend that kind of money on a wedding. And did they realize how hard she had worked to pay it all back? Did they know she had even reimbursed her former future in-laws for the rehearsal dinner?

True, she never should have let Eric talk her into marrying him. She wasn't ready. He did not know why she could not go through with it—the real reason—and she would never tell him. But she was not proud of what had happened, not by any stretch of the imagination. If they only knew how much pain and suffering she went through! How much she was still suffering now!

Meanwhile Douglas also was very unhappy with Roger. They had a complicated relationship. At some level he loved him—as a brother—but on another level he could not stand him. Roger had a way of bringing out the worst in him, especially in crowds. He stormed out of the pool house because he felt humiliated, because it was the same old thing with his brother, because they had a history together that made him want to avoid him—but storming out made the humiliation complete, and unfortunately he failed to consider this until he was already half way out the door.

Well, no, that wasn't the only reason he stormed out. It was because of Trish. Oh yes, he noticed her. It was more than just noticing. It was almost like he already knew her—although he had never seen her before. This was probably the main reason why he ran away. His brother had the best of him, again, and he could not

stand being made to look foolish in her eyes.

He vaguely remembered his brother raving about the “runaway bride” at some point in the past, and he remembered not being very impressed. He had a runaway bride in his own personal history and was not inclined to glorify the breed. Also he hated, absolutely hated, Roger’s smug nihilism. Douglas held marriage in high regard and felt personally offended by attempts to devalue it. If this girl felt the same way as his brother, then he definitely did not want to have anything to do with her.

But that was then. Now that he had actually seen the “runaway bride,” without realizing who she was, his feelings were very different. She did not seem anything like the way his brother had so gleefully portrayed her. She did not look like a scornful Kate, at least to his mind; quite the opposite. To the extent that a face is an open book, or a mirror of the soul, what he saw was someone who was kind. He perceived a certain sadness mixed with a smile in the corners of her eyes, which to his mind indicated depth.

This first impression was powerful. His brother’s blistering wisecrack did not make a dent in it. He saw Trish before Roger spoke and did not care what he said about her. He liked her and wanted her to like him. The feeling was almost overpowering. Strange as it may seem, that was why he ran away.

He realized, after the fact, that running away was not likely to impress her, however. For one thing it made him look like a coward. It was embarrassment and the bitterness of family history, not cowardice, that made him storm out of the pool house, but Trish had no way of knowing this. She had no way of knowing about the complex relationship between him and Roger or the bearing it had on the interaction she had witnessed.

And his chivalry gene was also activated; yes, the specific one. Running away was bad because he had left her defenseless. Roger was acting like an ass. This was not unusual—*he* was certainly used to it—but he saw the effect it had on *her*. He saw the look on her face in the wake of his brother’s unfeeling comment. He should have stayed and put himself between her and Roger. At the very least, he should not have left her there alone in the wake of such an attack. It was bad manners.

She deserved an apology from his brother. Whether he would have felt this way for *any* victim of Roger he did not know, but in Trish’s case the feeling was strong. She had been insulted in vile

terms, but he knew Roger would not give her one. Roger was never conscious of the hurt he inflicted. Suddenly Douglass felt like it was up to him. He wanted to apologize to her himself and try to make up for his brother's rude behavior. He did not want her going home hurt, and (to be honest) he also did not want her to think he was in any way complicit in the attack.

He jumped up and started to head—where? He could not see himself making another grand entrance at the party. The first one had been traumatic enough. But then he had an idea. The party had been going for six or seven hours, at least. Some cars were already leaving. It would probably break up soon.

Instead of heading for the pool he headed for the turnaround where most of the cars were parked. He would catch her as she walked to her car, away from the glare of the lights. He sat on the rock near the old beech tree under the lustrous summer stars, thinking or dreaming about what he was going to say.

He sat there for a full hour slaying impertinent mosquitoes and becoming more and more self-conscious as departing guests cast curious looks in his direction. The rock got harder and the whole thing began to seem ridiculous. For all he knew she might have already left. It would not be surprising, considering what Roger had done to her.

Then the old feelings of shame and inadequacy came back and they were too strong for him. Who was he to be sitting on a rock in the moonlight? It was false advertising. He had already failed once at marriage. Nothing had changed since then. He was still working at Callahan's. For that matter he was still living at home!

Suddenly he saw himself sitting there and realized how pathetic he looked—and was. He stood up and began trudging reluctantly back to his house. The expedition begun with such high hopes was ending in foolishness and defeat. He did not know if he would ever see Trish again. He was surprised by how much this thought affected him, a girl he had never even seen before.

Meanwhile Trish was very much there. After the pool house ambush she found an empty table and sat down hoping for the return of the older brother. She did not realize he had retreated to his house. She assumed he was somewhere nearby and would eventually find his way back to the pool.

The longer she sat there the more invested she became in the outcome. From time to time someone would stop by and chat. Jeff

sat with her for quite a while. She longed to ask him about Douglas again but didn't dare. She looked down the hill into the valley and saw a house with lights glowing in the darkness. It must be the one they were talking about—the one where he lived.

Then the party started thinning out. She did not want to expose herself to any more of Roger's rallery, so she said goodbye to Jeff and a few others and slipped quietly into the darkness. The walk to her car was very lonely.

It seemed hopeless. She was the runaway bride and his bride had run away. She thought she saw some interest on his part, in that brief moment when they looked at each other, but then why did he go storming off? Was it because of what Roger said?

She was intrigued by Douglas; she could not deny it. She liked what Jeff had to say about him. It seemed perfectly sincere. He said Douglas was "nice." This was just what she thought she saw when she looked at him. He seemed to her like a very nice person. He said he was a "wonderful guy." Who says that about their friends?

But then she began to feel depressed. It was not just because of the obstacles between them. It was not just because of Roger's obnoxious comment. No, it was the other thing. She had been close to marriage before and could not go through with it. What made her think things would be any different now?

Still, she could not help glancing at the guest house as she crept down the driveway. She fantasized about knocking on the door—and doing what? Asking for a cup of sugar? Directions back to town? The truth was she had no business knocking on his door. For a lot of reasons.

Trish had been sitting at a table by the pool waiting for Douglas to return to the party while Douglas was sitting on a rock waiting for her to leave the party. If they knew this, they both would have had a good laugh. But they did not know it, and the self-doubt and cross purposes on display were a foreshadowing of things to come.

## IV

*A festive birthday  
Trish meets Mr. Lendell  
The conversation*

**T**HUS IT HAPPENED that the runaway bride and the guy whose bride had run away became aware of each other's existence and attentive to opportunities to see one another again. For Trish, this meant saying yes to any invitation she might receive from "the group," as they called themselves.

This was not her usual MO. Actually she wasn't sure why she hung out with them at all. Maybe it was because she didn't have a lot of friends nearby. Maybe it was because she was flattered by their interest in her (she was not aware of its provenance). After all, they were the alpha group at school, the group everyone wanted to be in. Not that *she* wanted it so much, but now that they were asking she found it strangely difficult to say no.

She was not overly fond of "the group." She had a chatty relationship with a couple of the girls, whom she liked and were harmless. Roger struck her as very possibly the vainest individual on the face of the earth and puzzled her by his interest in her. She liked Jeff. He was kind and had a good sense of humor. But now Jeff was not the only reason for joining in their activities. Most of all there was the possibility of seeing Douglas.

There was an opportunity almost right away—a party for Roger. His mother came home from vacation and decided to combine his birthday with a celebration of some big promotion he had received at work. She told him to invite as many friends as he wanted (she was indulgent with Roger). Trish of course was automatically added to the list. There could not be a party without the runaway bride.

Finding a present was hard, but she settled on a fruit keg tapping kit, which seemed amusing until she was carrying it into the house and thought of the parents. What was even harder was



finding the right card. They were larded with nice sentiments, none of which she really felt. In the end she defaulted to a plain one with balloons on the front and an anodyne “Happy Birthday.” Added benefit: it was the cheapest one on the rack.

The mansion was a bit overwhelming, but Mr. Lendell answered the door and immediately put her at ease. She was amazed by him. Her own father had pleasant manners but nothing like this. After five minutes she felt like they were old friends. It was difficult to pull herself away and go to her own crowd.

She joined a circle of five girls talking enthusiastically about their shopping adventures, but she was not really listening. No, she was still thinking about Mr. Lendell. She had never met anyone quite like him. She knew gracious men—especially some of her parents’ friends from church—but he was different. He was tall, slender, handsome. He looked like a scholar behind his glasses. There was a genuine warmth to him and a verbal elegance. He asked questions and they were kind and sincere.

Why was this so fascinating? Because of Douglas, of course. She had heard stories about his imposing mother but nothing about his father. Was Roger like one parent and Douglas like the other? Was this the “family dynamic” referenced by Jeff? In any case meeting him only made her want to see Douglas more.

She also met the famous Helen. How to describe her? She was a large woman, not fat or anything, not a giant by any means, but with a definite physical presence that could not be missed. She was also—well, let’s just say handsome. Certainly attractive, with her striking features, bright eyes and blond hair, but not necessarily “pretty” in a feminine way.

There was definitely something fascinating about her. Trish could see why people would feel comfortable putting her in places of power, where women were beginning to go with regularity in the corporate world. She was perfectly cordial to her guests, even good-humored to a degree, but you knew there was a line. She was not someone you would want to cross.

Mrs. Lendell was clearly Running Things and Mr. Lendell was out circulating amongst the guests and doing his best to make them feel at home. They made a good team, but there was no other obvious connection between them. Even when everyone sat down to eat they were not together. Mrs. Lendell sat with family and friends; her husband joined the kids.

And Douglas? He showed up fashionably late, looking sheepish. She watched him as he circulated among the older crowd, greeting everyone with a pleasant smile. He seemed a little shy, a little like an outsider in his own house. This endeared him to her. A lot.

He mingled with the elders for a long time. It occurred to her that he *preferred* to be with them. Only when the buffet was served did he go anywhere near Roger's crowd—and even then the only one he seemed to greet without reserve was Jeff, who received a welcome that made her a little jealous.

She was standing a few feet away, observing them, when suddenly he turned and looked at her. He pulled away from Jeff and walked in her direction. She did not know what to do with herself. Her hands reached back instinctively for the wall.

"Hi," he said. "Trish, right?"

"Right!"

"We have not been formally introduced. I'm Douglas, the older and lesser Lendell brother."

"I doubt that. I mean the 'lesser' part," she said babbling.

"I just wanted to say I was sorry for what happened at the party. It was inexcusable. I felt terrible about it."

"Why should *you* be sorry?"

"Well, it was probably my fault, to be honest. I think he was mad at me for showing up."

"Why would he be mad at you for that? It's your house."

"I don't know. I think I embarrass him. Not exactly his cup of tea. But I did feel badly about it. Sometimes things just come out of his mouth. I don't think he really means them."

"Don't worry. I'm used to Roger. I don't take him seriously. I mean—Oh! I don't know what I mean."

He smiled. "Well, I guess I should get something to eat. Nice to talk to you."

"And to you. Too."

Unfortunately it was the *last* time she talked to him, that day anyway. He filled up his plate at the buffet and sat with the older crowd. She felt obligated to go into the large room where Roger and his friends were. She saw him again during the cake routine from across the room, but after that she lost track of him. She was too embarrassed to go looking for him, although she wanted to. So she forced herself to stay next to Jeff and try to pretend she was interested in whatever the heck was going on.

She wasn't listening, though. She was thinking about The Conversation. It was a mixed outcome. She had babbled. She had blundered. She said she didn't take his brother seriously. Had she trampled on sacred ground? After all, they *were* family. He was apologizing for Roger but maybe his feelings about him were complex. She wished she knew what he was thinking about her and about the interaction. She almost wished she had not said anything at all. Better to give no impression than to give the wrong one.

The only impression she *wanted* to give was of her intense pleasure in seeing him again. But then she mocked herself. What was this intense pleasure and what right did she have to have it? She knew nothing about him, except for what she heard from Jeff. She did feel she knew him a little better after their brief chat. He did seem to be like his father—gracious, although maybe too shy to be outgoing. But this was nothing more than a surmise. It did not seem to justify the feelings she had for him.

One thing was perfectly clear—he was not comfortable with Roger's friends. She could not blame him. She wasn't comfortable with them either. Then an unhappy thought occurred to her. Did he think of her as one of them? She longed to go to him and assure him this was not the case. But that seemed rather silly. If she was not one of Roger's friends, then what was she doing there?

Still, the feelings she had for Douglas could not be denied. She could not talk herself out of them or stop replaying the terse but wonderful conversation in her mind. She saw him coming to her again and again. She was looking at other people while they talked but this was what she was seeing in her mind. He was apologizing for what his brother said. He wasn't the one who said it, but still he apologized. His manner was warm and gentle. It was all very sweet.

Did Roger really find him embarrassing? If so, she could not imagine why. What she saw was a good-looking, intelligent, athletic young man who seemed very sincere and very concerned about her feelings. She wanted to go to Roger and tell him to shut up. Of course he hadn't really said anything.

For his part, Douglas was elated and perhaps a little depressed. It was not easy for him to approach her. He had no way of knowing how his mission would be received or if she even wanted to talk to him, since he was essentially a stranger. Thus he found the conversation very awkward. He tried to say complex things in a simplified, almost coded way. *He* knew what they meant, but how

could she possibly know? He wondered if he came across sounding a little crazy.

She seemed puzzled. He couldn't blame her. Why was he apologizing? He hadn't done anything wrong. He was not the one who had insulted her and exposed her to ridicule. He mumbled some lame excuse about it "probably" being his fault, but of course it was not his fault at all. It was pure, genuine Roger. He was trapped between his desire to justify his apology and exonerate his brother, because it was not like him to be critical of others.

So then why *did* he apologize? Yes, it was partly because he felt she deserved an apology; it was sincere in that sense. But it was also partly something else, or perhaps mostly—he wasn't sure. The truth is he wanted to talk to her. He longed to talk to her. He needed an excuse and the apology seemed like a good idea.

Well, maybe not. Apparently she saw through him. She was right; Roger was the one who should have been apologizing. This was why he avoided her for the rest of the party. He felt he had been a little too obvious. He didn't want to seem even more obvious. He had made contact with her; his mission was successful. It was what he was hoping for when he came to the party. He did not want to push his luck and possibly embarrass himself.

He was in love with her but had no reason to think she was in love with him or was even thinking of him. In his downtrodden state he found it very unlikely. He decided to be content with this first contact. His original impression of her was confirmed. She seemed to him to be kind. She was also intelligent and had a good sense of humor. He thought of the fits and starts and smiled. He did understand them. That was the thing. He did not know what to make of the connection he felt, but it certainly seemed to be real.

He spent the rest of the party looking for opportunities to observe her without being apprehended. If this seems a little creepy, blame it on love.

## V

*Trish all mixed up  
Life's a beach  
Douglas passes up an invitation*

UNFORTUNATELY TRISH did not know about all this or why he stayed away. She could think of a lot of reasons but that particular one did not happen to come to mind.

She did know he stayed away. She did not see him again, at least not to talk to. And this was perplexing. He came to her once and they had a very nice chat and then he disappeared. Did the chat not seem as nice to him as it seemed to her? Because to her it seemed very nice. She acted like an idiot, but other than that it was nice.

The most direct interpretation was he really did want to apologize for his irritating brother but otherwise had no interest in her. He ignored her for three hours. This seemed to indicate a lack of interest. Or maybe she scared him away. She had been somewhat unkind to said brother. Was he offended?

Oh, she did not know what to think! Except to think she was crazy to be obsessing over him. She had recently heard an expert proclaim that all romantic love was an illusion and partly believed it, based on past experience. But then Douglas came into her life and she became confused.

Actually it was not about romance, per se. No, it was something much stranger than that. She was like an ancient Greek heroine whose psychic receptors had not been turned off. She sensed a mysterious *connection* between them.

She could not have explained it any other way. It was as if she knew him even though she did not know him. It was as if they were somehow close even though they had just met. This feeling of hers made no sense, but it didn't seem to matter. She could not unfeel it. She didn't even try.

Trish was torn between her modern self that considered all

connections to be hard-wired and an expressive self that she just now seemed to be discovering. Should she ignore this inner voice just because of the dust of college textbooks? The problem was she did not want to ignore it.

She was hoping for another opportunity to see him. It was a pretty long wait for someone with the feelings she had. Four weeks went by before she got a call from Jeff. A party was planned for beautiful Hammonasset beach.

Trish did something she almost couldn't believe. She asked if "Roger's brother" was coming.

"I doubt he's been invited. Why?"

"I was just thinking about our conversation. It would be kind of nice to include him. He seems like such a nice guy." Fortunately he couldn't see her blushing as she said this.

"He's a great guy. I love Doug. I just don't know how Roger will feel about it."

"Oh, who cares what Roger thinks. Did someone die and put him in charge?"

"No one died that I know of," Jeff said laughing. "I'll call him right now."

Trish was abashed. Was this what she was stooping to now? Feigning a disinterested concern for Douglas's welfare? It was not like her. She did not like feigning of any kind. In fact it was a major part of her problems with love in the past. She pretended not to know whether he had been invited. She *knew* he hadn't. He was never invited to Roger's parties. That was why she asked.

Oh well, it seemed she was not in her right mind. She definitely was not in her right mind in the time between this call and the actual event. She went to work but her mind was not at work. She went to bed but she did not go to sleep. She wanted to call Jeff and see if the invitation had been accepted but was too chicken. She really, really wanted to call him.

The much-anticipated day finally came and she drove to the beach with Jeff and a couple others full of excitement. Things did not start out propitiously. Douglas seemed to be avoiding her. No, that isn't true. He was avoiding everyone, except Jeff. It made sense. After all, Jeff was the one who invited him and was his friend. Still, she couldn't help wishing he would come to her as he had at the birthday party. She could not talk herself into going to *him*, not with everyone watching. What would Roger say?

He was sitting there greased up in the sun reading his Kindle. She longed to ask him what he was reading. The idea that he was a reader appealed to her. Not that she was such a great reader herself, but it suggested he was a serious person, an intelligent person. Which is why she wanted to know what he was reading.

She was sitting in a crowd of people on a beautiful beach with the waves glistening in the sun and all she could think about was Douglas and his Kindle. Was she in love with him? She was afraid to say yes. She tried to scold herself out of it. The scolding had no effect. It didn't stop her from glancing at him as often as she dared.

Meanwhile the party seemed to drag on forever. They played Frisbee. They went for a swim. They came back out and ate. They put on more suntan lotion. All of this was done in beachtime; that is, in excruciatingly slow motion. And *still* there was a wall between her and Douglas, at least in her own mind.

Finally Roger decided it was time to leave. The plan was to head to Ashley's for ice cream. Trish waited until Douglas joined the caravan back to the cars and followed him. She was his side car, hanging back a little. Then she got bold and drew even; an effort that put her out of breath, since his walking pace was brisk.

"Are you going to Ashley's?" she said, trying not to gasp.

He seemed startled and looked at her for a moment. "I don't know. I thought I might just head home."

"You should! It's a great place. You have to try the Mud Pie Nugget Delight."

"Thank you for the kind offer, but I think I've had enough."

"Ice cream?"

"No, I was thinking of something else."

"I think I know what you were thinking. It doesn't seem like you find our company very stimulating."

"It's not that. It's just—well, everyone in the group is so much younger than I am. I probably shouldn't have come. I don't really belong here."

"But you don't feel that way about Jeff."

"No, I grew up with Jeff. I enjoy seeing old friends. I just have a hard time making new ones."

"Maybe if you tried a little harder. I'm sure there are lots of people who would love to get to know you." She shook her head as these blundering words left her mouth.

"You are right. It's entirely my own fault. The only thing I can

say in my defense is I don't seem to have been born with my brother's happy manner. Roger has hundreds of friends. If I have a few close ones, I consider it a miracle."

They reached the cars and parted cordially, but Trish could have kicked herself. She did not mean what she said in the way he seemed to take it. She was not trying to be critical. She just wanted him to have lots of friends! Douglas's story touched her. It made her sad to think of him being alone. Also she believed he was undervaluing himself. The strong feelings she had for him told her that everyone would have the same feelings, if he let them.

Then again, maybe he liked being alone. She did not know him well enough to know whether he was lonely, being alone. Some people weren't, or so they say. Besides, it was not just *charity* that caused her to give him her well-meaning advice. It was also self-interest. She included herself among the "lots of people" who wanted to get to know him better.

Still, the exchange had not been a complete disaster. First of all, it was an exchange. She'd had another conversation with him, two now! Second, she learned a lot, considering how little was said. She learned he was not like Roger in his own mind. He was not an extrovert. She liked that. Trish preferred the strong, silent type.

He was not proud or aloof, as he seemed on the beach. It was that he felt out of place. He was shy! She was not the first young woman to have had this insight about Douglas, but she was the first to love him for it. It did not seem like a weakness to her. No, it made him more appealing, more interesting. Roger was not shy, and for that very reason he was boring. He could not surprise her.

These were sweet things to think about. But then she felt a little down. He had refused her invitation to go for ice cream. She made a direct invitation—and he refused! The meaning seemed plain. He did not share this mysterious sense of connection she had been feeling, or demented, depending on how you looked at it.

Now she felt ashamed of herself. After all, what *was* this strange feeling that she had? She did not know him; how could she feel connected to him? Was it some sort of fantasy or delusion? She had never felt anything like it in her life. Why now? Did she have summer fever? Was she just tired of being alone?

If the connection she felt to him was real, then shouldn't he feel the same connection? After all, how can there be a connection on one end only? And yet he turned her down. He wouldn't have



turned her down if he felt connected to her.

She had to be imagining the whole thing. That was what she told herself. Besides, was it right to chase him down like that? Was it right to insinuate herself into his sacred space? She had a past. For that matter, she had a present. Was she running up to him just to run away again? It wasn't fair to him.

Jeff was right. Douglas *was* very sweet. She could definitely picture them together. Indeed, at that point in her life it seemed to be difficult to picture anything else. But was she being selfish? She hoped it could be different this time. She was so deeply attracted to him that it seemed like it *had* to be different.

After all, *she* was different. She wasn't the same person she had been four years ago. A lot of time had passed since then. She said these things to herself, and was almost convinced; *almost*. But then she tried to picture them having the conversation they would need to have and couldn't quite do it.

In that case maybe it was better if they never saw each other again. Maybe it was better if he really was upset with her for being critical, even though she did not mean to be. He'd already had enough grief in his life. The last thing he needed was to get mixed up with someone who was as mixed-up as she was.

Maybe the best thing was to let him go! But she could not do it. The beach party was hard in a way but wonderful. She was there with him and that was all she wanted, in spite of the weirdness of it all. She loved talking to him, however briefly. Absolutely loved it. There was nothing she wanted more than to see him again.

## VI

*Bill's cleverness*  
*Helen moves the pawns*

AND WHAT WAS *Douglas* thinking during the long drive home? He did not know what to think.

He was indeed inclined to regard Trish's comment as a criticism, but he was not at all offended. In fact he agreed with her and admired her insight and common sense. He probably *could* make friends if he made an effort, even a little one. He was not proud of being shy. He was not proud of the self-consciousness he felt when he was around Roger's crowd. In some ways he wished he could be more like Roger. But he simply was not made like that.

Could he make himself that way? He had tried to be more outgoing in the past—although usually it came across as being awkward because it was not natural to him. Or at least *he* felt awkward. Still, he agreed with her. Not so much the part about lots of people wanting to get to know him—he very much doubted this was the case—but about being willing to try. It made a difference. He promised himself he would take her advice. And even as he promised it he doubted he would ever actually do it.

But what a strange afternoon! He went hoping to see Trish, and she was there, but there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. He was paralyzed. He was not the sort of person who could approach a woman casually, or anyone for that matter. He did not have the self-assurance to be natural, like Roger, and abhorred the idea of trying to fake it. He longed to go to Trish and say something very suave, like 007, if he could think of anything; but he couldn't. Plus, in a crowd? Impossible.

He sat there in the hot sun pretending to read *Killer Angels* on his Kindle. He really did want to read the book. He was excited after hearing his father rave about it. He read the words from the first page over and over again but could not get them to register on

his frazzled brain. He heard them in his mind as he read them and still he could not get them to register. They left no footprint.

The problem was his *other* eyes were also looking at Trish, whom he had managed to position strategically on the horizon of his personal reading device. He saw the words and he saw Trish—and Trish won. Except for when he was swimming or playing Frisbee with Jeff, he literally sat there for two hours surreptitiously observing Trish and watching every move she made, as it were. If he managed to read a page with comprehension it was a major accomplishment.

He was very much interested in Trish. He never would have accepted the invitation to go to the beach if he wasn't. He was surprised when Jeff called him, but he was able to overcome his surprise because of the possibility that Trish would be there. But he did not know what to think about this interest of his, or infatuation, or whatever it was. Was he wasting his time? It was hard for him to believe someone like her would want him after what happened with Vanessa. He did not feel worthy.

What right did he have to recommend himself? He had been at Callahan's for eight years and was making a decent salary, but it was not impressive. The way to do better, he knew perfectly well, was either to start his own business or go into some big firm and climb the corporate ladder. He was not enough of a salesman to have his own business, and the idea of working in a big company where it was all politics all the time did not appeal to him.

But if he was not willing to take the risk and rise, then what right did he have to offer himself as a husband? What right did he have to fantasize about being together with Trish? He could not provide the things women seemed to want. Worse, he did not have the desire to provide them, the will and drive that were necessary to make it possible. Did Trish want them? He did not know. But it was not something he felt he could ask.

Vanessa had had high expectations, but those expectations did not seem unreasonable, considering where they lived and what they saw all around them. They were the same expectations he saw in his mother and her social set—but he knew he could not live up to them. So did it make sense to be spending so much time thinking about Trish? He could not convince himself that it did.

On the other hand, she *did* talk to him. It really happened; he didn't just dream it. She even invited him for ice cream! He fibbed

a little. It was true that he was worn out from spending two hours with Roger and his friends, but the main problem was he didn't have any cash. Somehow he had managed to leave his stupid wallet at home. Probably because all he was thinking about was Trish.

Now of course he could have simply said this to her. That was what Roger would have done. But it was exactly the thing he was afraid to say. It seemed to him that he was coming up a dollar short in the proverbial marriage market. He did not have enough cash on hand to justify being interested in someone as interesting as Trish. Why advertise it by not being able to buy himself an ice cream?

He got into his hot, airless car and tried not to watch as she got into Jeff's car. They all seemed so happy, joshing and laughing. They were going to get ice cream. Douglas loved ice cream. There were few food groups for which he had a more positive affection. But they went right at the park exit and he went left. He was heading home by himself.

It happened, however, that Jeff and Trish were not the only ones who were conspiring to draw Douglas out of his cottage. In fact his mother had been conspiring for some time. She wanted to use the guest house for guests. It had almost never been used for guests in all the time they lived there, but that did not matter. It was the principle of the thing. Besides, as she told herself and anyone else who would listen, it was in Douglas's best interest to get out of there. He needed to be out on his own and independent.

Her husband undermined her efforts at every turn. She would tell Douglas that it was time to think about moving out, and then Bill would sneak around behind her back and assure him he could stay as long as he liked. She was never able to muster enough leverage to prevail. Bill could be stubborn in his own way, when he wanted to be. Fortunately he did not want to be very often.

He started finding things for Douglas to do. There was the painting and the renovating. He let Douglas think it was his own idea, but he had planted the seed in his mind. It went on literally for years. They would finish one room and the next thing she knew there was talk of doing another. She could not say anything. No work had been done on the guest house in a long time. It needed it.

Then they started in with the other "projects," which frankly did not seem very necessary. There was the new deck. There was digging out the dirt basement floor and putting in concrete. There were new gutters. It seemed like there was no end to the devious

little tricks her husband came up with to keep Douglas there and prevent her from protesting too much.

There was the rent scheme. Douglas would pay \$1000 a month, on top of taking care of utilities. Actually it was Douglas himself who suggested this after he managed to reimburse his father for the down payment. The figure he kept using was \$2000, which seemed like fair value. His father said it was too much but finally agreed to the lower amount—specifically because he knew it would placate his wife. (He took all the money he collected from Douglas and put it in a special account which he intended to hand over to him when he decided to strike out on his own.)

So much for Bill and his evil machinations. Helen knew he was never going to allow her to push Douglas out; and after all, it was his estate. She had other means at her disposal, however. Her plan was to get Douglas interested in marriage. She knew her husband could not refuse to let her assist Douglas in finding happiness, although he was not shy about making his skepticism known, sometimes right in front of their son.

This plan had produced a series of blind dates over the years. Douglas's participation could best be described as half-hearted. He agreed to go along mostly because it was hard to say no to his mother. Also he felt some obligation to his parents for letting him live in the guest house. (He did not realize that the purpose of the dates was to get him out of there.)

The dates were all with women from work. The sisterhood was strong at Helen's company. She was a senior VP, but that didn't prevent her from engaging inferiors, even in her own department, or wanting to help them along the path to happiness and success. After all, she was their role model and their mentor. They needed her, and she was not one to let them down.

The women she sent Douglas's way were a little like herself—strong-minded career women who knew what they wanted and were determined to get it. In her view, this was just the sort of helpmate her son needed. He did not lack ability—she could never bring herself to admit he did—but he needed someone who could take hold of the rudder and steer him in the right direction.

Her coworkers were thrilled at the idea of being matched up with him, but the report they brought back was always the same. He seemed "distant." He was polite—they all thought he was a nice guy—but there seemed to be a barrier. There was one date

and that was it. He never asked them for their numbers. Some got his from Helen, but he did not answer his phone.

Sometimes they messaged him on Facebook to the effect of “had a great time” or “really enjoyed our conversation about x,” but he never replied. Helen rebuked him. “It’s rude not to respond when someone sends you a message.” He didn’t bother trying to explain that he never went on Facebook and didn’t even realize he had any messages.

Helen found her older son very frustrating, or mystifying. But she had an inspiration one day when Roger was complaining bitterly about Jeff’s newfound fascination with his brother. “I don’t know what the heck he thinks he’s doing. He keeps inviting him to come along with us. It’s getting kind of weird.”

“Go with you where?”

“Friday night. Some club somebody knows about. There’s supposed to be this old blues guy who’s legendary in certain circles. I was just hoping to go and relax and have a good time, but now I find out I have to babysit, too.”

“Hmmm—I wonder.”

“What?”

“Well, you know I’ve been trying to get him matched up with somebody and get him out of the guest house. I don’t want him living there for the rest of his life. But I don’t think he does well on these dates. I’ve been told he seems self-conscious.”

“So?”

“I’m just thinking. He’s already going with you folks on Friday night. What if I send someone along to meet him there? He’ll be with a group. It won’t be so awkward.”

“Actually that’s not a bad idea. It will get him off his butt and allow me to relax and not have to worry about him. But you’ve tried this before. It never works.”

“It might be different this time. I’m thinking of someone—she’ll know how to handle him. She’s very strong on the empathy side. She was a liberal arts major and seems interested in the same things he’s interested in. She’s also quite good-looking.”

“Maybe I want to date her.”

“No, this one’s not for you. She has a past. But that shouldn’t bother him. They’ll have a lot to talk about.”

## VII

*Summer blues*  
*Mixed messages*

**D**UGLAS COULD NOT BELIEVE what happened. He accepted Jeff's invitation in the hope of seeing Trish. Jeff thought he would want to see the blues player, and he *was* somewhat interested, but Trish was the main attraction. She was what enabled him to overcome his natural resistance to spending any more time with Roger's friends.

Then his mother informed him that Barbara was coming. Her way of doing it was very sneaky.

"So I understand you're going to the club with Roger and the gang on Friday."

"Yes, Jeff invited me."

"That's nice. I'm glad they include you."

"I'm not sure why. I guess Jeff thinks I need to socialize."

"Well, it's probably just their way of showing they care about you. By the way—a friend of mine might be joining you. Her name is Barbara Kramer. I hope you don't mind."

"When you say 'joining you,' do you mean me personally, or the group?"

Helen smiled. "She's looking forward to meeting you. I've told her all about you. Good things, of course."

"I wish you had asked me first."

"Oh, come on. Don't be such a stick in the mud. It's not like a date. There'll be plenty of people there. No pressure. She's a very nice young woman. Very personable. Very attractive. And you two have a lot in common. It won't hurt you just to meet her."

Douglas could not back out now, especially since this Barbara person had already been invited, but his mother certainly had made things complicated for him. He was hoping to see Trish; how was he supposed to "meet" Barbara at the same time?

He could not tell his mother this, so he said nothing. But now he did not know whether to look forward to Friday night or dread it. True, they would be in a crowd—but Barbara was coming specifically to meet him. He did not want to meet Barbara. All the other dates his mother had sent his way had been disasters, in his view. He really, really did not want to meet Barbara.

And he definitely did not want to meet Barbara in front of Trish. That would be awkward. He began to hope against hope that Barbara would decide not to come. After all, it was not a formal date. If she did come, then the second best outcome would be for Trish not to come, as much as he hated the idea. Of course neither one of those things happened.

The group seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely when he arrived, which indicated he was at least one round in arrears. Trish was not there. He heaved a sigh of sorrowful relief and sat down at the end of the table and tried to look inconspicuous. He must have succeeded because everyone ignored him—except for Jeff, who smiled and waved from a distance.

He was sitting there with a sense of impending doom when Barbara arrived. He recognized her from his mother's description. To tell the truth he was surprised. She was very attractive, just as his mother said. She had nice features and sandy-blond hair. She was dressed stylishly but comfortably in neutral colors, as if intentionally sending out a message that he found agreeable.

Unlike some of the other women his mother had sicced on him, she was not at all intimidating. Her manner was reserved perhaps but gentle. She had a quiet smile, almost serene. Douglas was surprised to find that he was inclined almost instantly to like her. He did not want to like her. It just made things more complicated.

They began chatting. It was the usual small talk but pleasant. He felt comfortable with her. She was not a game player. She did not make any attempt to impress him, nor did she act like she had any agenda. It was all very relaxed and friendly. He noticed some of Roger's friends glancing in their direction. Her attractiveness, both in person and in manner, reflected well on him.

But then Trish walked in and the colors changed. He did not see her right away—but she saw him. She also saw Barbara. They were talking and leaning toward each other. She stood there staring at them for a moment in complete shock.

"*Trish!*" boomed Roger, his usual greeting for her. "Thank God!



Now the party can begin. I was bored out of my mind for a while there. How about you, Jeff?"

"Yes, very bored," Jeff replied, glancing at Trish.

She floated in the direction of the table, determined not to look at *them*. She was not expecting to find Douglas with someone else. It was the last thing she was expecting. He was supposed to be spending all his time in his lonely cottage brooding over a broken marriage, or something. What was he doing out with some other woman, and not just any woman but a very attractive one?

Trish had been looking forward to the evening all week. Now everything was broken. She squeezed a chair in next to Jeff in a state of confusion. Douglas was in the same state. It took a monumental effort to stay focused on his conversation with Barbara. He could not prevent himself from casting occasional glances in her direction.

Barbara noticed. She decided to take a look herself. She wasn't entirely sure she liked what she saw. This Trish was very pretty and fresh. She was not wearing any make-up, which made Barbara feel self-conscious. What she liked least about Trish was she seemed very likable. Roger liked her. The guy Trish was talking to clearly liked her. The guy *she* was talking to seemed inclined to like her.

She studied Douglas. Was he in love with this girl? She had felt so close to him until Trish walked in, and now he seemed miles away. He was still perfectly amiable. She saw that he was too much of a gentleman to do otherwise. But there was a difference—and she could see the glances.

Meanwhile Douglas found himself in a strange predicament. He was talking with Barbara, whom he liked, but all he could think about was Trish, who was ignoring him. She did not look at him or acknowledge him. Then again, why would she? Just because she had been kind enough to talk to him at the beach? It didn't necessarily mean what he wanted it to mean.

It did not occur to him that her seeming indifference was a matter of self-preservation. Trish was pretending not to know he was there because he was there with someone else. The two of them made quite a picture, two good-looking people sitting at the end of the table, as if framed. She did not look at them but she could not help seeing them. It was all she could see.

Jeff was talking to her about something. She did not know what. She looked at him with an erstwhile engagement that was

nine parts determination. She was using their friendship to weather the storm. She heard the words that were coming out of his mouth and saw his lips moving but did not understand them. She did not even attempt to try.

Trish went into a zone that had no name. She had been walking around for weeks with her head in the clouds, thinking about this uncanny connection she felt to Douglas, analyzing it, trying to talk herself out of it just so she could talk herself back into it; but in all this time the one thing she did not contemplate was the possibility of there being *someone else*.

She had to contemplate it now because Douglas was sitting a few feet away with an annoyingly attractive woman. Not a bimbo by any means—not the sort of creature Roger would latch onto—but someone who seemed intelligent and substantial; just the sort of person, unfortunately, that she could imagine him liking.

She was devastated. She had to get out of there. But the band came on and started to play. They were outrageously generous with their time; the set seemed to go on almost forever. Trish could not get up and run out, which is what she wanted to do. The band seemed so earnest and were working so hard to please that she did not want to hurt their feelings.

A torturous hour later the set finally came to an end and she was clapping like a trained seal and feeling completely wrung out. Douglas got up and headed in the direction of the restroom. This was her chance. She could run away without being observed. She did not want him to see her running away. She didn't want him to know what a fool she was.

She told Jeff she had to go home, was working tomorrow, etc., which just happened to be true. She thought about saying goodbye to some of the others but they were pretty tipsy and she didn't want to risk causing a commotion. Fortunately Roger was at the bar talking up an unknown girl. She quietly got up and squeezed through the throng to the door and popped out into the blessed darkness, the soft summer night of escape.

Douglas did a double-take when he came back to the table and realized she was not there. He sat down with Barbara but he was thinking about Trish. What happened to her? A mass of people flowed around them giving him perpetual hope, but she did not materialize. Finally the truth began to dawn on him. She was gone.

He did not attribute this to Barbara's presence. It would never

have occurred to him that her feelings for him were so strong that Barbara could drive her away. No, he took it as a sign of lack of interest on her part. She did not bother to say goodbye. For that matter she did not bother to say hello. They had been there for over two hours and she completely ignored him.

But Trish did not ignore him. Not for one second did she ignore him. She was in love with him! He was there with someone else. She couldn't even get herself to process the information. What about the connection she felt? He certainly didn't seem to feel it.

She went home and got into bed and stared at the ceiling. It seemed to her that she had been acting like an idiot. But her feelings toward Douglas had not changed. She was not angry with him for being there with someone else. She was angry with herself for assuming too much and living in the realm of fantasy.

## VIII

*Helen surprises Douglas*  
*Douglas shows Barbara the guest house*  
*Trish almost trashes a Lexus*

HER TRIALS WERE not over, however, and once again Helen was involved. The annual Labor Day party was coming up the following weekend. This was Helen's end-of-summer bash for friends and business contacts she felt she needed to cultivate.

Barbara brought back such a positive report about Douglas that she was invited on the spot. Meanwhile Roger's friends also were invited, and Jeff called Trish to make sure she was coming.

"I don't know. That sounds like a lot of people."

"Oh, come on. You have to go. It's quite a spectacle, gourmet food and top-shelf booze all over the place and no small supply of hubris on display."

"But it would be kind of weird, being there with Mr. and Mrs. Lendell's friends."

"You won't even see them. We'll all be up at the pool most of the time. So what do you say? Are you coming?"

"I guess so." Part of her wanted very much to come, longed to, but she was still reeling from seeing Douglas with his friend at the club. "By the way, were you surprised about Douglas?"

"Surprised? What do you mean?"

"Well, here we are trying to draw him out of his shell and it turns out he has a girlfriend."

Jeff laughed. "That's not his girlfriend. That's one of his mother's matchmaking projects. I understand there have been quite a few over the years."

"I don't know. They seemed pretty friendly."

“Well, that’s Doug. But I don’t think he’s going to like anybody his mother throws in his path, for several reasons which I don’t want to go into. Plus he’s not really a blind-date kind of guy. He needs to get to know you before he’s going to feel comfortable.”

Trish was very happy to receive this information. It made a difference if the woman at the bar was an arranged date. In that case there was always the possibility that he was not there with her willingly, as Jeff implied. Plus she trusted Jeff’s judgment when it came to the Lendells. He seemed to know them very well. She leaned on his certainty that there was nothing between them.

She decided to go to the party. She did not know if she wanted to go—she didn’t feel she belonged there—but it was hard for her to turn down a chance to see Douglas. And to tell the truth she was a little curious, after hearing Jeff’s description. She had never been to such a party and wanted to see what it was about.

Meanwhile Helen made a strategic decision not to tell Douglas about Barbara. She did not know how he would react and did not see any reason to risk it. The night of the party arrived and the caterers and the jazz trio arrived and then Barbara arrived a little early, as instructed, and was welcomed into the “big house,” as it was called, *inter familia*.

Naturally she could not help being impressed by what she saw. She knew—or assumed—that Helen made a comfortable living but did not know she had married into old money or had a lifestyle one would normally associate with a CEO or movie star. This was not where Barbara came from, but she kept her calm demeanor and no one was the wiser about what she was feeling inside.

“Now you wait just one minute while I take care of something,” Helen said as she picked up the kitchen phone and dialed the guest house. “Douglas? I need your help. Kitchen. Yes, right now.” She hung up and laughed at Barbara’s wide-eyed expression. “Don’t worry. He’ll be fine.”

“You didn’t tell him.”

“No, it slipped my mind. But he’ll be glad to see you.”

Barbara was used to Helen’s Byzantine ways from work, but this was different. This involved her. She gulped and hoped her uneasiness was not seen—by either the mother or the son.

Barbara was husband-hunting. She was hesitant when Helen first mentioned Douglas, not because she knew anything about him or had any reason to doubt they would be compatible, but simply

because it was Helen's son.

The effect of Helen on her staff was a little hard to describe. One of Barbara's friends likened it to Patton with a dose of Oprah thrown in. Almost everyone was terrified of her at some level while pretending not to be, and almost anyone also knew her as someone who would stop in the hallway and talk sympathetically to "one of her girls" about work or personal matters.

Barbara was not completely surprised when Helen suggested a blind date with her son—she knew about the others—but neither was she completely comfortable. She understood the difference between Helen and herself, as different as Ivy and State, as town beach and country club, as money and privilege and a middle-class Chicago suburb. What chance did she have of fitting into Helen's world—even though Helen herself seemed to be inviting her?

There was the other thing, too—she worked for Helen. Barbara had been around long enough to know that business can be personal. What goes on outside the office can have an impact within. She knew someone in Marketing who did not get a promotion because she did not play golf. It's not like her friend *guessed* this was the reason; she was actually told.

Barbara had never seen Helen be petty, but this was her son, after all. What if he liked her and she didn't like him? What if he was a freak? There could be trouble for her down the road. But the thing was, Barbara really wanted to get married—again. The first time had not worked out and had broken her heart. She was in love and did not realize until after they were married that she could not tame his wild ways.

She did not want to divorce him, but she had to. He was killing them with thousand-dollar credit card bills rung up in Manhattan bars and wildly erratic behavior. He was, on the whole, a happy drunk, but that was the problem—he was happy drunk. There was no domestic violence per se, but showing up three hours late for a dinner party at his own house totally soused? Over and over again.

She was a beautiful bride at twenty-two and a divorced wreck at twenty-seven. But seven years had sped by since then and Barbara was beginning to get a little antsy. She was losing her bloom—she could see it in the mirror. Meanwhile it was getting harder to meet viable marriage candidates. Most of the men her age were married, and the ones who weren't did not seem to be worth the trouble.

Barbara wasn't necessarily looking for love. She had been in

love once and it did not work out very well. She would have been glad to have love, if she could find it, but at this point in her life she was looking for good companionship. She wanted someone to talk to and hold; someone to go on walks with and to flea markets; someone with whom to share a house where she could enjoy her crafts; someone who wanted a small family.

Divorce and time made her circumspect about relationships. She was touched by the scene in *Fiddler* where Tevya asks Golde over and over again, "But do you love me?" Theirs was an arranged marriage, but who was likely to be happier in the end—the parents who respected each other and forged a pretty nice life together or the three girls with their improbable choices?

What is love, after all? Love can be a dirty liar. It had led her into pain and chaos and almost ruined her life. Maybe love was not what people thought it was. Maybe a marriage begun in respect instead of romance can turn into a deeper kind of love. In any case she was not looking for love, not anymore. She was looking for someone decent with whom she could share her life.

This was the first thing that struck her about Douglas—his decency. He was looking out for her, courteously watching to welcome her, eager to put her at ease. All very thoughtful. He was cordial and attentive and pleasant and ingenuous. He walked her to her car to make sure she was safe. Who does that anymore? Her father always did, but it seemed like a generational thing.

To sum up, the blind date about which she was so wary went better than she dreamed. Here was a respectful, good-looking young man who had somehow managed to remain unattached. She knew about his failed marriage—Helen told her. Even so, it was amazing that he was still single. Was she missing something?

There was that girl—Trish. When she told Helen she just laughed. "That's the runaway bride. They're all fascinated with her, especially Roger. Believe me, it's not what you think. She's the last person Douglas would be interested in."

Well, okay, maybe. Barbara wasn't so sure about that. Helen was right about all the men being fascinated with Trish, but Douglas seemed to be a little fascinated himself. She liked Helen's interpretation but did not take it entirely to heart. She had noticed some blind spots in her over the years. Helen was very sure of herself but did not always see things clearly.

One thing threw her—Douglas did not show any positive

interest in seeing her again. He did not ask for her number or attempt to contact her in the days that followed, which he could easily have done through his mother. She had heard he was shy, although he didn't seem like it at the club. Maybe he needed a little encouragement.

Then there was the invitation to the party. She hoped it had been instigated by him and was horrified when she realized he didn't even know. It wasn't that she was too proud to be on a second arranged date with him. No, she was afraid of seeming too forward. She tried not to look concerned while she stood there chatting with Helen and waiting for Douglas. Then he walked in.

He looked startled. She noticed. She tried to catch his eye and shake her head but was too wary of Helen to do it successfully. He recovered and gave her a little wave and smile. This charmed her. He was more concerned about her feelings than his own.

"Here's someone I think you know," Helen said as he came up to them. "I can't remember if I told you she was coming."

"No, you didn't. Nice to see you again," he said to her.

"And you," she said with more confidence than she felt. It was strange, being there together with him *and* Helen. She did not realize how strange it would be until that very moment. She felt like Helen's conspirator, for more reasons than one, and did not want to feel that way with Douglas. At the same time she knew her entire future could depend upon this moment and how she reacted.

Barbara had a certain persona she cultivated for work. It would not be fair to say she put on a mask. It was more a matter of projecting a serenity she believed in but did not necessarily always feel. This was the face she now showed.

"Why don't you give her the tour, then take her over to see the guest house and the pond. She doesn't need to see what the caterers are doing."

Douglas accepted the hand-off and hid his irritation. He liked Barbara. Under other circumstances he might not have had any qualms about seeing her again, in spite of his mother's heavy-handedness. But it was the club dilemma all over again. He was kind of hoping to see Trish and now there was Barbara.

The "tour" Helen had in mind was of the house. Douglas showed her around. In spite of everything he was impressed by her reaction. She did not rave. She smiled appreciatively and said nice things in her quiet way. So different from when he showed the



house to Vanessa.

They headed over to the cottage, as prescribed. Cars were arriving as they crossed the driveway onto the mulched path.

"By the way—I'm so sorry," Barbara said, when they were safely out of earshot.

"About what?"

"This. You obviously didn't know I was coming."

"I'm glad you did," he said gallantly. "Now I have an excuse to get away from the crowd. I'm not crazy about these parties. Just seems like a big show to me, I guess."

"I suppose it's hard to have that many people over without putting on a bit of a show," she said gently.

"Touché!" he replied with a little laugh. "The thing is I don't think my mother even enjoys this 'tradition' of hers anymore. I know my father doesn't. He looks at these things with a kind of dread, has for years."

"Finds a good place to hide, I hope."

"No, far worse. It's his house, so he feels obligated to go around being a good host. It's painful to watch. He would rather be anywhere but here, greeting her work pals and country club pals—please don't take that the wrong way. But frankly these are exactly the sort of people he left the business world to get away from."

"She's lucky to have him."

"Very lucky. Although I'm not always sure she realizes it."

This frank conversation raised a variety of thoughts and emotions in Barbara which she was careful to conceal. She looked at him and wondered. Fortunately they were approaching the cottage, which afforded a change of topic. "Oh! Lovely. Gingerbread. That's what my father calls it, anyway."

"We call it the same thing."

"Of course you do," she said laughing. "What am I thinking? But I do love the color scheme. Someone did their homework."

"Yes, 'they' did. My father and I have been renovating. We spent some time researching historical Victorian colors, since the house was built in 1893 and was clearly meant to have a gingerbread look."

"You and your father did all this?"

"We did! It makes me feel useful. And frankly I think he uses it as an excuse to keep me here."

"So you *live* here," she said, as something occurred to her.

“I do. I know—it’s embarrassing, someone my age living at home.”

“That isn’t what I was thinking at all.”

“Don’t worry. I agree with you. I wound up here because of a very unpleasant divorce and a lot of debt. I wasn’t planning to stay quite so long. Not sure how it happened.” Douglas did not intend to share this personal information. He felt so comfortable with Barbara that it just spilled out.

For her part, Barbara was embarrassed by her faux pas. It caused her to be more than usually forthcoming. “Something very similar happened to me. I had the misfortune to marry a drunk.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. We were married for five years. It seems like a whole lifetime ago.”

“I barely got to four months, to tell you the truth. But I do plan on finding a place of my own. I was just waiting for the housing market to come down and the right interest rate.”

“Your father will be sad.”

“Maybe, but my mother will be elated. She’s been trying to get me out of here for years.”

“I know she can be kind of forceful,” Barbara replied carefully.

He smiled. “Let me tell you a little story about my mother. When I was four, she took me to J-Peak to teach me how to ski. You have to understand, my mother is an avid skier—annual trips to Utah or the Alps or whatever—or she used to be. Anyway, I was a big disappointment. I was not ready to try the black diamonds on my first day, as she was when she learned, at least according to her father. To tell you the truth, I was terrified. Not so much of the slope or the skis. I was terrified of my mother and the look on her face. I can still remember it, to this day.”

“But you learned eventually.”

“No, I never learned. I refused to go again, and my father stood up for me, not being a skier himself. It was up to my brother to become the ski champion and preserve the family honor.”

Barbara looked at him but did not know what to say. She could picture it all too well—the scene with his mother, the look on her face. She had seen that look. He took her inside and showed her the house. She was impressed with all the work he had done. She didn’t have to feign; she really was. He had a gift. She was also impressed with his modesty. Could he be real? They returned to

the main house as evening fell and stars began to twinkle in the sky and lights were glowing on the lawn.

They crossed the driveway and were headed for the kitchen door when Roger and a group of his friends appeared. Among them was Trish. She looked up and saw Douglas and Barbara coming up the driveway together. At the same time Douglas looked up and saw Trish. It was dusk, but just for a moment their eyes seemed to meet.

Barbara noticed he had stopped. She immediately saw Trish and the mutual reaction. Helen was wrong. There was *something* between them. She wasn't sure what, exactly, but he was more interested in the "runaway bride" than his mother realized.

After that things got a little weird for both Douglas and Barbara. He stayed by her side throughout the evening—he liked her and felt responsible for her—but he was thinking about Trish. He kept looking for her and did not see her. He used a bathroom break as an excuse to do some extensive scouting, but she was nowhere to be found. This depressed him. It was silly, but it did.

He did not know that Trish had taken the first opportunity to slink away. It wasn't hard. There were a lot of people milling about. It was dusk and getting duskier. All she had to do was go looking for one of those delicious hors d'oeuvres and fade off gracefully into the summer mist. Well, all right, she did have to evade the house spotlights, but no one seemed to notice.

There was a challenge when she reached her car. A Lexus had parked her in. For a moment she considered crashing her way out, like Susan in *Bringing Up Baby*. She was sorely tempted. The Lexus was a juicy target. She managed to maneuver into an egress in the opposite direction, however, although not without driving over a barberry and scraping her bumper on a hidden rock.

So it was true. He *was* seeing someone. Good, she said to herself. It made things much easier. But she didn't really believe it. That's why she was so angry.

She thought about the moment when they looked up and saw each other. Her emotion. What did it mean? It didn't mean anything. If it had happened without the other one being there she would have taken it as a sign of this connection she thought she sensed between them. It seemed like all they saw was each other.

But there was just one problem with that: there *was* someone else. Besides, she did not know if he had seen her at all. It was quite

dark. She could not know for sure that he had looked at her. It *felt* like he did—but feelings can be deceiving. It seemed her feelings had been deceiving her for some time.

She was really mad at Jeff. Why did he tell her there was nothing between them? She never would have gone to the party otherwise; in which case she would not be so miserable now. Most of all she was upset with herself. What in the world had she been doing for the past two months of her life? It was insanity.

Okay, so she had strong feelings for Douglas. Didn't it happen all the time? Weren't people all over the world falling in love for no good reason? What made her think she was unique or her love was somehow different from all the other imaginary or insane loves that afflicted all nations and races of the planet?

She had this strange idea of a connection between them but knew very well that it was not based on real evidence. She had just seen him with someone else! If anything, the evidence suggested there was no such connection, at least not in his mind. She thought he liked her, but *why* did she think it?

She had given him opportunities to show he liked her—and he had done nothing. It wasn't because of idle curiosity that she started a conversation with him at the beach or invited him for ice cream. Instead he kept showing up with this strange woman. Two times in a row!

She was upset with herself. Love *was* a kind of madness. She was definitely not in her right mind. She knew she had to stop obsessing over him. But how?

## IX

*A rough beast  
Trouble on the horizon*

**P**OOOR DOUGLAS! Twice now he had been seen with Barbara—by Trish. He wasn't really "with Barbara"—not voluntarily, anyway. But he knew how it had to look.

What he really wanted to do, in both instances, was walk away from Barbara and *go directly to Trish*. But he couldn't do that, could he? For one thing he could not be unkind to Barbara. It was not in his nature. Besides, he liked her. She seemed like a nice person. She was a fellow veteran of the wars of love.

At the same time he did not feel confident about approaching Trish. The more he saw her, the less confident he felt. She was very pretty and very intelligent—and very lovable. He felt he had never met anyone so lovable in his whole life. But what made him think she was interested in *him*? She ignored him at the bar. She sat apart from him at the beach. He was not the sort of person who could bring himself to approach her without knowing whether his feelings were in some way reciprocated. He wasn't Roger, after all.

But more than that, what made him think he *deserved* her? Who was he, a recluse accountant living in his parents' guest house, to recommend himself to someone like Trish? He saw himself sitting on the sofa the night Vanessa left. He remembered the pain of realizing he was not good enough for her and could *never* provide for her in the way she deserved and demanded. Nothing had changed. He had not won the Lotto. He was still just Douglas.

Besides, what did he really know about Trish? All the guys were "fascinated" with the runaway bride because they saw her as a proud Diana, a mighty huntress scornful of love and the institution of marriage. This was not what Douglas saw, however. He saw sweetness and almost reticence. But perhaps he only *thought* he saw these things! He had no way of knowing. He had been wholly deceived in Vanessa. Was he deceiving himself again?

What Douglas wanted more than anything in the world was a

sweet woman to marry, someone he could love and who would love him; as an act of love and not just a fleeting emotion; an act of loving devotion, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Yes, these are the types of things he actually thought about, sitting alone in his cottage on summer nights. She did not have to be just like him. He was quiet, but she did not have to be quiet. He was shy, but she did not have to be shy. In fact he preferred that she wasn't. He liked the idea of marrying someone who was *not* like him in her outward qualities—who would fill in his many deficits, as he saw them—as long as she was like him in her heart; as long as they were of one mind, which had not been the case with Vanessa.

But the “runaway bride”? Just by reputation she did not seem to fit the bill. Was he making a fool of himself again with these deep feelings that he seemed to have for Trish? Didn't he have deep feelings for Vanessa at one time—hadn't he completely misread her? And yet what reason did he have to think Trish was anything like Vanessa? His heart told him she wasn't. True, the heart can neither see nor think; but does it necessarily then follow that the heart must be blind, like the mischievous little cherub of old?

Douglas felt strongly inclined to be in love with Trish, and yet at the same time he wondered if it would not be better for him to retreat back into his shell and push away the impossible feelings that he had; better in the sense of preserving himself from hurt. Maybe it was better if she saw him with Barbara. Maybe it was better if she thought he was attached. Oh—who was he kidding? What made him think she was thinking of him *at all*?

Trish was not the only thing weighing on his mind at that point in his life. There was a new guy at the office by the name of Mark Jenkinson. He'd been there only a couple of months and already he was starting to drive Douglas crazy. He had been hired just like Douglas. He came to see Ralph, who took a shine to him for some reason and offered him a job on the spot.

Which seemed very strange to Douglas. You would have to know something about Callahan Associates in order to understand why. Vanessa was right—the place was sleepy. Ralph Callahan was a solid guy of the Other Persuasion—Catholic, that is—who had built a pretty solid little business out of doing good honest work and providing excellent customer service.

A lot of the clients were widows who looked at Ralph as a sort of proxy husband. Or at least that was Douglas's impression. Ralph

treated them with the utmost kindness and respect, and they reciprocated by smiling on him in a sunny way and patting his hand and allowing him to manage their money while saying things like “how could I ever get along without you, dear?”

They were not his only customers, of course, but they were representative. Ralph generally did not serve movers and shakers. People like that went to bigger firms in shiny office buildings in Westport. Most of his clients were either people with a lot of money who were basically clueless or they were from the upper middle class circles in which he himself moved.

Ralph was a *rock* for these people. They depended on him because he was trustworthy and solid and had a reputation for taking good care of his clients. There wasn't any question they couldn't ask him. He was always stepping in and helping no matter what was needed, short of walking the dog; and who knows? They never asked him.

Oh, yes—and Ralph was risk-averse. If a client insisted on risk, which did sometimes happen, he would accommodate him to some degree; but by temperament and outlook he preferred a course of moderation, just as he had been taught in Catholic school. In his view it was the best way to serve his customers and help them come out ahead in the end, even if it lacked the thrill of jackrabbit jumps in income, even if it meant tax-free bonds.

All of which made the new hire very puzzling. Mark was sharp, aggressive. There were four employees at the firm before Mark arrived, in addition to Douglas and Ralph, and they were all cut from the same cloth. They were all from Ralph's church or were in some way connected to members of the church. They were not what you might call “sharp.” They were worker-bee types who did not think much in analytical terms and tended to go in circles and waste a lot of energy unless there was clear direction.

That's where Douglas came in. He endeared himself to Ralph by showing an aptitude for business solutions. A small firm cannot afford to hire a consultant every time it needs to improve its systems and processes. There has to be someone on staff who has a quick mind and can think strategically. It wasn't Ralph. He was by no means slow, but he was the salesman in the outfit; he was the face and the relationship-maker, and frankly he didn't have a great deal of patience for details and sitting still.

Douglas was a whiz at that kind of thing. He wasn't a salesman,

but he was great behind the scenes; smart, dependable, informed, not afraid to make decisions, determined to follow through. Douglas came into an office that was basically an amorphous mess and began slaying the dragons of inefficiency one by one until the whole staff almost could not believe how well-organized they had become and how much easier it was for them to do their jobs.

He became the anointed one. Ralph made him the de facto point man. Ralph liked this arrangement because it gave him the freedom to go off and do his own thing, including golf. After all, he was a people-person. He was the one drumming up the business. Douglas did pretty much everything else, and Ralph appreciated it and was not bashful about saying so.

But now with Mark he had something else up his sleeve. Mark was a salesman, like Ralph. There was a difference, however. Ralph was a natural salesman and talker who always had his clients' best interests in mind. This was not necessarily the case with Mark. He said things to Douglas that were not quite right, the kind of things that keep you up at night. And yet Mark was the rising star.

Watching them together in those first weeks and months, a strange thought entered Douglas's mind. Was Ralph using Mark to do the things he himself would never do? Or not actually using him but tacitly allowing him to do them? It couldn't be so blatant—Ralph would never have such a thought in his head. But was he being *honest* with himself about Mark?

Ralph was in a tough stretch financially. The firm was not doing as well as it had been, due to the economy. His oldest daughter was a senior in college. Her education cost him a fortune. The younger one was just beginning, with a boy two years behind. Also Ralph was generous by nature and inclined to live beyond his means. His wife, at least in Douglas's mind, was a complete spendthrift. Sometimes you just have to live with the drapes you have, especially with two children in college and another on the way.

Could it be that Ralph saw Mark unconsciously as a solution to these challenges? Not so much that he took on risk in a deliberate way as that he saw growth potential and dollar signs in Mark and neglected to communicate with the part of himself that was naturally risk-averse? Either way, the new hire was a little strange. Douglas had become accustomed to doing business a certain way; now it seemed they were going in a new direction. They were doing things they had never done before.



Of course it could just be jealousy. Douglas had been the star for years. Ralph did not do anything without consulting him. The staff liked him, since he made their work easier and was kind and respectful and happy to pitch in. As with his trombone, Douglas focused on making harmony in the office. Ralph saw it and was grateful. In his view, Douglas walked on water.

But that was then. Now it was “Mark this” and “Mark that.” The spotlight was at least divided between them. The staff was falling under his spell. Mark was full of good spirits and flattery and often showed up with treats. It was “like a breath of fresh air had come into the office,” but to Douglas it was nothing more than fake smiles and Munchkins to soak up their coffee.

For his part, Mark seemed very taken with Douglas. He was new to the area and wanted to do everything with him. They spent breaks together. They had lunch together. They went out after work for a beer. Every time Mark had another brilliant idea, Douglas was brought in and his approval solicited. He acted like they were best friends. Douglas did his best to accommodate this fancy because he didn't want to be rude.

Mark was very curious about Douglas's family. He heard through the grapevine that they were rich. At first he wanted Douglas to introduce him to his parents. He had some great ideas for estate planning he was sure they would “love.” Douglas did his best to deflect him—he could not imagine introducing Mark to his mother—but then his new friend turned his attention to Roger. He had heard about him from the staff. He was dying to meet him.

On this point Douglas was willing to be flexible. Frankly he hoped Mark would stop badgering him about his parents if he offered up his brother as a sacrifice. It also occurred to him that it would be nice if the two of them hit it off. Maybe Mark would turn the bright light of his attention on Roger and leave Douglas alone for once. He thought they would get along. They were the same age. They both had big mouths.

And he was right! They got along famously. Mark became a fixture in “the group.” This in itself did not trouble Douglas; as far as he was concerned they deserved each other. But he forgot one important little detail. Trish was also part of the group. Hence he was in for a very unpleasant surprise when Mark came to the office one Monday morning boasting about the fantastic date he'd had on Saturday with the “runaway bride.”

Roger confirmed it. To him, it was all a big joke. Mark bet him that he could get Trish to go out with him. Roger thought it was a slam dunk, since Trish never went out with anyone, and most people were afraid to ask. But Mark surprised him. He succeeded where so many had failed. Roger didn't mind losing the money (apparently it was \$200). He admired the triumph.

This news destroyed Douglas, however, on so many levels. First of all, he now realized, because it was right in his face, that he did not want *anyone* going out with Trish. Unfortunately this great truth had not been revealed to him until it was too late. He was not going to go charging in as Mark's rival; rutting, as it were. He was not the type. And he did not know how it would be received.

Second—how could she go out with someone like Mark? He was a pompous jackass. Couldn't she see it? Well, no, now that he thought about it, no one was seeing it. Mark put on a great show. He was cheerful, considerate, always made you feel like you were the only one in the room. He certainly had everyone in the office fooled. As far as they were concerned he was a "great guy."

Douglas felt otherwise because he had the misfortune to be Mark's confidante. It now occurred to him, because of the news about Trish, that he was the only one who saw Mark as he really was. He did not believe in judging people. He still had not found it in his heart to judge Vanessa for destroying his life. But he could not help judging Mark because Mark insisted on judging himself—every time he opened his mouth. Mark was completely open with him, and some of the things he said were shocking.

It wasn't just his shady notions about how to do business. It wasn't just his views on their coworkers, which were a good deal less charitable than he let on, or Ralph, who he thought was basically an idiot. It was his apparent views on women. Douglas could not always draw the line clearly between braggadocio and misogyny, but Mark seemed inclined to the latter camp. He said the kinds of things Douglas would see occasionally on TV and say to himself, "Oh, nobody would ever say *that*."

What was he to make of the dark side his new friend insisted on showing him? He could not shake the feeling that he was seeing the real Mark. It seemed too unfiltered not to be real. Mark was two completely different people. There was the smiling Mark who was full of warmth and kindness when they were with the rest of the staff. And there was the smirking Mark who never had anything

good to say about anyone when they were alone.

Could she really be dating someone like him? It seemed impossible. But then it seemed all too possible. Why should she not be as deceived in Mark as all the other people in the office and all the customers he was bringing in and Ralph himself? His whole manner was deceiving. He was very good at being what people wanted him to be. Somehow he knew what that was and could transform himself on the spot to meet expectations. He was Morpheus. Douglas saw it over and over again.

If he could deceive prospective clients, who were considering entrusting him with their hard-earned money, and if he could deceive his coworkers, who saw him every day, then why couldn't he fool Trish? It was unreasonable to expect her to see through him. What magic powers did she possess that so many others lacked? Douglas himself might not be able to see through him if he did not occupy the same office space and know him so well.

So Trish was dating Mark. It was upsetting, but he had no one to blame but himself. He was the one who introduced Mark to Roger, thinking he was being so very clever. How did that work out for you? Also he'd had many opportunities to make his feelings known to Trish *before* there was any Mark. He just could not bring himself to do it. The lingering pain from Vanessa and feelings of inadequacy were too great. The drawbridge was up and he was not letting anyone in. No, wait; the drawbridge was up and he was not letting *himself* in.

He hated the thought of her dating Mark, but there was nothing he could do about it. He wanted to go to her and tell her the truth. He wanted to unmask the gold-plated phony, but this was fantasy. The only way he could disabuse her was by abusing Mark, which was not something he was willing to do.

It was painful for him to listen to the Boastful One talk about her. "People don't realize how incredibly pretty she is." Really? Douglas realized it. "She's so smart." Well, at least he knew how to appreciate her. "She has a great sense of humor." Douglas had experienced a little of it, but he wished she were not wasting it on Mark. He wanted more of that good humor for himself.

Mark was taking over the office and he was taking over Trish. It was almost more than Douglas could bear.

## X

*Douglas makes an error at the ballgame  
Trish spends time with Barbara*

**T**RISH WAS dating Mark? Well, no; not really. *She* didn't think of it that way. She was surprised to receive a call from him, perhaps too surprised to muster the courage for the always challenging task of saying "no" to a persistent suitor. And Mark was unusually persistent. His will and determination to have her go out with him were greater than her ability to resist.

The person she really wanted to go out with was Douglas, but Douglas was involved with Barbara. She never would have agreed to a date with Mark if that were not the case. She was still reeling from the experience of seeing them together at the Labor Day party. She made a fool of herself. She ran away in the dark without saying goodbye to anyone and crunched her fender.

Was she still in love with Douglas? Of course she was. She didn't say yes to Mark because she had fallen out of love; she said yes because Douglas was dating someone else. It seemed silly to say no to a date when she didn't have any idea if he was interested in her. It was even sillier if he was interested in Barbara.

Trish found Mark to be entertaining and respectful. On that first date he asked her if she would like to go to a country fair upstate. He seemed to gravitate to the games and rides, but she was more interested in the animal tents and the arts and crafts. He realized this intuitively and cheerfully bent his will to hers. He was a great talker and a very good storyteller. He was funny and had a lot of comical quips to make about the more exotic sheep. Let's just say she was not bored.

She insisted on paying her own way, but caution did not seem necessary. He made no attempt to approach her with unwanted familiarities. He did not so much as brush up against her, even while they were being jostled by the large crowd. In fact he seemed

to maintain an absolute three-foot safety zone at all times, even when it caused them to be separated. She was grateful for this and also a little puzzled. What was it about?

Of course she knew nothing about the bet with Roger. It was not a real date to Mark any more than it was to Trish. In order for him to win his bet he had to find a way to have their picture taken together. This he managed to do by importuning a nice woman to use his cell phone. It was the closest he came to her, when they were posing together. Even then he did not touch her.

At the same time he could not spend time with Trish under the brilliant late-summer sun and not admire her. She was indeed very pretty, just as he said to Douglas. It was a different kind of pretty—an intelligent pretty—but he could not deny it. He preferred women who were a little more, shall we say, well-rounded, but he was not stupid. He saw her slender well-proportioned face in the sunlight and was impressed.

He was also impressed by the runaway bride thing, frankly. In his mind she was aloof, untouchable, actually quite a bit above him. He knew she was a PharmD. He knew she was smart—he could see it. She got all of his jokes, which was not always the case with the women he dated. And he dated many.

Things went very well overall, he thought, considering that the date had its origin in a wager. He'd won the wager and he had enjoyed himself with the runaway bride. He felt kind of proud, walking around the fairgrounds with her, with this very pretty, very intelligent, somewhat mysterious female who showed no particular interest in him. It surprised him. Usually he thought of himself as the main event. Perhaps we should mention here that, surprisingly, Mark was a bit of a ladies' man. There was something about his football lineman physique and knowing boyishness that they liked.

The surprising pleasure of this first date in the sun was what made him think of Trish when he inherited four tickets to see the Mets at Citi Field. He called her and literally wouldn't let her say no. This was a case where he knew what was good for her better than she did herself. She just had to see a game in the great stadium on a sunny fall afternoon under the blue sky. To reassure her, he told her it was a double-date. But now he had to think of someone else to invite. First he asked Roger, who was going to be out of town on a business trip. Then as a fallback he settled on Douglas, his dear old office mate, who he knew was a big Mets fan.

“Hey! What are you doing Saturday afternoon?”

“Nothing that I know of. Why?”

“How about coming down to see the Mets with me and the runaway bride?”

Now this was a question! Mark had no idea of the conflicting thoughts and emotions storming upon his friend at that moment. For one thing, he did not want to go anywhere with Mark on his day off, even to see the Mets. Forty hours a week of his scintillating company was enough. On the other hand, Mark had invited him to spend an afternoon with the one person he was dying to see.

“Yes!” he blurted.

“OK, that was easy. But can you find yourself a date? I have four tickets.”

“Why did you buy four tickets?”

“I didn’t *buy* them. They’re Ralph’s. He got them for some clients who can’t make it.”

“Can’t just the three of us go?”

“No! I told her it was a double-date. It would be awkward.”

It certainly would! As usual, Douglas did not have the strength to resist him. And to tell the truth he didn’t want to resist him, because Trish would be there. True, it rankled him that Ralph was the source of the tickets. Douglas had been at the firm for eight years; Mark barely three months. Ralph knew how much Douglas loved the Mets but had never given him leftover tickets. Mark didn’t even like the Mets. He was a Yankees fan. He was only going because the tickets were free.

The main reason he did not resist Mark’s insistence on bringing a date was he thought he had an amusing solution. He would ask his father, who was also a Mets fan. Wouldn’t it be a great joke to show up with him as his “date,” a mini rebellion against Mark and his coerciveness? Unfortunately his father had plans to go sailing on the Sound with an old college friend.

This was perplexing. Douglas wanted very much to see Trish but he needed a date. Whom could he ask? He couldn’t think of anyone. Then he thought of Barbara. He remembered her saying she liked baseball when she saw his Mets pennant at the cottage. True, it would complicate things. It would be the *third* time Trish had seen him with Barbara. But then again he would be spending several hours with Trish. It seemed like an acceptable tradeoff.

Of course he probably should have spent a little time thinking

about this plan. In the heat of the moment he didn't see anything wrong with inviting Barbara. After all, they were just friends. They had spent several hours together at the party and had a nice conversation, but he did not see any signs of romantic interest on her part. She was too cool and collected. They parted in exactly the same way friends would part, with a cheerful wave.

But Douglas did not understand Barbara. It was true that she was not in love with him, but she was not looking for love. She was looking for companionship, and he struck her as a very acceptable companion. In some ways she felt she knew Douglas better than he knew himself. She saw his decency and she saw the reason for his shell. She understood some of the mannerisms that were puzzling or off-putting to others. They were not off-putting to her.

She also knew what made him a failure in his mother's eyes. He was not like her, not driven by the need to succeed, and for this she found it hard to forgive him. The rest of his life was going to be one long skiing story, unfortunately. Helen would always have that glare on her face when she looked at him or even thought about him—the one he still remembered after all these years.

Barbara did not share Helen's concerns about Douglas's seeming lack of ambition because she was not materialistic. She was not looking for someone to buy her lots of jewelry and take her to the Islands every year. All she wanted was someone who was kind and thoughtful. Douglas was certainly all of that. And he had actually called *her!* She was surprised and happy to say yes.

A little too happy! It made Douglas pause. He wasn't expecting such an enthusiastic response. What was he getting himself into? Basically he had invited Barbara to the game so he could see Trish. Did she have something else in mind? He was not going to be happy with himself if she did. He was not thinking of it as a date and did not want to give her the wrong impression. But what impression *did* he want to give? Two couples going to a ballgame? Now he began to feel guilty and wished he had never called her.

Meanwhile Trish was in for a big surprise. Mark picked her up and informed her they would have company. "I think it's someone you know. Douglas Lendell. Or at least you know his brother."

"Yes, I know Douglas," she said as the fall colors swirled around her. Trish almost could not believe it. She felt like laughing. She felt like helium. She had said yes to Mark because it was hard for her to say no, even though she was not a baseball fan, and

because he would not *let* her say no. She was not very excited about spending the afternoon watching baseball—that is, until the word “Douglas” came out of his mouth.

Now she could barely contain herself. There was nothing she wanted more than to see Douglas. At the same time she would be “seeing him” with Mark; in fact as Mark’s putative date. She was either ecstatically happy or highly apprehensive—she was not sure which. Then they arrived at Douglas’s cottage and she came crashing back to earth. He was waiting for them with *that woman*.

Douglas and Barbara got into the car in a tangle of emotions. Trish was surprised and thrilled to see Douglas but depressed to see Barbara. Barbara was happy to be with Douglas but unhappy to discover they would be spending the day with Trish. Douglas was overjoyed to see Trish and feeling increasingly guilty about Barbara.

The only one who was not feeling any debilitating emotion was Mark. It was his car and his tickets and he was in top form, regaling them with his inimitable stories and trenchant observations on the state of the world. They were very happy to let him shine. Their hearts were too full for conversation.

Douglas did not realize how awkward a double date was going to be until he and Barbara were sitting in the car with them. First of all he was disoriented at seeing Trish and Mark together. It was one thing to hear Mark talk about dating her and quite another to see it with his own sore eyes. It was painful, strange. The combination of the warmth and tenderness he felt toward her and the cold feelings he had for his office mate was almost too much for him.

But worse even than this was the guilt he was now beginning to feel about Barbara. He was being doubly false—to her and to Mark. He didn’t care if he was false to Mark. In his view, he deserved it. He was happy to do anything he could to come between him and Trish, especially since Mark had invited him. He did care about Barbara, however. He wanted her to enjoy herself on this very strange excursion. He blushed when he caught himself staring at the back of Trish’s head. He was so strongly drawn to her that it was hard to stop. He had to force himself to look away.

Trish, of course, was thinking about Douglas. Once again he was with Barbara. Once again she was reminded of how attractive Barbara was. She had been trying to forget it. What were they doing back there? Was he sharing a private moment with her while Mark kept babbling? Was he possibly holding her hand? She didn’t



want to think about him holding someone else's hand. She wanted him to hold her hand.

She was upset with Mark for not warning her. Well, no; she wasn't upset about being with Douglas, but she was definitely upset about Barbara. If she had known she never would have come. Oh, who was she kidding? She probably would have come anyway. It didn't matter how painful it was. She wanted to see Douglas.

Barbara, for her part, was on serenity mode. She looked at Douglas and caught him looking at Trish. She did not feel jealous, because she was not in love with him and had no plans to be in love. She felt—undervalued. She felt she had much more to offer than the runaway bride. What she perhaps lacked in fascination she made up for in sincerity and good sense. No, she was not like Trish. She was different. She hoped he could see the difference.

They reached the park and made their way in. There was some confusion about how to arrange themselves when they got to the seats. Normally the girls would sit together, but they barely even knew each other. They all stood there for a moment looking perplexed. Then Mark went charging in, because he was Mark, and Trish followed him. Douglas followed Trish, because he knew her, and Barbara wound up trailing along on the end.

Douglas could not believe his good luck. He was sitting next to Trish! He went into a dream without the help of hallucinogens. She was so close he could feel the emanations. He felt like they were in an alternative universe where he was one with her in his heart. But this was just fantasy. There might as well have been a physical wall between them.

After all, she was with Mark. The court jester was chatting her up and she was nodding and smiling and not showing any awareness of his meager existence. She did not say a word to him. Why would she? What reason did he have to think she might? And of course he did not say anything to her. He couldn't think of anything to say or any viable reason to say it. And this was torture.

Still, it was wonderful just to sit next to her. He had never been so close to her before. He talked with Barbara, as he should. He listened to her and responded to everything she said—but in his soul he was with Trish. They were sitting there, just the two of them, in the warm sunlight, their arms so close they were almost touching. He caught himself listing in her direction. He thought of Mark. He thought of Barbara. He righted his ship. Barely.

Pretty soon the game was underway. It started out well. The handsome and daring home team scored first and the home-town fans roared. Mark bought them all a cold beer to celebrate. They scored twice in the second inning and things were looking good. Being a Mets fan in those days meant never taking anything for granted, but it was better to be up by three than vice-versa, which had been the trend of late.

Douglas saw Barbara glancing at his scorecard and offered to explain the scribblings, but she already knew. Her dad was a big baseball fan and had often taken her to Wrigley Field, which apparently was not far from where she grew up. She smiled as she talked about the park and her father. Clearly it was a good memory. Douglas smiled just listening to her.

“Sounds like you have a good relationship with him.”

“I have a wonderful father. I wish I could see him more, but it’s a bit of a trip.”

“Me too—have a wonderful father, I mean. It’s not much of a trip.”

“How is your father?” she said from behind her sunglasses.

“He’s doing well. New semester, new students. He always gets excited about that.”

“It’s nice to hear that teachers get excited about their jobs,” she said after a pause. “I thought about being a teacher, but I couldn’t do it as well as your father.”

“How do you know if you haven’t tried?”

“Trust me, I know. I had a few really great teachers and have an idea of what’s involved. But I think teachers are born, not made. And unfortunately I wasn’t born to be a teacher.”

“I wanted to be a teacher, too, believe it or not. I thought it might be kind of fun to teach band somewhere, try to give students a love of music and something to hold on to, try to make the whole high-school experience a little less dreary. But of course my mother put an end to that idea.”

“How did she do that?”

“Simple—she refused to pay for it,” he said laughing. “I wound up studying accounting, mostly because I was good at math and I knew it would make her happy. But sometimes I wonder.”

This story caused strong emotions in the breast of more than one neighboring female. A little later Douglas overheard a comical conversation between Mark and Trish.

"I can't understand why people would buy American cars," the Sage of Georgetown was saying. "They're such junk. I would never even think of buying one."

"My father has a Ford pick-up," Trish said simply.

"Oh—that's different. A truck. America does trucks. Still, I don't understand people spending more money on something that has less value. It just doesn't make sense."

"Maybe they're not thinking about the money. Maybe they're thinking about their fellow Americans."

"That's insane! The domestic Hondas and Toyotas are made right here in the good old USA. They're more American than so-called American cars, for God's sake."

"I doubt everyone knows that, if true. They're probably just going with their heart."

"Then they're fools. You don't buy a car with your heart; you buy with your mind."

"The next time I see my father I'll be sure to let him know."

Douglas smiled all the way through this exchange. Her quiet, ironic replies were the perfect counterpoint to his brash self-assurance. The use of the word "heart" was particularly gratifying, since in his view Mark didn't have one. She was saying that not everyone looked at the world like him, in such hard-fisted, grasping terms. It didn't sound like Mark got the message—which made it all the more entertaining.

But *why* was it so entertaining? Because he did not want her to be in love with Mark. In his mind they were polar opposites, but he also knew that Trish did not know all the things he knew about Mark. She was like the people in the office—she saw only what he wanted her to see. Hence it made him feel good to hear some resistance on her part to the irresistible one.

He was happy in his misery. But after a while the combination of Trish and the warm sunlight and the beer and Mark's big mouth started to become a little too much. They went to get food after the sixth inning and when they came back he made a momentous decision. He paused at the end of the row and let Barbara go in ahead of him.

Why? Because six innings of sitting six inches away from Trish was almost more than he could bear. He was worn out from the effort to keep himself in his skin. At the same time he felt like he was neglecting Barbara. Every time Trish said something his

attention went directly to her, and he knew this wasn't right. Barbara was his date. He felt he needed to change the arc of the afternoon before it was too late.

He hated to separate himself from Trish, but he felt better after they sat down. He had managed to show restraint for two hours, in spite of the fact that their arms were almost touching, but he was not sure if he could make it through a third. Also he felt a little less like a cad with regard to Barbara. He realized that inviting her was selfish, belatedly, but at least he had a chance to make amends. He was committed to focusing his attention on her.

He was not completely successful in this, since every time he looked at her he saw Trish, but the change in seats did make things a little better. He chatted with her about the game. She knew quite a bit about baseball. She knew what a change-up was. She knew why the infield moved in with a man on third. She knew about Casey Stengel and the immortal utterance of Met misery.

After a while Barbara and Trish struck up a conversation and seemed to be getting along quite well. Trish was surprised to find that she liked Barbara. She was easy to talk to. She was intelligent and had a sneaky sense of humor. She did not seem to be at all full of herself. Quite the opposite; she listened carefully to everything Trish said and made thoughtful replies.

Trish did not know whether this pleased her or upset her. She did not *want* to like Barbara. She was trying so hard to hate her that it almost made her like her even more when she realized she didn't hate her at all. The dreadful thought came to her that under other circumstances they might even be friends. After all, good conversation was not something to be taken lightly.

She could not help comparing Barbara's gentle, confidential manner with Mark's interminable bloviating. She liked Mark and thought he could be fun to be with but three hours of being forced to listen to him in the sun was giving her a headache. This was partly why she found it so easy to turn to Barbara. It didn't take him long to get on his cell phone when he realized she had.

Up until the seat switch she had been having a great—if strange—afternoon. It made her very happy to be sitting next to Douglas. Mark droned on and on and she kept nodding and letting out an occasional chirp in appreciation of one of his many killer witticisms. But she was only pretending to look at the game. Her eyes were pointed toward the players but all she saw was the halo

of the guy on her left in her peripheral vision.

She was there with Mark and he was there with Barbara but she felt like she was there with him. She was feeling exactly the same thing he was feeling without knowing it. The teacher story made her angry. She believed with all her heart that he would be a wonderful teacher. And he was musical! This was something she didn't know. She was glad to know it.

Then disaster struck. They came back with their hot dogs and he sent Barbara in next to her. Why did he do it? Was he trying to make a statement? Whether he was trying to or not, a statement had been made. She did not mean anything to him. It was perfectly obvious now. He could have sat next to her. He *had* been sitting next to her. Apparently he didn't want to.

This was what made the conversation with Barbara so hard at first. Barbara was sitting between her and Douglas. She was talking to Barbara but thinking about Douglas and why he changed seats. It hurt her, but she was too good-natured to take it out on Barbara. It was not Barbara's fault if Douglas liked her. It was not Barbara's fault that he invited her on a double date. Besides, she was there with Mark. She could not cast the first stone.

Trish made up her mind, sitting there in the sun and talking to Barbara, to stop doting on Douglas. For one thing, he changed seats. It could not be denied. For another thing, life was too short. She had wasted the last three months chasing this foolish dream, done things she never dreamed of doing, put herself in difficult and embarrassing situations because of this feeling she had for him. And after all that he stuck her next to Barbara!

What *was* this feeling she had for him, after all? Was it love? She thought it was, but she knew she could be fooling herself. She began to wonder if she had fallen in love with Douglas because of his backstory. Did she think she owed it to him because his bride had run away and she was the runaway bride? Was it an attempt to atone in some weird cosmic way for her own sins?

She was sick, sick in her soul as she sat there in the sun on a perfect fall day, smiling and listening to Barbara and trying to resist becoming her friend. She had love sickness, and it was making her unhappy. If only he had shown some sign of interest while he was sitting next to her! If only he had spoken to her, at least! It would all be so different. There had been signs at other times. There was the look in the pool house the first time they met and Roger's

birthday party. But since then? Nothing.

He literally would not look at her at the beach. She had to chase him down and force him to talk to her. He refused her invitation to go for ice cream! The next time she saw him he was with Barbara. Then she saw him with Barbara again at his parents' house, walking alone together in the evening, looking very confidential. And now she was sitting there talking to Barbara with him on the other side!

Good—let her have him. She liked Barbara and thought her worthy of him. Trish tried to convince herself that it was over between her and Douglas while she was sitting there having her bizarre conversation with his lady friend. *Over?* It had never begun. There was nothing between them and never had been. She did not even know he was coming until she got into Mark's car. But he did come, and although it was terrible, in one sense it was also good. It broke the spell. It helped her wake up out of the mad dream she had been having for three long months.

After the seventh inning stretch things started going downhill. The dastardly Nats caught up with the valiant home team and finally passed them in heartbreaking fashion. There was cursing and gnashing of teeth, especially from the upper deck. Meanwhile some flat clouds rolled in and blocked out the sun. Suddenly it became quite chilly and they needed hot coffee instead of beer.

The day ended on a dark note. The parking lot was crammed and surly, and the drive home was quiet and uncomfortable for some. Mark suggested dinner but Douglas and Barbara both said they were tired. Trish asked him to take her home. She couldn't wait to lock herself in her room and have a good cry.

## XI

### *Mixed messages*

**D**OUGLAS, HOWEVER, WAS HEADED in the opposite direction, emotionally speaking. He had gone to the game wondering about his feelings for Trish, wondering if he really did have feelings for her at all or was just imagining it, wondering if she was the person he thought she was. But he went home madly in love.

The experience of sitting next to her in the sun for six innings was overwhelming. He listened to her conversations with Mark. He heard her tease him in a way that he himself would never have dared. He heard her say things that Mark could not understand—but he could. The more she talked the more he loved her.

No, it was not just physical longing he felt, the longing to touch her bare arm with his arm, although this was so strong that it was almost traumatizing. The greater longing was a soul-longing. As uncomfortable as he was because of Mark and Barbara, he was completely comfortable with her. He felt like they were together even though they were not together. He felt closer to her than ever.

But then there was the following conversation on Monday morning.

“So what did you think of the runaway bride?” Mark said in his usual subtle way.

“I thought she was very intelligent.”

“That she is. I gotta say, it was hilarious, seeing you two guys sitting there together. I kept wondering what was going through her mind.”

“I was wondering the same thing.”

“I’m kind of thinking I’d like to keep seeing her. What do you think? I mean, it didn’t start out as anything. I was just trying to win a bet, for God’s sake. But now it feels like it’s becoming something. Kind of hard to explain. Just something about her.”

“Maybe the question is how *she* feels about it.”

“Are you kidding? She loves going out with me.”

He said it, and Douglas had no reason to doubt it. Sure enough, a week later Mark came back with tales of another date with the runaway bride, as he invariably called her. This time he took her to a movie—*Interstellar*. He thought it was fantastic. She liked it, too. They had a drink at the Inn and he was amazed at how pretty she was in the candlelight. Such a good conversationalist. Never interrupted him. Always had something interesting to say.

It was funny—they talked about Douglas. He told her about the little office they shared and what a hoot Douglas was, with his sly comments and his fake smile. He told her about how it was him and Douglas against the old fogeys and how they practically did everything together.

Douglas couldn't help himself. He asked if Trish said anything about him. Not really. She just said she thought he seemed like a nice guy. She couldn't stand the way his brother treated him. But then Mark reminded her that Roger was making about 400k a year before perks and bonuses and could treat people any way he wanted. She laughed when he said that.

It wasn't long after this dreadful conversation that Douglas received an invitation to take a foliage ride down the coast with...Barbara. Why did he consent to a foliage drive with Barbara if he thought he was madly in love with Trish? Partly because he felt guilty about the whole debacle at Citi Field and wanted to make it up to her—and partly because of despair. Trish was dating Mark. What more was there to say?

He went on the foliage ride, and he enjoyed being with Barbara, but to tell the truth the whole time they were together he was thinking about Trish. It was the same as at the game. He and Barbara would be driving along and ooing and ahing at the gorgeous fall day—and Trish would pop randomly into his head. What did it mean? It meant he could go out with Barbara but apparently he was still in love with Trish.

The next morning he went to church and fervently prayed. No, he did not pray “dear God, let me have Trish.” His prayers were full of tenderness, yes, but also sorrow and even despair. He wanted the moon but his feet were made of clay. He wanted love but prayed that he might be worthy of it. He thought he loved Trish but hoped he was not deceiving himself again. He was very



much afraid of deceiving himself again.

Meanwhile things were getting even stranger at Callahan Associates. Mark was bringing in new clients and everybody was happy about that, especially Ralph, who seemed more energized than he had in years. The sole exception was Douglas, for whom some of the investment cocktails Mark was mixing up seemed a little too intoxicating, and in at least one case not necessarily within the spirit of the law.

How did he know all this? Mark continued to confide in him. He had mistaken Douglas's friendly demeanor for friendship. His ego was such that it never would have occurred to him that he was merely being tolerated or that the information he insisted on imparting was often unwelcome, though fascinating in the sense of the macabre.

At first Douglas simply listened to the red-haired wonder, albeit with his mouth open. Then he started speaking up and carefully making his reservations known. Mark scoffed at him. If they wanted to make money they had to do what everyone else was doing. His trump card was always Ralph. The boss knew what was going on. Douglas got teased for being more old-fashioned than the old man.

What about the "old man"? Did he really know what was going on, or was he only getting part of the story? Douglas found it hard to believe he could be as supportive as his new friend claimed, but he found himself in a bit of a quandary. He could not go to Ralph without betraying Mark's trust. Twice he ventured tentatively onto that uncertain ground and twice he was rebuffed with a paternal wave of the hand and a smile that said "do not worry."

Douglas believed in the chain of command and in a certain kind of deferential relationship between boss and employee. It was Ralph's decision to make and it was Ralph's business. If he had chosen to go down this new path, then Douglas felt compelled to submit and subdue his own personal feelings.

He knew he was jealous of Mark and his new clients, jealous of his relationship with Ralph and the whole office for that matter. He knew jealousy could be clouding his judgment. And in one sense Mark was right. The things he was doing were being done all over the place. Douglas didn't agree with them, but maybe he was making them out to be more precarious than they actually were.

After all, these things are not clear-cut. It was not as if Mark

were contemplating outright fraud, either against his clients or the government. His schemes fell more into the category of pushing the envelope. But Douglas was skeptical of envelope-pushing, especially when it involved other people's money. He loved the old Ralph, the one who recoiled at risky schemes and bold ventures. Where had he gone?

Douglas was not the sort of person who insisted on being right, so he began the painful process of mortifying himself at the office. He could not fight a tidal wave. He was suffering, but the only path forward seemed to be to suppress all personal feelings and submit to the will of his employer. Well, there was one other option—he could quit. But Douglas liked his job at Callahan's. He worked hard, had done good things, built a good reputation. He was loath, on the whole, to let it all go.

Callahan's was not paradise, of course. Some of the clients were very demanding and others could drive you crazy in other ways. There was Ralph himself, with his compulsive inattention to detail, his ADD, and the staff with their dull plodding, as well as the occasional outbreak of pettiness that seemed to defy belief. But he loved them in their own way—all except Mark, that is. He was not sure he was ready to trade them for the shark pond of big business and the scary kind of people his mother brought home.

Douglas remembered one of his father's friends telling him that in the business world you get five good years and five bad, sort of like Joseph and the famine. This idea stuck with him. If it was true, he'd had a bonus. He had nothing but good for eight years; nothing but positive achievement and reinforcement. It was foolish to think it could go on forever.

Besides, Mark was not likely to stay there long. He was too "good" for their sleepy little office. Eventually he would hit a wall. He would not be able to convince the kind of clients he coveted to bring their business to a place like Callahan's—and then he would move on because he was ambitious and made no bones about his desire to be rich.

For now, however, Mark was everywhere. He was omnipresent. It seemed like every time Douglas looked up he saw his semi-florid smiling face. The office was too small to get away from him. And every time he looked at Mark he also thought of Trish. He thought of seeing the two of them together. It was like a hot burning coal.

Sometimes he tried to talk himself *out* of being in love with

Trish, for the sake of his sanity. He thought about the first time they met when his brother embarrassed him and made him run away. He thought about the birthday party where they exchanged barely a few words. He thought about the bar and her indifference.

But then the slight cooling precipitated by such critical thinking would lose its force when he thought about the beach party. What a strange day! He went for the sole purpose of seeing Trish. Most of it was surreal. He felt very uncomfortable with Roger's friends. Fortunately he had brought his Kindle, but two hours of straining to read at the beach is a bit much.

What he really wanted to do was take a long, leisurely walk—with Trish. That was what he loved to do at the beach. He was not a tanner. He loved the sun shining on the waves and he loved the sound and smell of the surf, and he loved combining them with his favorite thing, which was walking. He was sitting there pretending to read his book but what he was really doing was fantasizing about walking with Trish with their bare feet in the surf, their bare, bare feet in the warm surf. Then he tried to imagine *asking* her to walk with him, especially in front of his brother and friends. That put an end to his fantasies.

Then it happened! The wonderful thing she did, one of the greatest moments of his life, especially since it was so completely unexpected. Just when he was on the brink of despair she came up beside him and started talking. Words cannot describe how this made him feel. Well, maybe they can. He was striding like a hero among the stars, along the Milky Way, even if only for a brief moment, even if he could not be sure what it meant, even if the sand flies pursued them like furies to the parking lot.

The game confirmed these feelings. The attraction was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. That was why he had to let Barbara go in first when they came back with their hot dogs. He was afraid of embarrassing himself and wanted to restore some sense of equanimity. By a simple transposition of seats he killed two birds with one stone, calming his overheated emotions and reminding himself of his obligation to Barbara.

Unfortunately he did not realize the effect of this maneuver on a third bird. The cavalier change of seats was the specific reason why Trish was still going out with Mark. She had never been happier than when Douglas sat down next to her. Even if he was with Barbara she still wanted to see him. Six blissful innings went

by—or whatever they called them—what was an “inning,” anyway?—and he was still there. It was a strange situation but wonderful in its own crazy way.

Then in a flash everything changed. She found herself sitting next to Barbara. The hated interloper was between them. It was almost like a metaphor. Wait! It was no metaphor; it was the thing itself. Trish could not get to Douglas with Barbara there. And it seemed that Douglas was the one who put her there.

Meanwhile Mark kept calling. She was not particularly attracted to Mark, but he was entertaining and harmless and most of all insistent. They went out every couple of weeks or so, usually something fun or at least interesting that he managed to cook up. Best of all he continued to keep his distance, just as on the first “date.” She didn’t know what to make of it, but she was very glad. Things would have been different if he hadn’t.

Mark kept his office mate informed. Douglas found himself in the strange position of wanting and also dreading these reports. Any news about Trish was good news, regardless of the source; and to his credit, Mark was generous. He always had positive things to say, which was remarkable, because he rarely had positive things to say about anybody, except Roger.

Douglas agreed wholeheartedly, of course. He agreed she was attractive and her attractiveness grew on you the more you got to know her—although he did not know her nearly as well as he would have liked. He agreed she was intelligent and fun to talk to. He agreed she was by far the most interesting female in Roger’s crowd, even if he could not go along with calling her a “Sheila.”

But these same conversations often left Douglas lying awake at night running through scenarios that never seemed to have a good ending. This thing he felt for Trish was hard enough without Mark making it harder. He still could not get past his fear of women, no matter how much he loved her. No, not that kind of fear; the fear of getting hurt that had been instilled in him by Vanessa. The fear of not being able to make someone happy, of simply not being good enough.

Throwing Mark into the mix just made the whole thing seem impossible. She was dating him and it sounded like the dates were *fabulous*. It was the office all over again. He found himself in direct competition with Mark, but *his* strengths, *his* merits, were not made for competition. He had quiet qualities that went unseen. He was

loyal and a hard worker and an honest worker, but he was just now discovering that there is nothing very sexy about such things. You can be beloved by your boss for your hard work and loyalty one day and then a big talker comes along and you are forgotten.

He was respectful and humble, but who cares about such old-fashioned qualities when someone like Mark could make them all rich? Besides, Mark was an expert at feigning those very things himself. He let his hair down with Douglas, but when he was with Ralph he was the epitome of respect and humility. It was only when they came back to their little space that he laid the boss out like a corpse.

Douglas assumed it was the same thing with Trish. He did not think Mark was good enough for Trish—or for any woman, for that matter—but Mark knew enough about goodness to imitate it. He knew the right things to say and the right way to act and the right expressions to have. He was dating Trish and Douglas wasn't. Why? Because Mark was made to win the affections of women. It was as simple—and maddening—as that.

Douglas said yes to Barbara because Mark was dating Trish and why not? Besides, he liked Barbara. She was kind, she was thoughtful. She had fascinating tidbits to share about his mother. He knew nothing about his mother at work and was naturally quite curious. Barbara recognized this hunger. She was careful about what she said, but she was willing to feed it to some degree.

Beyond that, Barbara was good company. He always felt relaxed when he was with her. And he realized this was because he trusted her. She was not like the other women his mother had thrown at him. If you asked him to define this trust, he couldn't. Barbara made him feel like it was safe to be himself. This was not a feeling he got very often from others, and he was appreciative.

These were not dates; they were like getting together with a good friend. She was so easy-going that it made him easy-going as well. Perhaps a key piece to the puzzle was he was not calling Barbara, except for the baseball game; she was calling him. He was not used to having attractive women call him. He was glad when she called, especially since he had given up any hope of seeing Trish.

Barbara gleaned that one of his passions was walking. She invited him to hike on a trail up in Cornwall that was supposed to have great mountain views of the Housatonic. This involved a

substantial investment on her part, since she did not have any hiking equipment and found herself making a trek to EMS and buying more than she needed from an over-enthusiastic clerk.

Also she was not really in shape for this sort of thing. She was in aerobic shape but not mountain shape. Everything seemed fine until the trail started going vertical and she quickly became aware of the difference in conditioning between Douglas and herself. Looking at his back in shorts and capilene shirt, she was impressed. He was muscular but walked with a light and indefatigable tread. She found herself looking at him again and again.

Now, don't get the wrong idea, you dirty-minded males. Barbara wasn't thinking about THAT, even though she did happen to be hot and sweaty at the time. But she admired men who kept themselves fit and in good shape. She did not have to see sixpacks and bodice-ripping biceps, but good health and an active lifestyle were attractive to her. It was the kind of lifestyle she believed in.

Did the thought also cross her mind that his muscular body might be pleasant to hold? Well, you know, people are human. She was thirty-four and in the prime of her life with the same needs and desires as anyone else. Suffice it to say that the pleasure of holding someone was also important to her.

The problem was finding someone to hold. Most of the men at work were married. Of the ones that weren't, not many held much attraction for her; in fact none. What was she to do? She was picky. She could not face the bar scene. She tried it with her girlfriends, after the divorce and hated it. If you weren't approached, you felt rejected; if you *were* approached, you felt like rejecting. It was dehumanizing and humiliating.

But what then? A dating service? She had considered it. How bad could it be? She signed up and did her profile one long winter night when she was feeling very lonely—but she never went back. She never checked to see if there were any “matches.” It just seemed too bizarre. Besides, she was still young. There was plenty of time for desperation later.

She was intrigued by Douglas. He was definitely worth pursuing to see if they were compatible. But the hike set the tone for their entire relationship. He was chatty on the way up, excited perhaps about the hike, but quiet afterward. The silences were awkward for Barbara. She was not a conversationalist. That was not really her strength. She was depending on him in that department.

She did not know how to interpret his quietness. Was he unhappy? Was he bored? She thought of older couples she had observed in restaurants, sitting and not talking and looking vaguely uncomfortable. It was painful to see them. They were trying to have a good time, paying to have one in fact, and not succeeding. Was the same true of Douglas and her?

Barbara liked being silent. It was actually pleasurable to her. She did not feel any existential anxieties when she was not talking. What she felt was calm. When she was with a group of people she was often silent because she did not feel the need to say anything but also because she was observing them. She was trying to find out what made them tick.

This inquisitiveness was a curse when she was with Douglas, however. She did not have to find out what made him tick. She felt she already knew. He was a sincere young man who had deep feelings and believed in deep things. But he was just like her in the sense that he was not a talker. Her former husband was a good talker. It was what attracted her to him in the first place. She wondered if she needed a talker in order to be truly comfortable.

She did not know quite what to make of these encounters with Douglas. She kept calling him because he seemed amenable and because she was wondering about him, about them. She was interested in Douglas, frankly, and not willing to give up until she knew whether there was something there. She wanted him to be happy, to have fun with her. He always had a polite smile on his face—always—but she did not know what to make of it. Was it real? What did it mean?

What troubled her the most, however, was that he did not seem interested in anything physical. She gave him opportunities—let's just say she was not unwilling—but he seemed perfectly content to go out and spend time with her and leave it at that. Not just on the first date but on subsequent dates as well. She did not know what to make of this. As far as she could tell it made no difference to him if there was *any* physical contact between them. Apart from her own desires, this did not seem like a good sign.

## XII

*Bill surprises everyone*  
*A very odd holiday*  
*Barbara on the hot seat*

CHRISTMAS WAS COMING, but something shocking happened that took a good deal of the joy out of the season for Douglas, if not all of it. His father moved out.

Yes, really. The first hint was that he stopped coming to the guest house. He was in the habit of dropping by for a friendly chat a couple of times a week at least, either because Helen was never home and he was lonely or because she was home and he needed to get out of the house. Douglas enjoyed these visits.

But after Thanksgiving they suddenly stopped. Douglas became curious and meandered over to the big house one night to see what was going on. Nothing was going on. Nobody was home. The place was dark. Had they gone out or gone away and not told him? It seemed strange for his father not to be home. He was always home and always had a good book in his hand.

The next night he walked over to the big house again, and again it was eerily empty. He went back to his cottage and watched. His mother was in the habit of coming home late—she was rarely home before eight—but it was almost ten before her black Mercedes finally rolled down the driveway. He waited a few minutes and went over for the second time.

She seemed startled to see him. “Oh! Douglas. It’s you. Kind of late for a visit, isn’t it?”

“I was just wondering where everybody was.”

“I’ve been at work. What did you think?”

“I was referring to Dad. Haven’t seen him. Is he here?”

“No, he’s not here,” she said without looking at him.

“Did he go somewhere?” Douglas stammered, somewhat thrown by this cool reception, cool even for her.



"I guess you could say that. Douglas, I have some bad news for you. Your father has moved out."

"What! Why?"

"I don't know. I guess he wants to spend some time at his mother's house."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. Apparently he just feels he needs to be alone for a while. Don't know why he had to choose this time of year to do it, with the holidays coming; but then I never really understand the things your father does."

Douglas had a million questions but was too flabbergasted by this news to go on. Besides, he was not very good at asking his mother questions. The look of exasperation that came over her face every time he opened his mouth was too painful.

What should he do now? What was the right thing to do, under the circumstances? Try to hug her—show his support? Her body language did not invite a hug. He never really hugged her—and she never hugged him. There was a formal kiss on the cheek when they greeted, if she condescended to any greeting at all, but not a hug. He had seen friends receive heartfelt hugs from their mothers and felt very jealous. It just was not something Helen did, not even with Roger.

He stumbled back to the cottage and sat up half the night trying to process what he had just heard. His father had never done anything like this before, not even close. He had always been the steady one, especially as Helen took on more responsibility at work and was home less and less. For him to have gone off the reservation was truly shocking. It was almost as if no one really lived there anymore, like the place was abandoned.

*Why* had he "moved out"? Why would he suddenly leave without any explanation, without coming to give him fair warning? Douglas had a sleepless night. The next morning he dragged himself to work and went through the usual motions, but all he was thinking about was his father. He had to see him. He had to know what was going on.

After work he went straight to his grandmother's house, feeling very jittery. His heart jumped when he espied the familiar Jeep in the driveway. It really was there. It was true after all. His father greeted him warmly and offered him a beer, and they went into the den, where there was a cozy fire. The very coziness was disturbing.

Douglas did not want him to be too cozy. Not there anyway; not away from home.

They chatted about the weather, which was unseasonably mild. They chatted about the Rangers, and the latest from David McCullough, which they were both looking forward to reading. It was basically the same conversation they would have had if they were sitting in front of the fire in the guest cottage.

The big topic never came up. It became clear to Douglas that it was not going to come up unless he did something about it. He waited for the twenty minute lull and dove in reluctantly.

“So—you seem happy.”

“I am, as a matter of fact. I always loved this little red house. Emphasis on the ‘little’.”

“Are you planning on being here long?”

“I’m not really planning on anything, to tell you the truth.”

Douglas decided to be a little more direct. “Mother said you moved out.”

“Did she, now. What else did she have to say for herself?”

“Something about you needed to be alone for a while.”

He chuckled. “Well, I suppose I do. We all need to be alone from time to time. Very important to hear from ourselves. Even if we don’t like what we hear.”

“I don’t understand. Did something happen?”

“Something always happens. Life’s funny that way.”

“I mean between you and Mother. She seems kind of upset.”

“Really? I can’t imagine why she would be. I only seem to be in the way there.”

“How can you be in the way? It’s your house.”

“You would be surprised. My point is I wouldn’t worry about your mother too much. She’ll manage very well on her own.”

“Maybe she will, but I won’t,” Douglas said bluntly. “You’re the only one who wants me there.”

“Oh—is that what you’re worried about? You can stay as long as you like.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Douglas said, becoming flustered. “It’s not the same without you.”

“You are kind to say so. I do miss our little talks—although come to think of it we’re having one right now. But you’ll just have to trust me on this. Everything will be all right.”

Douglas did not realize—had no way of knowing—that when

his father said everything would be “all right” he was thinking of the \$60,000 he had invested from Douglas’s rent, which had grown to almost \$90,000 as the market roared back like a stuck bull from the last major correction. Everything would be all right because Douglas would have plenty of money to find a house to live in.

But Douglas wasn’t thinking about money at all. He had saved up more than that on his own over the past five years, since settling his debts. The only thing weighing on his mind was the prospect of his parents divorcing. But he could not push his father any further. Obviously there was something he did not want to tell him. He very much wanted to know what it was, but his father was in high deflection mode.

The conversation moved on to other things but seemed heavy and strained. Douglas realized it was time to go home. It was another sleepless night for him after this strange conversation. His father’s puzzles were disturbing. Why would he not simply say what was on his mind? It was not like him. Usually they seemed so close, so much at ease with each other. Douglas did not feel the ease or the closeness now.

He lay there in the dark in the cottage—didn’t even have the will or energy to get up for a trip to the refrigerator or bathroom or whatever—just lay there on his back most of the night with his eyes wide open wondering where all this was heading and fearing it could not be good.

Why was his father being so secretive? What wasn’t he telling him? Were there money problems? It did not seem likely. Was he worn out from being beaten down by Helen? This was possible. Douglas would have found it very fatiguing to be in the kind of relationship they had. He did say he felt like he was in the way.

It was crushing to see one’s parents separated, especially for someone who had such strong feelings about home and family. It was also dislocating. Home did not seem like home to Douglas anymore. He was able to suppress the pain at work because he had things to do, but it was all he could think about when he returned to the lonely, dark estate. It consumed him.

What he really wanted was for his father to come back home and for everything to be normal again. But was this ever going to happen? He thought about how comfortable and content his father looked in his grandmother’s house. He thought about the way he was treated in his own house. It was too easy for him to stay away

when he had such a convenient place to go.

Roger did not feel the same way. He thought it was funny that “Bill” had moved out. Roger shared his mother’s skepticism of his father and his low-octane profession. It was just like him to run away to his mother’s house and leave the estate for Helen. He never would fight for what was his; therefore he didn’t deserve it.

Whether this cynicism was real or a show of bravado Douglas did not know, but his feelings were nothing like Roger’s. It hurt him to have his father move out because his father was the parent he loved and the parent who showed love for him. The abdication that was amusing to Roger had a very different effect on him. He was upset at his father for letting Helen have her way.

Douglas was in an awkward situation. Communication ceased between the guest house and the “big house.” He saw his mother’s car in the driveway but did not try to contact her; nor did she try to contact him. It was not because he was trying to mind his own business or honor his parent, although both of these things were important to him. It had more to do with not knowing what to say.

He had never known what to say to her. He was always tongue-tied in her presence, sensing and dreading her disapprobation. Besides, it was not that easy to reach her. She was busy with her important job. If the family wanted to talk they had to find time on her calendar. It was not as hard as she made it for her minions at work, but it was still a challenge.

Douglas did not feel up to the challenge. It was hard enough to talk to his father in the present circumstances, but at least he was *able* to talk to him. This was not the case with Helen. He could not remember having had a single personal conversation with her in his life. A week went by with no contact, and then another. It was two weeks of waiting for bad news, two weeks of imagining the worst and not knowing what to imagine.

He saw her coming and going in her black Mercedes SUV. He saw her in church. Nothing seemed any different. She greeted the same old people in the same old way, with her stout smile and briskness. He stood there watching her during the coffee hour and wondering what she was thinking. What was his mother made of? He felt like wax but she looked as steady as a rock. And she was the one whose marriage was apparently in trouble.

She did not talk to him at church, except to say hello, but she did call that same afternoon with regard to the obligatory holiday

party, the gala open house for family and friends that she hosted every year. She needed him to do something for her. He almost felt flattered until he found out what it was.

"Have you seen or heard anything from your father?" she asked in the usual cool tone.

"I have. I went the day after we talked."

"Oh!—you didn't tell me about that."

"I didn't think you needed to know."

There was a pause, as if waiting for him to say more. "How was he? Did he seem—all right?"

"He seemed perfectly fine, as far as I could tell."

"I see. Well, good for him, I guess. But you haven't heard from him since then?"

"Not really. I texted him a couple of times, but that's about it."

"Well, what I'm really wondering about is the party. Did he say anything about that?"

"No, we were texting about the Rangers."

"You boys and your sports. I need you to do something for me. I need you to find out if he's planning on coming. It will be kind of awkward not to know in advance."

"I guess I can do that. Is there anything you want me to tell him?"

There was another pause, not characteristic of his mother. "No, he knows the guests will be expecting to see him. That's all."

Douglas was not going to put it quite that way. He knew it was the worst way to entice his father to come. But he did accept the commission, partly because he found it hard to say no to his mother, but also out of self-interest. The thought of having the party without his father was painful.

He called that very evening. "I'm supposed to ask if you are planning on coming to the party."

"Your mother asked you to call me?" Bill said, sounding surprised.

"Yes. Is that okay?"

"Of course. It's more than okay. It's extremely clever. She knows I could never say no to you. And you can put her mind to rest. I will be there. There's no reason to hide from my friends."

It was another ambiguous statement, but Douglas tried not to obsess over the possible meanings. The main thing was that he was coming. He called his mother right away to give her the good news.

“Well, that’s a relief,” was her only reply.

Still, his father’s self-exile was felt. He was the one who always took care of the decorations, both inside and out. Nothing happened along those lines outside. The usual wreaths did not get purchased and the cheerful white lights stayed in the barn. Helen did not have time for such nonsense. As it was she had to hire the gardener to put up a tree and rely on her housekeeper for anything else that managed to come out of storage and find its way into the entertaining rooms. Somehow in the process Joseph lost his head. Helen blamed it on Bill.

“Why do I even have these stupid parties?” she said to Douglas a little crossly when he came over Saturday morning to help. He did not have an answer. To him they were simply a family tradition. It occurred to him just how fragile such traditions can be. He pitched right in and did the things he usually did—brought in firewood, prepared the bar, brought in and set up chairs, helped set the buffet table, helped put things in order. All he could think about was doing this without his father. There was no one to joke with, no one to share it with. He did not even try to joke with his mother. It was better just to stay out of her way on state occasions.

When his father did arrive, it only made everything seem stranger. He fell right into the old routine as if nothing were amiss. Douglas did not see him greet his mother but assumed it must have happened offstage. Pretty soon the guests started dribbling in. He watched his father welcome them with his typical gracious warmth. No one could possibly have guessed, based on what they saw, that he had moved out of the house or there was any kind of rift between him and Helen. He talked to her the way he always did, with bemused politeness. He did not avoid her any more than usual.

Barbara was at the party. Helen invited her. Douglas didn’t mind—it was nice to see a friendly face. Later on they made their way into the library with full dinner plates and discovered that they were alone. Douglas could not help himself.

“Have you noticed anything different about my father?” he said in a low voice.

“No, not at all. Should I?”

“I don’t know. He’s—sort of not living here right now. If you can believe it.”

Barbara stared at him with wide eyes. “He moved out?”

"I know. It's strange. He's living at my grandmother's house."

"When did this happen?"

"Oh, right after Thanksgiving. We had a nice holiday and then all of a sudden it wasn't so nice."

"I'm so sorry."

"He says it's because he needs some time to be alone. I don't know. It does make things kind of awkward, as you can imagine."

"No one could ever tell. On the surface everything seems perfectly normal. But how about you? Are you okay?"

"Not really. I'm pretty close to my father. He won't tell me what's going on, and at this point I'm starting to wonder if I really want to know."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well—I mean, what could it be? Is there someone else? I just can't imagine it—but I also don't understand why he won't talk to me. It's not like him."

Barbara paused. "I doubt there's someone else. I'm sure he'll talk to you eventually. Your father is a wonderful man. He would never do anything to hurt you."

It was soothing to have Barbara there. He opened up to her more than he ever had. In his melancholy mood he wound up talking quite a bit about his childhood. The stories he told about his father were very sweet, and she was glad he shared them. The stories about his mother were not always as gratifying. There were some she wished she could unhear, since she knew she would always think of them when she looked at her.

## XIII

*Marissa in jeopardy*  
*Crossed wires on New Year's Eve*

**M**EANWHILE THINGS WERE taking an equally bizarre twist at the office. It turned out investing wasn't the only area where Mark liked to take risks. To Douglas's unwilling eye, he appeared to have developed an interest in Marissa, the younger of Ralph's two daughters, now a freshman at Boston College but definitely home for the holidays.

Marissa was the most like her father of the three Callahan children; the most outgoing, the most likely to save a party—only in one way she was not like her father at all, for she was a very pretty brunette and, well, as Mark put it, “hot.” The attraction between them seemed instant and strong. Marissa would come into the office for no apparent reason and find her way into the room that Mark and Douglas shared and just stand there being her beautiful, vivacious self. It certainly was not because of Douglas. He was not the one with whom she was exchanging fond barbs.

This was so wrong, on so many levels. First of all there was the age difference. She was eighteen; he was twenty-eight, and those ten years were ripe. He was, let's just say, “experienced”; she was as fresh as a flower. There was also the issue of façade. To Douglas's mind, Mark was a salesman not just by profession but by nature. At Callahan's he exuded sincerity and warmth. Douglas assumed this was because he wanted to endear himself to the homely folk who worked there. But he was very different when he was in other company—for instance with Roger's friends.

In fact he was like two different people. Now it was possible that he was trying to sell himself to Roger's friends as well. Douglas did not know which was the real Mark, or even if there was one. But his gift for becoming whatever people wanted him to be was disturbing when it came to Marissa. In her presence he made



himself into a fresh-faced young man with a great sense of humor and a tender soul; but the moment she left the room he would express his attraction to her in ways that could be quite crude.

Douglas was torn between wanting Mark to find someone new and give up his infatuation with Trish and fearing that this new someone might turn out to be Marissa, who in his view was completely overmatched in the game of love. He did venture a comment about possibly “toning it down a bit” one day after she left the office, but Mark just laughed at him. He knew he had no control over Mark. He doubted anyone could control him.

It also seemed like a slap in the face to Trish. Douglas liked Marissa, always had—she was a sweet girl and he had enjoyed watching her grow up—but there was no comparison in his mind between her and Trish. It was offensive to him to see Mark flirting with her if he was supposed to be going out with Trish. Strangely enough, it actually made him angry—Mark’s lack of discerning loyalty. And this made him realize something. His feelings toward Trish had not changed.

There were times over the fall when he tried to convince himself he was *not* in love with Trish. Since love was causing him pain, the best remedy seemed to be to do battle with love. He held his hand to the flame by telling himself she was in love with Mark. He told himself she didn’t care about him and had no interest in him. Besides, he didn’t know her well enough to know if he really was in love. Maybe he was only imagining he was!

He was no match for love in this particular battle, however. At night in his bed he would close his eyes and find himself sitting next to her at Citi Field on that horrible-wonderful day. He remembered the delightful feeling of being united with her in some strange way. He remembered listening to her talk and relishing every word she said, every word that indicated intelligence and kindness. He remembered how he longed to say something to her and how his tongue would not function.

Douglas was inclined to believe in destiny. He had heard that all things work for good to those who love God and was very struck by this idea. He believed there was a mate for him somewhere in the world just as Adam had Eve and Isaac had Rebecca; no, not just a person to mate with but a soulmate, someone with whom it was possible to become one flesh and banish all loneliness.

The thing was, he had a funny feeling this person was Trish. He

did not know *why* he felt this way; he just did. He remembered believing he was in love with Vanessa, but it had never occurred to him to think they were destined for each other. The connection with Trish was different somehow. Or it seemed to be.

It made him sick to think about her dating Mark, and not just because of jealousy. He was worried about her for the same reason he was worried about Marissa. Should he do something to alert her to the danger she was in, as he saw it? But then he tried to imagine actually having such a conversation. Who was he to presume to be concerned about her well-being? Also, she was not like Marissa. Trish seemed highly intelligent, mature. It was presumptuous to worry about her being able to take care of herself.

Douglas did not have a very merry Christmas. Not that year; not with his father moving out; not with Mark's peculiar star continuing to rise at Callahan's and the inappropriate flirtation with the boss's daughter; not with his unrequited feelings for Trish. He felt a strong desire to do something about the disasters that seemed to be unfolding all around him but felt blocked at every turn.

On Christmas Eve it was raining. There would be no white Christmas that year. He played in a brass quartet at a big church down on the coast, which was nice except that it was not his church and he was a little turned off by the snobbishness of the rector. The next day he went to the big house in a drizzling rain. His aunt and uncle were on hand with their daughters. Apparently they knew about his father.

Roger was there with a new girlfriend. Helen went out of her way to make her feel welcome. The reason for her attachment was obvious: it carried over from her love for her younger son. Douglas was happy that Liz was treated well—she seemed like a nice girl—but it made him mindful of his second-class status in the eyes of his mother as well as his brother.

No one said a word about Bill. The subject was embargoed by unspoken agreement. But Douglas thought about him constantly. The dynamic in the house was very different when his father was not there. He was the one who made everyone feel at home; he was the one who always started the most interesting conversations and quietly guided them to a soft landing.

One thing that came out at the dinner table was Roger's desire to have a New Year's Eve bash at the big house. Helen said she would be happy to see his friends. She asked Douglas if he would

help—he knew she meant the things his father usually did, which she would never dream of asking Roger to do. Roger looked a little disappointed at having his brother included, but Douglas didn't care. From that point on all he could think about was seeing Trish.

A couple of days later Mark informed him he was looking forward to seeing him at the party. Douglas surprised himself and asked him if he was coming with the runaway bride. Mark laughed and said yes, of course he was. He wouldn't go anywhere without her. Oh well. At least she was coming. He wanted her to come, even if he was miserable to think of her coming with Mark.

Something occurred to him as he sat there looking at Mark and wanting to strangle him. It was a golden opportunity to do the very thing he had been contemplating. She would be at his house, or his parents' house; he could see himself finding a quiet place to make his reservations known. All he wanted to say was "be careful," or something to that effect, like the mysterious oracle in *Jane Eyre*. He thought he could bring himself to say this to her. It was sincere.

The festive night came, and he went over to the big house early to help set up and then went up to his old room to read (and hide) until the guests arrived. He did not go downstairs until it seemed loud enough for him to avoid standing out in his brother's crowd. The first thing he saw was a tipsy young lady bending over to pick up a dropped cracker and inadvertently spilling a gaudy red drink all over an Oriental throw rug. Oops!

Fortunately the rug itself was basically red. He helped her clean up the mess with club soda and paper towels. It wasn't one of Roger's usual friends. She did not seem to know who he was, which was a relief, since Roger had poisoned all of his friends against him. She was very apologetic and effusive in her thanks and smiled perhaps more than was necessary, but there was only one girl Douglas wanted to see that night, and she had not yet arrived.

He went into the library to tend the fire (one of his duties) and decided he might as well sit down and wait. Jeff sat down next to him and they had a nice conversation about music and some jazz recordings that had just been released. While they were talking there was a commotion at the front door, and then he heard the unmistakable boom of Mark's voice.

Douglas kept talking to Jeff as if nothing had happened. He did not want to give himself away. Also he wanted to give them a chance to settle in. Jeff did not seem to be in any hurry to leave his

comfortable spot by the fire, so they sat there chatting for another half hour or so until he decided he needed a beer.

Douglas looked for Mark and Trish but did not see them. It was painful for him to reconnoiter because it meant multiple close encounters with Roger's friends, most of whom looked at him as if he did not belong there, or at least that's how it seemed to him. Finally he wandered out into the kitchen. Trish and Liz were helping his mother arrange frozen pastries on cookie sheets.

He had not seen her since September. She looked adorable in her apron and glowing cheeks. He positioned himself next to Mark, who started raving about the house. His voice came to him as if from another room. The kitchen was large and full of people, and there was some distance between Douglas and Trish. This was frustrating. He could not take his eyes off her, but would she ever look up? No, she seemed absorbed in what she was doing. She was talking and laughing with Liz while they worked.

Something became blindingly obvious to him as he stood there watching her and talking to her paramour. He could never do what he was contemplating—try to save her from Mark. Was he going to tell her about Mark's character defects, as he saw them? Nothing is added to the happiness of the world by tearing down others.

Suddenly he felt very small standing next to Mark. It wasn't just that Mark was large of stature but more that he was large of life. If she looked up and saw the two of them standing there she would of course choose Mark. Just like everyone else was choosing Mark.

She did not look up, however. She seemed to be ignoring him. The longer this charade went on—and it went on for some time—the more uncomfortable he felt. It was like he was a complete stranger to her, a stranger in his own house. Besides, she was with Mark. He loved her so much—he was so happy to see her that he ached—but there did not seem to be any point in hanging on. He was just making himself miserable.

Suddenly he felt like he had to get out of there. What was the point of torturing himself? Was anything likely to change? No. Trish was with Mark. Besides, it wasn't all that much fun watching other people get drunk. Mark started chatting with someone else, and Douglas took the opportunity to slip out of the kitchen and out the porch door, where he would not be seen. He headed back to his lonely, dark cottage with his head down and his tail between his legs. Never had he felt more aware of his insignificance.

It was not until he was leaving that Trish even became aware of him. She was working in the kitchen because it made her feel closer to Douglas. It was his kitchen and she was helping his mother, and as an added bonus it got her away from Mark. She was focused on what she was doing and on getting acquainted with Liz, whom she liked. She did notice someone come in and start talking to Mark out of the corner of her eye but did not look up because she did not want to see Mark or encourage him in any degree.

It was only when she was turning back from the oven with a hot tray of pastries in her hands that she noticed someone leaving in the crowd. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized who it was. Had he been standing there all along? Why didn't he say something to her? She felt hurt. But she did not say anything to him either. She was too busy with what she was doing and too busy avoiding Mark to realize he was even there.

Trish became determined. She slid the pastries onto a platter, not very gracefully, and carried it out to serve the guests. It wasn't necessary to serve the guests—there was a table for food—but she wanted to look for Douglas. Also it was the best way she could think of to get away from Mark, who had followed her into the kitchen.

Douglas seemed to have disappeared. She went around to all the rooms and she went around again, even after the platter was empty. Where was he? Had he left the party? She tried to find a window with a view of the guest house. They were blocked by a line of shrubbery between the house and the valley. Then she became bold and sneaked upstairs and into the first bedroom she saw that faced the driveway. She made it to the window just in time to see a light go on in the guest house.

Her heart sank. Why had he left the party? It was upsetting. She had come to see him and now he was gone and she was stuck with Mark. She had the whole evening to get through without him, and she literally didn't know how she was going to do it. What she really wanted to do was to march right over to the guest house and confront him. She wanted to know how he felt about her. She wanted to know if he felt the same way she did.

But she wasn't going to do that, was she? Not in this life, anyway. She became curious about the room. It was pretty dark in there, lighted only by the hall, but it seemed like a masculine room from the colors and Spartan decoration. Was it Douglas's? She

tiptoed around, looking at things and tracing them with her fingertips. Then she came to a bookcase and saw a yearbook on the bottom shelf. Yes, it was Douglas's room.

A strange emotion came over her. She sat down on the edge of the bed with her hands in her lap. She sat there for a couple of lovely minutes, just thinking and taking it all in. Then she noticed a book on the bed. She picked it up and tilted it toward the light—*The Guns of August*. Had he been reading it? Was it his book?

Her mind flashed back to the beach party and Douglas sitting in his chair with his Kindle. She wondered then what he was reading, what he liked to read. She remembered seeing this book in her father's library. She remembered the glowing dust jacket reviews. She sat there in the dark with it in her hands, and then she did an odd thing. She clasped it to her bosom. She embraced it!

Trish came to her senses and practically threw the book back down on the bed—and then felt silly about that, too. She would have laughed out loud at herself but was afraid of being found out. Now she remembered where she was and the fact that she had to go back downstairs. Mark was down there. She was afraid he would try to make it seem like they were together.

They were *not* together, as far as she was concerned. She had been out several times with Mark and he was not growing on her. The more he saw her, the less inhibited he felt by her reputation and education. He became more like himself, which made it harder for her to like him. The grand entrance into the party was a case in point. She hated calling attention to herself. She could not respect people who did. He was trying to show off for her and had no idea of the effect it was having.

The thing was Mark was the one who invited her to the party. No one else invited her, and she could not pass up an opportunity to see Douglas. But of course Douglas saw her with Mark. She did not want him to think she really *was* with Mark, whom she could hear downstairs making a fool of himself, but there was nothing she could do about it—not now, when he had apparently left the party. She noticed there was no Barbara. This made her feel a little better. She wished there was no Mark!

It had been a long time since she had seen Douglas; since the baseball game, in fact. At that point she was upset with him for having switched seats with Barbara. She made up her mind she did not have the strong feelings she thought she had for him. But it did

not take long for the hurt and the resolve to fade away. Within a month all she could remember was sitting next to him and how it made her feel. She was just as much in love with him as ever.

She glanced around the room, now that her eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark. She saw a dresser, a chair, a desk, a case full of books. Over in the corner there was a music stand. She remembered the conversation at the ballpark. She saw a poster on the wall of a historical figure and became curious. She walked up close to it and saw the name: John Philip Sousa.

Suddenly she became aware of the party sounds downstairs. She knew she couldn't stay up there forever, as much as she wanted to. What she really wanted to do was lie down on the bed and put her head on the pillow—*his* pillow. Instead she went to the window and looked at the guest house again. It looked very snug with its lights on. With a sigh she looked around one last time and made her way downstairs.

The hours dragged on and things became even worse than she imagined. She had not been at a party with Mark where there was heavy drinking. He was the self-appointed ringleader. He talked too loudly and whooped it up too much when the ball fell, which seemed to Trish to take forever. Champagne was passed around and a boozy cheer went up and there was a lot of kissing, which was awkward with Helen in the kitchen. Mark tried to kiss her, but she managed to fend him off.

It was not a "new year" for Trish; it was the same old year. The one person she wanted to see was not there. She was not drunk and did not share the irrational happiness that seemed to have overcome the crowd at the stroke of midnight. Now her ride was intoxicated. How was she going to get home?

She found Jeff. "Can you help me?"

"There is nothing I would like better. What's up?"

"Look at him."

"Oh my. He's a mess."

"I'm not driving anywhere with him."

"No, you shouldn't. I'll take you home."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. We can go right now, if you like."

Trish was afraid to tell Mark she was leaving in his present state, so she told her new friend Liz and begged her not to say anything until they were safely on their way. Jeff escorted her to his car.

Trish gazed at Douglas's house as they drove by. The lights were still on. Was he up? She longed to call him when she got home but she knew she would never do it.

Jeff dropped her off at her dark house and she collapsed on her bed and lay there for a long time thinking about Douglas. The party had been a complete waste of time. She saw him for a second and he was gone. Well, not a *complete* waste. She did see him, for the first time in months. She did sit in his room. She did give his book a little hug. *If* it was his book.

What was he thinking, right then, at that very moment, if he was still awake? Was there any chance he was thinking of her? She had no reason to think he was. She wanted him to be thinking of her—but not as Mark's date. She wanted him to be thinking of her in his mother's kitchen happily volunteering. This was the image she wanted him to have in his mind.

Oddly enough, he *was* thinking of her. Douglas had gone to bed early but was awakened by the long procession of cars out of the driveway, some tooting their horns. He was in heaven and he was in hell. He was elated to have seen Trish at the big house and utterly thrown down by the red-headed phenomenon that seemed to stalk him everywhere he went.

He was thinking about the very thing she wanted him to think about—the indelible image of her in the kitchen. He was thinking about how cute she looked and how crazy he was about her. And then he was thinking about Mark and how small he felt standing next to him. In his own house. It was the effect Mark had on him.

He ran away because he felt small, but he did not want to run. Actually he ran away because he was angry. He felt rejected. He felt like no one understood him. His brother did not want him there. Trish gave no sign of wanting him there. His own mother probably did not want him there, except to keep the fires going.

But most of all he was angry about Trish. She would not even look at him. Why couldn't she at least look up and acknowledge his existence, acknowledge the fact that she was in his house? The longer she ignored him, the more conspicuous it made him feel. And this was a feeling he could not tolerate.

He ran away because he was nothing to her, because he was a nonentity in her mind and in the mind of everyone else, because she was dating Mark and as far as he was concerned Mark was the great Satan. Why did she ignore him? Was there something wrong



with him? She seemed so happy, working and laughing and trading quips with Liz. Why couldn't she share some happiness with him?

But the moment he stepped into his cottage and turned on the lights he wanted to go back again and throw himself at her feet. He thought of the lively scene at the big house and he thought of himself in the valley and felt truly pathetic. His brother was right—he *was* a loser. Divorced and thirty and going nowhere. Mad over nothing and running away from the very thing he loved.

Mark had become his nemesis. He had only been at Callahan's a few months and already he was making more money than Douglas, counting commissions. Ralph didn't want Douglas to know this, but he couldn't very well keep it from him when Douglas was the office manager. For a while he was hurt by the discovery, terribly hurt. But then he realized something. He could never compete with someone like Mark. He was not made for it.

He was not made for Trish either, apparently. She was at the party with Mark and there was nothing he could do about it. His plan about warning her was foolish, condescending, worst of all transparent. He could not warn her because he was not disinterested. He realized now that warning her was a way of attempting to undermine her relationship with Mark, and not a very clever one.

He could not take up his sword and slay the red-headed dragon; he could not attempt to save her from the peril she was in, or he thought she was in. Why? Because he was in love with her. He could not move against Mark because he knew his own motives, and they were far from pure. It was his pure love for Trish that made him want to save her and his pure love for Trish that sent him scurrying to his house and the cold comfort of being alone.

Still, he had seen her; that was something. His feelings toward her were not changed. He thought he was angry with her but he wasn't really angry. At least not with Trish.

## XIV

*A terrible rumor  
Douglas visits his father  
Barbara pays the price*

**J**ANUARY TURNED OUT to be a bit of a traumatic month for Douglas. The party did not help when it came to Trish. Being there with her—and with the indomitable Mark—made the whole thing seem hopeless. She was more adorable and more unavailable than ever. She wouldn't even look at him! And Mark was still Mark. There was nothing he could do to get past the immovable object. At least not without overplaying his hand.

Then there was the ongoing situation with his father, who was still holed up at his grandmother's house. Douglas dropped in on him after the holiday had yet another unenlightening conversation, although he seemed glad to see him and quite cheerful. Douglas was cheerful too, but it was purely an act. He was dying to ask him when he was coming home but was afraid of the answer. He was dying to ask him a lot of things.

One week went by, two weeks of pale winter sun and long winter nights under bone-white stars, and no vitamin D, and his father still did not come home. Gradually Douglas went into a funny place in his mind where reality wasn't quite real anymore. He kept hoping it would all turn out to be nothing—an inexplicable blip or bad dream—kept hoping he would look up at the big house one day and see his father's car in its usual place as if nothing had happened. He did look up, every morning and every night when he came home from work, but the Jeep was not there.

Then one brisk Saturday he had the misfortune of running into Roger at the barn. Roger was collecting his skis for an overnight trip to Stratton and Douglas was collecting some firewood.

“Heard anything from Dad?” Douglas asked him.

“No. I thought *you* were in touch with him.”

"I did see him a couple of weeks ago. Just wondering if you knew what was going on."

"You know more than I do. I haven't seen him since Christmas. Helen doesn't seem to think he's coming back, and good for him. Sounds like he has his own thing going on."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hey, I'm just saying. That's the rumor, anyway. Probably one of his fellow teachers. I hear there's a lot of that these days at the public schools."

"Are you trying to tell me he's having an affair?" Douglas said incredulous.

"Well? What do you think? I mean, there's no other reason for him to run away like that. Not that I know of. This is his place. He would have to have a pretty good incentive just to abandon it."

This conversation put Douglas into shock. His first reaction was to try to discount it. His brother didn't know anything more than he did. Besides, he could not imagine his father having an affair. It just wasn't like him, no matter how unhappy he might be.

Or was this wishful thinking? After all, his father was miserable. Well, Douglas didn't know this for a fact. His father never actually told him he was miserable. He just assumed he was because of the miserable way his mother treated him. Douglas knew *he* would be miserable in such a marriage.

Also Roger was right—it was very strange of him to move out. He loved his house and his grounds. They were comfortable old friends. He thought about his father's resolute evasiveness. Why be evasive if there is nothing to hide? Why could he not simply tell him the reason he moved out? What was the big secret—unless it was the one Roger hinted at? What other kind of secret could it be?

Douglas did not want to believe it—but he knew it was not impossible. People do stumble, even people we love very much. King David had a great fall. There was no love for his father at home, as far as he could see. Helen was away more and more on business trips. He could not remember ever seeing anything like physical affection between them.

Would it be so strange for his father to seek it elsewhere? Yes, it would, as a matter of fact. It's easy to be philosophical about such things when they happen to someone else's father, but perhaps not so easy when it happens to you. Douglas felt like his whole world had been turned upside-down.

He had to know the truth. He had to see his father and hear it from his own two lips. He picked up a four-pack of exorbitant craft beer on the way home from work one cloudy February day and dropped in on him, once again uninvited. The very fact that this was the third time he had had to invite himself was troubling. Did it tend to confirm what Roger was saying?

This third visit was the most frustrating of all. Douglas had a burning question, which he could not bring himself to ask. He was too embarrassed. He talked around it and left all kinds of clever openings, but his father failed to drive through them. He could not tell if he was concealing something. All he knew was he was not forthcoming. He had the same deflector shields up as before.

Douglas beat around the bush for a couple of hours and finally gave up. There was no budging on his father's part. He did not give any sign of a willingness to come home, but neither would he explain why he had banished himself. He wouldn't even let Douglas get to the point (he was good at that).

Douglas did not know whether to be more upset with his father for his evasiveness or himself for his lack of resolve. What he *did* know was he was a wreck. Roger's "rumors" were like an angry chorus that would not go away. They chased him to work and they chased him to bed. They were in his head. They were loud.

Why wouldn't his father come home? Why wouldn't he stand up and defend himself against the wagging tongues? Was it because the rumors were true? Was that why he wouldn't talk to him?

If his father was having an affair, so be it. He told himself he could adapt to this new disaster in his life. What he could not adapt to was the uncertainty and insinuation. To know the worst is better than to dread it. That's what he told himself, anyway.

Barbara called the following weekend. It felt so good to hear her voice. It was like a drink of sweet water. He had no one to talk to, and he knew he could talk to Barbara. He surprised himself by inviting her over for dinner. She showed up at his door when the sun was going down and it was all he could do to keep from embracing her. He was leaning in her direction and caught himself at the last second as she breezed by him into the house.

Barbara looked great. He had almost forgotten how good she looked. He made her swordfish, which he knew was her favorite. It didn't come out quite the way he hoped, but she seemed very appreciative. At some point she asked him about his father. She

could not help it. She was as curious as he was.

"I went to see him last week."

"You're such a good son. How is he doing?"

"He seems to be doing fine."

"Seems?"

"Well—I don't know. To tell you the truth I heard something from Roger that has me wondering."

"About your father? Like what?"

"Let's just say he doesn't seem to mind making certain insinuations. He was kind of hinting at there being someone else, to be plain about it."

"I wouldn't pay any attention to him. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"But how can you be so sure? It seems like the most plausible explanation."

"It doesn't seem plausible at all. What evidence does he have?"

"I don't know—he didn't tell me. He just said something about a 'rumor,' which kind of set me off."

"I bet it did. But did you hear these rumors yourself?"

"No, of course not."

"So you don't even know if they're real. He could just be trying to get you riled up—which he seems very good at, by the way."

"But it's not just that. My father won't give me a straight answer to anything. It's not like him. He never hides anything from me."

"Oh, well, now we know *that's* not true, don't we? Human discourse would grind to a halt if we never hid anything."

"But you don't understand. I can't go on like this. Maybe the best thing is just to tell him and see what he says."

"Tell him what?"

"About these rumors."

"Don't even think about it! You could ruin your relationship."

"Our 'relationship' is pretty much ruined as it is. I feel like he's shutting me out."

"You know that's not true. Besides, why make it worse? Why risk alienating him by accusing him of something that isn't true?"

"But how do you know it's not true? I don't know that."

"Douglas, your *father* is not having an affair," Barbara said in a rare show of exasperation.

He stopped and looked at her. "Why do you say it like that? What do you know that I don't know?"

She sighed. "Let's just say your brother is right about one thing—there have been rumors."

"But not about my father."

"No, not about your father. Not that I know of, anyway. And I wouldn't believe them even if there were."

"My—mother?"

She pursed her lips but did not reply. She also did not look at him.

"I see. So is there any truth to these rumors?"

She shrugged. "Normally I don't put any stock in what I hear at the office. I figure it's just the usual backstabbing and write it off as political theater. But let's just say that in this case it came from more than one source."

Douglas was stunned. He did not know what to say.

"I never should have told you," she said.

"Not at all. I needed to know. At least now I'm starting to understand his behavior."

"He's protecting her. Your father is a wonderful man."

"Which is why you couldn't let me tell him."

"No, I couldn't let you hurt him like that. Something similar happened to me once, and I could not let it happen to you." She shook her head. "Coming here tonight was a mistake. I knew it. Oh well, maybe it didn't matter anyway. Just promise me one thing."

"Of course. Anything."

"Please don't tell anyone about this conversation. And I mean *anyone*."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you? No, I suppose you don't. You're very sweet that way. Let's just say it wouldn't be good for me if it gets around that I shared this information with you, such as it is."

"'Good for you?' Because?—Oh! She would never do that."

"Douglas, don't be naïve."

"She's not really mean. Her bark is a lot worse than her bite, if you don't mind the cliché."

"I don't know how to tell you this, and I know you don't understand because you work in a nice little family place, but where I work you don't get into the top positions without being at least a *little* mean. There's a lot of money at stake and they choose CEOs who are at least a little mean and the CEOs choose lieutenants who are also a little mean. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is."

"This is my mother we're talking about!" he protested with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm not going to say another word. I'm sure you already hate me for what I told you. Just please, if you care about me at all, please keep this little conversation to yourself."

"I do care about you. And of course I won't tell anyone. Can I at least let my father off the hook?"

"You mean you want to let him know you know?"

"Yes. I want things to get back to normal. I want to be able to have a decent conversation with him."

"I suppose it's all right—but *I* was never here. You didn't get any of this from me. I'm sorry, but you don't understand. She has a mind like a steel trap."

"I do understand. I've been trapped in it many times."

There was a long silence as they both tried to process what had just happened.

"How long have you known?" he said at last.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" she said with a sigh.

"I think I do."

"Okay. Let's just say since before I met you. But I wouldn't use the word 'known,' necessarily. Don't forget, these are rumors."

"You knew all that time and you never said anything to me."

"What was I going to say? Put yourself in my place. Besides, if I told you I could lose you. I could also lose my job. It was a lose-lose proposition."

He didn't ask her what "lose you" meant.

The conversation was pretty much over. His mind was racing but he couldn't talk about it. He needed to think things through. He found himself wishing she would leave, and then longing for it. He put on *Liberty Valance*, which she had not seen, a movie about a lawyer. It was mostly to pass the time. Also to take away the burden of having to pretend to be a good host.

She stopped at the door as she was leaving.

"Am I ever going to see you again?"

"Of course! Why would you even say that?"

"Oh, I don't know—human nature?"

"I'm very glad you came. You took away a terrible burden."

"And gave you another one."

He did not know what to say.

After she left he sat down in his favorite leather chair in front

of the fire and tried to sort out his feelings. He tried, but we would not say he succeeded. She was right—one terrible burden had been replaced by another. His mother having an affair! Was it possible? Was that the reason for all the late nights? Was that why his father moved out?

Douglas had never felt very close to his mother, but this did not seem to mitigate his distress. It was painful to think of Barbara and all the other people who apparently knew about it at work. It brought his sensitive soul into a new perception of what her workplace was like. She was the senior VP but they were all talking about her behind her back. So much for dignity.

It was shame for her and shame for him as well—the rumors, if they were true. And this time there was no doubt in his mind they were. He did not struggle with the possibility as he did when he was afraid it was his father. Barbara's reticence told him very plainly there was no point in struggling.

Did this mean he wanted them to be true? Not at all. It was just as painful to find out his mother was having an affair as it had been to have suspicions about his father. Douglas loved his mother in his own way. She was not kind to him, she was not tender, but she *was* his mother. He had always respected her accomplishments. Admired her, like a statue perhaps. And now she had fallen.

He thought about his poor father. No wonder he moved out! After all the abuse he had endured over the years in his own house! He could not force *her* to move out. He probably didn't even try. But of course he could not stay. Not after being cuckolded.

Douglas thought about his visits and how hard it must have been for his father not to tell him. There he was, pressing him on all sides, beating the grass to scare out some imaginary pheasant, while his father sat there calmly with a pained smile on his face and giving nothing away. He must have been just as exhausted by those conversations as Douglas himself.

Thank God he hadn't gone to him with Roger's blasted rumor! Barbara was right. It would have been crushing. He came close. He was considering it. Barbara's timely visit may have been the only thing that stopped him from embarrassing himself and bringing his father unnecessary pain.

Now his thoughts turned to Barbara. He was glad she had come, glad she had set him straight. He liked Barbara and enjoyed being with her. He knew he could trust her. He could not imagine



having the discussion he'd just had with anyone else.

At the same time she was right—something had changed for him. She teleported a notion of office life into his head that he found highly dispiriting. It sounded like there were a lot of rumors flying around and a lot of them were vicious. But this particular rumor was about his mother—and Barbara had heard it from more than one source.

Because of this he could not see her quite the same way again. She became someone with a rumor about his mother. Not a new rumor but one that had been hanging around for some time. She had gone out with him several times and never said a word about it, never let on that anything was amiss. All the time he was with her she knew a terrible secret about his family that he did not know. It was—what? Well, humiliating.

He did not blame her for keeping it to herself. He could think of several reasons why she would want to conceal it. No, it was just the simple fact that she knew—and he didn't. It made him feel like she was treating him like a child. He wondered what else she knew.

And then there was the part about his mother being vindictive. This hurt Douglas. For all the differences he'd had with his mother over the years—for all the pain she had caused him by not being able to accept him for who he was—he had never thought of her as being "a little mean." Not precisely in those terms. A little cold perhaps, sometimes, but not mean. Not willing to hurt someone.

Was his mother "a little mean"? He did not want to believe she was. He was not very happy with Barbara for intimating it.

## XV

*Douglas visits his father*  
*Barbara ponders her options*  
*An unfortunate exchange*

**D**OUGLAS HONORED her wishes, however. He did not say anything to his mother about the rumors.

Now, isn't it extraordinary? He was ready to confront his father on the basis of empty whispers that weren't even rumors so much as rumors of rumors, but he said nothing to his mother who had been tried by a lawyer and found guilty. Oh, well. They say you always hurt the one you love. Maybe because those are the ones you really care about.

It was a full week before Douglas began to recover from the news about his mother. At first he felt pain and dismay. Then he became resentful. It was another kind of abandonment. She was not thinking of her husband or of him or even Roger. All she was thinking about was herself. Then he became angry. It was not just the betrayal of her family, or the faith she professed, but the pain she inflicted on his father—assuming the rumors were true. He had kept his vows through thirty-plus long years of abuse and neglect. And this was how he was rewarded?

Now all the bad feelings and all the years came pouring out in a noxious deluge, having been held back and repressed for so long. He thought about the times he had seen her be disrespectful to his father. He went over the countless times she had embarrassed or humiliated *him* in public and was filled with a kind of rage he had not experienced since the end of his marriage.

Long letters were begun in his head and abandoned. He wanted to rise up on his father's behalf but could not break his agreement with Barbara. His face settled into a stormy scowl. Every night he saw her car coming down the driveway and shook with rage as he stood at the window. He did not leave his little house and confront her, however. He bottled it all in.

There was one thing Barbara had given him permission to do. He went to his father on a Saturday afternoon and had a long circuitous conversation that led finally to the following exchange.

"I guess you probably know we've all been wondering about you."

"Wondering? Why?"

"What you're doing here. You had us all going for a while there."

"I did get that impression from some of your visits," his father replied with a smile.

"You'll be glad to know I'm not puzzled anymore."

"Will I?"

"I think so. I found out what happened."

"Oh, I see."

"It's been a strange week for me. Processing everything."

"So are you all right?"

"I think so—except that I hate her."

"You don't hate anyone. You just think you do. Nothing good ever came of hate. Such an ugly word."

"I hate her because of what she did to you," Douglas protested.

"I understand what you're saying. But you don't have to worry about me. I'm fine—really. I've had a couple of months to think about things and feel very much at peace."

"I don't feel any peace. I'm so angry."

"I've found that the funny thing about anger is it's like a spigot. You can turn it on or off. And right now you're trying to get me to turn it on," his father teased with a friendly smile.

"But I don't understand. What was she thinking?"

"People probably don't think anything at all when they get headed down a certain path. You know, the primrose path. That's a special gift people have."

"I'm glad you can joke about this."

"I'm not joking at all. Do you think a bank robber would rob a bank if he really thought he would be caught and sent to jail? And yet they always get caught. It's a strange psychological quirk that we have. We can forget what we know to be true."

"But she's not going to jail. She's carrying on as if nothing ever happened."

"We're all going to jail, one way or another," Bill said with a chuckle.

"What, in her mansion and her Mercedes SUV?"

"Especially in those."

Douglas wanted to go on but stopped himself. It didn't seem

like he was going to get satisfaction. More than that, he could see the pain and weariness his father was trying to conceal and realized he was the cause of it. He was not helping his father with his holy indignation; he was simply making things more difficult for him. His father was right. He was trying to get him to turn the faucet on and drink the same poison he himself was drinking.

Should he go on drinking it? As soon as this question came to mind he thought of his own divorce catastrophe. He thought about how he had held onto his anger and hate for months, years even, and how it had hurt him and stolen time from him without adding one single ounce to his happiness. Was he going to do the same thing now? Was he so much in love with hate that he was going to nurture it again?

His father was right. He didn't really hate his mother. He did not *want* to hate her, at least. But he also did not want to love her. He was too hurt. His father said he was at peace, and Douglas took these words to heart and tried to enter into the misery they held for him. Peace was the goal, but what was the means? He had been clinging to anger and hate when he knew full well they were not the path to peace. He knew he would be, as his father put it, thrown into jail if he continued to cling to them. He knew his mind was playing a trick on itself to make him forget what he knew.

The only other path to peace was the misery of forcing himself to accept his father's statement that *he* was at peace and stop trying to fight for truth and justice on his behalf. This meant letting go of the anger he was using to push away suffering. But which was better—to suffer now and possibly get it over with, or to cling to his anger and cause himself more suffering in the end?

Suffering and acceptance—this was the path he endeavored to follow. He was not always successful. There were mornings when he woke up just as angry as ever. Sometimes he felt like punching a wall. But every time he did he forced himself to think of his father. He knew he was right. He knew he had chosen the correct path. As painful as it was, he did his best to follow it himself.

After all, Douglas didn't really want to hate his mother. He was angry with her, to be sure, but he did not hate her. The thing he wanted more than anything was to feel she loved him and he was something more than an annoyance in her life. But if this is what he wanted, then how could he hate her? Didn't it mean he loved her?

Douglas began to calm down. The smile gradually returned to his face. True, it was a little sadder now. Wear and tear changed the contours. He could not sort out the stand-off between his parents. It was not up to him to resolve an issue that had been simmering since before he was born. He did not know what the future would bring—he hoped for something better—but he knew *he* could not make it better. An abler physician was called for.

He had restrained himself for Barbara's sake, and this restraint had saved him from potentially making a complete mess of things. Barbara was the sacrifice that made his peace possible, however. He could not look at her the same way again. She became linked in his mind to the place where his mother cheated, the place of rumors and disasters. She had not cheated. She had not rumored. But she was the one who paid.

Funny, she knew she was going to pay. She should never have gone to see Douglas, not so soon after the separation. She knew she was in a difficult position, potentially a compromising position, but she could not help calling him. It was winter and she was lonely in her condo and had not heard from him in almost two months. She was also curious. She couldn't help it; she called.

Of course she couldn't say no when he invited her over. Why would she? But in a sense she almost wanted to say no. She was in possession of a terrible secret. It was easier for her to keep this secret before Douglas's father moved out. There were no roiling currents to toss her out of her little boat. But now Douglas was upset. He was hurt, and she hurt for him. She knew what was going on. She knew perfectly well why Bill wasn't living at home.

She wanted to ease Douglas's mind, make his pain go away, but would full disclosure help him or hurt? Would it be better for him to know that his mother was having an affair than to suffer perplexity over his father's seemingly unaccountable absence? It probably would. She believed it was better to know the truth. But how would he react to receiving such information from her? The pill was too bitter to swallow.

She went to his cottage with a mixture of trepidation and exhilaration. She wanted to see him so much and was so happy that he had invited her, but she also had a sense of nervous foreboding. She was going into darkness and could not see the end of the road. It was all so complicated for her. She was attracted to this very attractive man. She did not know if she was in love with him, but

she wasn't sure how much it mattered. She felt they could be happy together. They could be as happy as anyone else she knew.

And she was lonely, so lonely! She tried to fill up the loneliness with girlfriends and going out, but she was not a *Sex in the City* kind of gal. The storied lifestyle of the high-flying professional female seemed shallow and stupid to her. She was not looking for glamour or glitter. She was looking for a quiet life and good companionship. Would she ever find someone who was more likely to be a good companion than Douglas? She did not know. As the years went by she became more and more concerned.

Then there was the work situation. She worked for his mother, a few levels away. In Barbara's mind, work was a bit of a jungle. So much depended on making and keeping a good impression and on being on the sunny side of the boss's ever-changeable mind. She liked and respected Helen in her own way, but she also feared her. She had seen her do things that were not nice. She had seen her turn on people who disappointed her and make their lives absolutely miserable.

Barbara definitely did not want Helen turning on her. This was why she hesitated when Helen tried to set her up with her son. She kind of wanted to meet Helen's son and she kind of didn't. She wanted to make Helen happy by agreeing to meet him but she didn't want to make her unhappy by not liking him and not being as grateful as she should have been for the opportunity.

Well, she needn't have worried about *that*. As it turned out, she liked Douglas very much. He was, if she could say this, everything his mother wasn't—kind, thoughtful, self-effacing, sincere. She felt drawn to him. But even here there were difficulties, weren't there? She knew something about his mother that he very clearly did not know. She had something to hide and it was not easy to hide it. Hiding had never been her thing.

The rumors were never completely out of her mind when she was with him. In one sense she was not with him at all even when she was physically present—because she was always thinking about his mother and the secret. The last time she saw him, at Christmas, it suddenly became much, much harder to hide. He was clearly in a great deal of pain. He didn't say much but he didn't have to. She was learning to read him pretty well.

This was the baggage she was carrying when she went to his cottage on that fateful day. Had anything been resolved with his

father? Was he still wondering why he moved out? Did he have the same questions he had before, and would he still be asking them if the subject happened to come up? She did not want to deceive him. At the same time she didn't know how she could avoid it. And it was all very strange, knowing Helen was in the house on the hill and she was on her estate.

Things started out well. He made her a delicious dinner and they chatted pleasantly. He seemed glad to see her and this made her happy. The fish was maybe a little overdone but he was cute about it. Not many men would even attempt making broiled swordfish. She gave him points for trying. Besides, she wasn't looking for someone to cook for her. She knew how to cook. She would love to cook for him.

But then when dinner was over something happened to her. She did not know if it was the pinot blanc or some other madness that overtook her, but for some reason she could not stop herself from inquiring about his father. He had not said a word about it in the two hours they had been together, and the longer it went unsaid the more her curiosity was piqued. Did he know the truth? Was he no longer in perplexity? It was a good thing for her if he did. It meant she didn't have to pretend anymore.

The words were no sooner out of her mouth, however, than she knew she had made a mistake. She could see on his face that he still did not know. He didn't have to tell her. And the pain! She felt so badly for him, wanted to reach out to him, hold him, but could not. Then she said something stupid. She just couldn't keep it from coming out. He was threatening to go to his father and confront him with a terrible accusation. She could not let that happen. She cared about him too much.

She could see herself sitting there in the candlelight talking to him in a calm and rational way, but she was not calm and rational at all because she knew she was destroying any chance she had with him. She wasn't sure if she had much of a chance in the first place; she wasn't sure if she could convince him that a relationship based on friendship was enough. His apparent lack of interest in touching her did not seem good. He did not seem to want her the way she wanted to be wanted.

But now something very different was happening between them. A wall was coming up on his side and she could feel it. She was not just the bearer of bad news; she *was* the bad news. She was,

in his mind, an emissary of his mother. It was not possible for her to make the real situation clear to him without having it reflect badly on herself.

Her heart was full and her heart was breaking. A self-sacrificing part of her wanted to rush into immolation, like the Carthaginian queen. She had kept the secret for too long. She didn't like keeping secrets, especially from him. She longed to disabuse him of the evil suspicions that his popinjay brother had planted in his head. She longed to keep him from doing damage to himself, because she was fond of him.

Her heart was breaking because she knew she had no chance with Douglas now. In his mind she would always be the one who brought him the terrible news. He would not be grateful to her for liberating him and protecting him, as generous as he was—and Douglas was the most generous man she knew, in that sense. No, he would hate her for putting a dagger in his fragile oversized heart.

If she felt he loved her it might be different. If there were a strong passionate attachment between them then love might redirect his anger and spare her. But love is not what she felt from Douglas. She felt that he liked her. She felt he enjoyed being with her. She did not feel he loved her. There was not enough of a bond between them in her mind for him to continue to want to see her.

She wanted to give him time to recover, time to process the information, and hopefully to think well of her again. She waited. She wasn't expecting him to call—he never called—but she wanted to make sure she didn't seem to be in too much of a hurry. She did not want to make things worse. She had brought him bad news and no one wants to hear from bad-news bringers.

It was almost a month before she called again. Even then she thought it was too soon, but she couldn't help herself. She had to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling, what the fallout was from the bomb she had dropped on his head. She wanted to know for them and she wanted to know for herself. It was important to her. It was relevant to her job and her career.

She expected to hear distance in his voice, which is exactly what she heard. She could not be sure if it was because they hadn't talked in a while, so she forged on and invited him to meet her for dinner. She had never spent more time worrying about how she looked than she did before this date. She showed up looking much better than she felt. Her pretty clothes and pretty face could not



quite cover up the feeling of impending doom.

It went surprisingly well. He did not seem tense or upset. In fact he talked a good deal more than he usually did and was quite animated at times. But the weird thing was that Helen never came up. It was as if it had never happened. He did not allude to it, and of course she did not dare to try, even though she was dying to know what happened and where things stood.

This was deflating and encouraging at the same time. On the encouraging side, she thought the evening had gone rather well. They enjoyed each other's company. But he did not talk about the elephant in the room. What did it mean? Was he avoiding it because he was upset with her? Was it his way of being polite and not making her uncomfortable? Or was he shutting her out?

She inclined toward the latter interpretation. It was too important a topic and she was too intimately wound up in it for him not to mention it—unless he was drawing a line. *Something* must have happened after their last talk, for better or for worse. He said he was going to talk to his father. She longed to know what the result of that conversation was. If he was not telling her, then it was probably because he did not *want* to tell her. At best, he was unwilling to return to the degree of affinity they had shared before. At worst, he was sending a signal: his private life was off limits. And that wasn't really the signal she wanted, was it?

She let a couple of weeks go by and then she invited him to go down to the Botanical Gardens to catch a little scent of spring in the middle of a particularly dismal March. He insisted on driving, which was sweet of him and typical, but it bothered her in the sense that *she* wanted to treat. She wanted to do something nice for him, and he was too nice to let her.

The sun came out, and it warmed up a little and was even warmer in the city. A delightfully balmy fifty-one degrees! They enjoyed themselves very much, walking around the park in the sun, finding signs of the imminent demise of winter even where there were none. They were friends, sharing. He surprised her with his knowledge. He was really into the nature thing, which was charming in its own way. She loved the greenhouse the most and the orchids and the big water garden. She stood there and drenched herself in tropical illusions.

But guess what! The main topic *still* did not come up. Did she want it to? At this point she almost wasn't sure. His silence was

puzzling. Had he gone beyond the pain he was feeling? Did he feel it was not important enough to bring up after so much time? No, that seemed impossible. She could not imagine anything more important to him, knowing Douglas.

She sure wasn't going to bring it up. The last time she did it was terrible. Also she was in a very precarious position. She already felt exposed, having told him about the rumors. She was the only one who could have told him, and Helen was very good at connecting the dots, especially when they were as obvious as this. She did not feel she could expose herself again.

She asked him if he wanted to go out to dinner with her on St. Patrick's Day, which was just around the corner. She insisted on treating, and to her surprise he did not resist. She knew just where to take him, she knew he would love it, and he did. He had an Irish beer he'd never had before and was excited about it. He declared the corned beef and cabbage to be the best he'd ever had. Not that this was a delicacy often sampled at the Lendell residence, but within the confines of his limited experience it was the best.

This conversation reminded her of the difference between Douglas and herself. It was a delicacy often sampled at her house growing up—every St. Patrick's Day, in fact. Her parents were not wealthy or even very well-off, and there was no shame in eating one of the worst cuts of beef soaked in brine for a couple of months until edible. She could imagine Helen turning up her nose at such things. But Douglas was definitely not Helen.

This thought made her wonder about the status quo at the Lendell house. Barbara was not particularly nosy, but there was some fascination for her in this topic. She met Bill a few times and was impressed with him. She remembered thinking any woman would be thrilled to have such a husband. So cultured, such nice manners. Douglas's love and admiration for him were obvious.

How was he doing? Was he still living at the other house? What was the state of their marriage? Had Helen been confronted? What was Douglas thinking and feeling about his mother at this point in time? There was no sign of anything being amiss at the office. No one observing Helen could have guessed that there was any drama in her life. Barbara wanted to know the real story.

In this she was disappointed. Douglas did not bring it up and did not even come close to bringing it up. She was waiting for him to say something about his father but he never did. She was not

waiting for him to say something about his mother. This was not a topic he had discussed very often, although he had shared a couple of bone-chilling anecdotes from his childhood.

As the dinner wore on Douglas gradually became quiet. This was uncomfortable at first, and then by the time the desert came it had turned into something else. He would not look at her. He seemed a little fidgety. And then all of a sudden Barbara had the weird feeling of not belonging there. It came in like a chill from a cracked window. They were there together but they were not together. They were like two strangers.

It was not as though they had a natural history. They were together because of Helen, a history most unnatural. As she was sitting there looking at Douglas and wondering what he was thinking she suddenly felt Helen at the table between them. It had always been an open question whether they would manage to get together. Now because of Helen it was not an open question. It was closed.

The quietness that overtook him did not go away. Was it being alone together in a restaurant? Did he have the same strange feeling that she had? The jarring silence continued on the ride back to her condo. She tried to ask him leading questions but he would only give terse answers. He was not cold. It was nothing like that. He was too kind to be cold. But he was distant, and she could sense it.

She didn't get out right away when they reached the condo. "It's over, isn't it," she said simply.

"It?" he asked with rare disingenuousness.

"I mean us. Not that there ever was an 'us' to begin with. It's because of what I said about your mother. You can't forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. You simply told the truth. I'm glad you did."

"I wish *I* was glad," she replied, with a sigh. She was silent for a minute. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If I didn't call you, would you ever call me?"

"Of course!"

"No, tell me the truth, not what you think I want to hear."

He looked down and did not reply. She said goodbye.

## XVI

*Marissa returns for spring break  
Douglas makes a momentous decision*

**D**OUGLAS DID NOT call her in the weeks that followed, but it was more complicated than you might think. There were a lot of times when he *wanted* to call her and a lot of times when he seriously considered calling and was even on the verge of pulling out the cell phone. He liked Barbara. He enjoyed spending time with her. But he did not love her. Which he knew because he was in love with someone else.

Her question did not surprise him as much as he pretended. He had been thinking about the same or similar things himself. He knew from other things she said that she was interested in him at some level, and he also was interested—at some level. What exactly this level was he wasn't sure. He was not unaware that they were compatible. He was not unaware that she was both attractive and attracted to him.

What made things more complicated was his growing despair over Trish. He hadn't seen her in months. He felt like she was slipping away. He loved her so much that he thought he could be willing to risk what little was left of his self-esteem and ask her for a date without knowing if she had any interest in him, since there did not seem to be any way to contrive to put himself into her proximity again as he had in the past.

But he could not do this as long as she was dating Mark. There was a code about those things. Besides, *did* she have any feelings for him? He had absolutely no idea. If he dared to think she did—if he remembered, for instance, the conversation at the beach, initiated by her—he would immediately beat this thought down as mere wishful thinking. This was his torture. He did not know if he was living in the real world, which was, on the whole, cruel.

But let's say his worst fears were true. Let's say Trish had no

interest in him. Was he really in a position to take Barbara lightly? Barbara seemed willing to accept him as he was. She had seen his cottage. She knew he was not his mother's favorite. She knew he was happy at Callahan's. (Was he happy?) In any case she had no illusions about him—and still she seemed interested. And he was attracted to her, in his own way. It was hard not to be. She was attractive. He often wondered what it would be like to hold her.

He felt he could be married to her in the true sense. He could give her both his mind and his body. Based on the model he had in front of him, this was not something to be dismissed lightly. He saw his parents and knew what kind of marriage they had, even before the recent disaster. It was a marriage without affection. He did not believe this would be the case with him and Barbara. She was a very caring person. He was sure they would care for each other. He was sure they would like and respect each other.

He thought of Vanessa. Barbara was nothing like her. He had been in her condo. He had ridden in her Subaru. This was not someone who needed things to be happy. She was rational and realistic. She was not living beyond her means. Her condo was modest and it was modestly furnished. Nothing for show. Much more for comfort.

And that was the way he felt about her. He was *comfortable* with Barbara. On the other hand, she was right about one thing. His view of her took a sharp negative turn after she told him about his mother. He tried to scold himself out of it, but we can't always help the way we feel. This was one of those times, apparently. When he was with her he thought of his mother and her secrets. It put a layer of alienation on everything they did together.

He knew this wasn't fair. It wasn't *her* fault that she made him think of his mother. There were few people he could think of who seemed less like his mother than Barbara. She was considerate and kind, not just in a phony way, of which political skill his mother was a master. Still, she worked where his mother worked. She had been introduced to him by his mother. Most of all she had given him the news about his mother that turned his world upside down.

So when Barbara said "It's over, isn't it?" he had very mixed emotions. He pretended not to know what she meant because he was living in a pretend world. He wanted to pretend he could be with Barbara without thinking of his mother. Of course he knew what she meant. He knew why there were three dates in a row. It

wasn't just because she was his friend.

But at the same time he could not be false to Barbara. Maybe it would be better if "it" was over. He did not want to mislead her. Not that he had said or done anything to mislead her up to that point. He did not flirt with her, not even once. He had not said anything to make her think he was interested in her as anything more than a friend. But it was misleading in a sense to agree to all these dates when he knew full well what she meant by "it." Yes, for her sake it was probably better if "it" was over.

Still, he felt badly. Not for selfish reasons, but because he liked her. He certainly did not want to hurt her—not that he was egotistical enough to think she would be hurt by not seeing him. It distressed him to think of people who were friends not being friends anymore. Maybe Harry was right for the wrong reasons. Maybe men and women can't be friends, not because of sex, but because of love.

And what about "Helen," as Roger called her. What were his feelings where she was concerned? He had settled into an unsettled dullness. He did not know how to think about his mother. There were no invitations coming from the big house for supper or tea during the long winter months. There had been invitations in the past but not since his father moved out. He did not know whether this was because his father had been the source of those invitations or whether his mother had other things on her mind.

She was still very much going to church. He saw her there and said hello to her and she smiled—or grimaced—and said hello as if nothing had happened, which to her mind it hadn't, since she did not know what he knew. She invited the family for Easter, including his aunts and uncles, just as she had all these years; and they came, and his father came and acted like there was nothing different, and he did not know what to think about it, or about her.

He could not talk to her about the burden he was carrying. He promised Barbara he wouldn't, but would he attempt it even without this promise? He could not imagine having such a conversation with her. He had never felt he could approach her with a problem. It would be hard to approach her with this particular problem even if they were close.

His relationship with his father returned to normal, however. He went to see him every week if not twice a week, and they would sit in front of the fire and have the same conversations they'd

always had. It was his only consolation during this difficult time in his life. It got him through the winter and gave him something to look forward to, other than his walks and the brass band.

He felt, he sensed, that he was also helping his father. Bill claimed not to be lonely in his exile but Douglas could not imagine this was the case. His father was gregarious. He liked people and, unlike Douglas, was happy in a crowd. His unique gifts as a host had always been a big part of who he was. He had to miss it.

He always welcomed Douglas with open arms. Literally! He gave him a big hug every time he walked in the door. This was unusual, this was different. His father had never been a hugger. His manners were warm and open but old-school. A hearty handshake had always been much more his style. This made Douglas think he was perhaps trying to telegraph his gratitude to him for these visits.

After all, he was the only one visiting him, from the family at least. He knew Roger would never think of visiting him. Roger was too busy jetting around the country and going to important meetings and playing racquet ball and checking email on his smart phone and making new friends at the bar. Where could he find time to squeeze in his father, who embarrassed him?

Meanwhile Douglas was still going through an interesting time at work. He was jealous of Mark and ashamed of his jealousy. He did not know if it was coloring his feelings about the new way of doing business that Mark was introducing at Callahan's. They were making a lot of money. No one else seemed to object. Why was he dragging his feet?

Not only had his own father moved out, but his father figure at work had moved on to better things as well. Ralph was no longer the person he thought he knew. He couldn't talk to him—it was like they were talking past each other. He began to sense something like dislike or at least distance coming from the man who always used to praise him and seemed so grateful to have him.

Douglas went from a situation where everything he said was golden to always seemingly saying the wrong thing and not being able to do anything right. He had an honest difference of opinion with Mark about where they were headed and what constituted success, and this put him at odds with Ralph and the rest of the crew, who seemed very content to be led by the young dynamo into the Promised Land.

He was letting his dislike and distrust of Mark get the better of

him and dictate his behavior. He found himself saying things he never would have said under normal circumstances. He wound up fighting with the staff, which he had never done before, and over trivial things. It was as if every aspect of office life was being blown out of proportion by his rivalry with Mark. He could sense the staff turning against him, and he couldn't blame them. He was turning against himself.

Douglas learned just how quickly good will can be squandered in an office situation. Years and years of honest labor and kindness and compromise can be blown away like a dandelion gone dry. Darkness and gloom seemed to have attached themselves to him. He didn't want it that way, but there also did not seem to be anything he could do about it.

Then Marissa came home for spring break and reconnected with Mark and he thought he was going to lose it completely. They picked up right where they left off. She arrived late on a Friday afternoon, full of energy, and kept it up all week. The flirting was so open that he could not see how the rest of them could miss it. Or was he really going crazy? Was he imagining this too, as Ralph told him he was imagining all those other dire things?

It got so bad that he actually started looking for a job. This was big for Douglas. He was inclined by nature to doubt that the grass was greener on the other side. He had been happy at Callahan's, on the whole. There were things he didn't like and things that annoyed him, but this would undoubtedly be true anywhere he went. After all, work is work.

He loved the old Victorian house with the creaky stairs and the somewhat creaky clients and their eccentricities. He had found a way, over the years, to love the humble station that had been accepted by the staff for its very humbleness—as much as it frustrated him at times and even embarrassed him when certain clients were in. It suited him. He did not want to step into some cutthroat office where people did not have any genuine concern for each other and all that mattered was the bottom line.

He loved Ralph, or at least he used to. His boss could be frustrating, especially due to his lack of attention to detail, but his heart was in the right place. They say love covers a multitude of sins, and love was embodied in his treatment of his clients. He really did care about them and really did have their best interests at heart, unlike the ads you see on TV, where they're just pretending



to care. Callahan's was a caring place and the clients and their bank accounts were like plants to be tended.

But things were different now. Ralph seemed to have been possessed by the red-headed demon. He allowed things he never used to allow. He said things about clients behind their backs he never used to say, Mark-like things that sounded odd coming out of his mouth because he was not like Mark. What was wrong with him? Was it a change of life? He was sixty. As far as Douglas was concerned, it was the worst age for him to turn against the prudent standards he had always been so careful to uphold, when he was so close to retirement.

Douglas still cared about him. He still wished he could do something to help him, something to pull him back into his old self and away from the brink of potential ruin, as he saw it. But he could not. He was shut out. And this made him want to leave. No, he did not think he would find paradise by going somewhere else; he was not naïve. But he had to get out of there. It almost didn't matter where he went. He needed to leave for his sanity. He needed to leave before the great crack-up.

Of course there was always the possibility of winding up someplace worse. He had a college friend who hopped out of an insurance industry frying pan into an insurance industry fire and was working eighty hours a week and feeling completely burnt out for the sake of an "ED" title. What reason did he have to think the same thing wouldn't happen to him? He was used to his humane work week and his leisure time and short commute. He didn't know if he wanted to trade it for long days and an electronic leash.

You may think you are stepping into a wonderful situation and find yourself chained to a boss who is constitutionally incapable of seeing your good qualities and moreover determined to grind you into dust. You may wind up with coworkers who don't think anything like you or value what you value. You may find yourself doing work you hate, or cooped up in a little office somewhere with no windows, or in a cube in some corporate rabbit warren.

Anything can happen. Douglas knew it. Still, the résumés went out. He was in a funny state of mind as he sent them. Naturally he wanted them to succeed in their little mission—his ego was engaged at some level—but at the same time he almost wished they would fizzle out and go nowhere. He wanted to get out of Callahan's and he dreaded getting out. He wanted to go and he was

afraid of letting go.

In his morning orisons he faithfully said “Thy will be done.” But to tell the truth he did not want “thy will” to keep him at Callahan’s. He wanted this cup to pass. He did not know how much longer he could go on. It was almost better to quit and be at home without a job. That’s how bad it was getting. That’s how much he hated Mark and hated going to work in the morning.

He hated Mark! He was not proud of this. He hated hate, but he could not help himself. Mark’s sheer phoniness was driving him crazy. It was in his face every day. He had to listen to Mark scoff at Ralph and their coworkers and the clients, and then he had to watch him interact with those same people as if there were no one in the world he loved more or wanted to see.

But what troubled him the most was Marissa. It seemed like a disaster in the making. He was Cassandra. He could see catastrophe looming but no one would believe him. Ralph would not believe him, not now, not after all that had happened in recent months. He felt he had very little credibility with Ralph at that moment and did not want to risk squandering what was left.

So he kept silent and hoped that one of his résumés would hit its target.

## XVII

*Bad news for Helen  
A surprising return  
Douglas tries to let go*

**J**UST WHEN POOR Douglas thought things could not get any worse, he received the shocking news that his mother had breast cancer.

It came from Roger, which was unnerving in itself.

“How bad?” was the question that blurted out of his mouth.

“They don’t know yet. She’s going to have more tests. Apparently this was something that was missed at the last check-up. She found it herself.”

This call came on a cold Wednesday evening in April. Douglas looked over at the big house and saw some lights on. He took a deep breath and walked over and found himself knocking on his own front door. There was no answer, so he went in. His mother was sitting at the breakfast table in the kitchen, poring over some medical information from the Internet.

She was wearing reading glasses, which threw him a little. They made her look old.

“Oh, it’s you. How are you Douglas?” she said, in her usual cool tone.

“How are *you*? Roger just told me.”

“Yes, well; it’s a bit of a surprise. I suppose we have to carry on.”

“But how are you feeling?”

“I feel fine. That’s the funny thing about it. I never felt better in my life. And it’s very inconvenient. This is not a good time for me to be missing work.”

This suggested more meanings than she realized, but he ignored the other one.

“Is that what they told you?”

“You mean about missing work? Yes, apparently they are a little worried about it. They want to take a very aggressive approach, and as I understand it I’m going to need to take some time off to get through it.”

“Did they give you any—”

“Prognosis? No, not really. Basically all they said was they wanted to get started as soon as possible.”

“Did you get a second opinion?”

“Douglas, he’s the best oncologist in New York! I don’t know what else you want me to do.”

He managed to summon the usual blather about “anything I can do,” etc., but her cold, hard tone pretty much took the wind out of his sails. It seemed she was determined to face down cancer the way she faced down everything else in life. The difference was that cancer was unlikely to be impressed.

“Does Dad know?”

“I don’t know if he knows. Roger may have told him. I know I didn’t.”

“Do you want me to call him?”

“Sure, that would be nice. You tell him his wife has cancer.”

Douglas didn’t bother to say anything. Now was not the time for a family reckoning. He drove to his grandmother’s house right away and found his father in the den, watching the Mets.

“It’s only April, and already they’re a disaster,” he said with a sigh. “But I’m guessing from the look on your face you didn’t come to talk about baseball.”

“Not really. Have you heard about Mother?”

“Heard what?”

“She has cancer.”

His father stared at him. “Breast?”

“How did you know that?”

“It’s what her mother had. So...how bad?”

“Well, that’s the million-dollar question. At this point all they’re telling her is they want to treat it aggressively.”

“You mean that’s all she’s telling *you*. If it were not a big deal, she would have said so. If she isn’t saying anything then that’s probably not a good sign.”

Douglas told him what little he knew about the treatment plan. There didn’t seem to be much more to say, so he made some small talk and left his father alone to process the devastating news. The following Saturday he was startled to see his Jeep in the driveway. For a moment he thought about going over but decided against it. They probably needed to be alone.

Just out of curiosity, he checked a few more times during the

day—it was still there. He saw his father leave around noon, but then he came back and was there for the rest of the day, and he was still there in the morning. Douglas noticed them getting into the car together. Were they going to church? He decided to go himself and see. Yes, there they were, sitting in the usual place. There were prayers for his mother. He looked over in their direction. She was looking down. He thought she was—crying?

That afternoon his father dropped over.

“I suppose you’re wondering what’s going on.”

“You mean with the treatment?”

“No, I mean with me. I’m going to be helping your mother out for a while, until she can get back on her feet. She probably didn’t tell you, but the doctors said the treatment could make her pretty sick. So I asked if she would mind me hanging around.”

“That is very kind of you,” was all Douglas could trust himself to say.

“This will be fun. Now I can harass you again whenever I feel like it.”

“So your sense is it’s—not good?”

“It’s not good. You know how breast cancer is. It killed her mother at forty-five, and of course she’s terrified.”

“She didn’t seem terrified when I talked to her.”

“That’s your mother. You’re never going to know what’s really going on.”

Douglas knew his father meant this in a positive sense. Helen did not believe in burdening others. She wanted to be self-reliant. Which made it kind of remarkable that she had agreed to the arrangement he proposed. Or maybe she had other reasons.

Bill moved back home at the beginning of April after a five-month hiatus and resumed his various rituals as if there had been no interruption, including his favorite evening pastime of dropping in on his son. Douglas realized how much he had missed these visits. All of his burdens, including his mother’s health and the dark clouds at work, seemed lighter when he had someone to talk to.

He talked to his father about a new job. Bill agreed it was a good idea, after being filled in on all the gory details. He said it was probably better for Douglas to move on anyway. He was not just thinking about the job; he was thinking about his own selfishness in wanting to keep him in the guest house. It was time for his beloved son to find a nice girl and begin his life. And in order to do

so he needed to be working for a firm that could afford to pay him enough to live in Fairfield County.

He was puzzled by Ralph's blindness to the smoldering fire between Mark and his daughter. He could not believe any father would expose his daughter to danger. Douglas asked him if he missed having a daughter. Oh yes, his father said; he always wanted to have a daughter. But two children were enough for Helen. She felt that more would interfere with her career.

One thing they never talked about was the Other Thing. Douglas, of course, spent a good deal of time thinking and wondering about it. His father had moved back home. Was it permanent? Had they reconciled? There was a part of him that did not want them to reconcile. He was still angry with his mother, and subconsciously he wanted his father to be angry with her too. He wanted her to be punished.

But he was embarrassed when he realized he was having such selfish thoughts. What kind of punishment did he have in mind? Wasn't breast cancer enough? Besides, he *wanted* them to be reconciled. He wanted his parents to get back together and for their marriage to be restored. The last thing he wanted was a divorce. It was important to him for the family to stay together.

It hurt him, in a way, to see his father move back home under such circumstances. It was kind of him to want to take care of the woman who had betrayed him, but it also seemed demeaning. It made him uncomfortable, especially when Roger talked about him "crawling back on his knees" in his inimitable sneering tone.

Then again he admired his father for what he was doing. The gesture was noble, self-sacrificing, even if Helen and Roger were not able to see it that way. Actually he did not know how Helen saw it. He certainly wasn't going to ask her, and she did not offer any information, except to admit once, on one of his visits, that it was nice to have his father back home.

It was not about him; it was about them. This was the hard lesson he had to learn. As much as he was hurt by what had happened, as much as he felt offended on his father's behalf, the only thing that mattered was their happiness and what they could do to redeem the situation moving forward. He had to give up the idea of punishment. It was not a son's role to punish his mother.

## XVIII

*Trish takes matters into her own hands  
Another uncomfortable night at the bar*

**A**ND WHAT ABOUT TRISH? What was she doing all of this time? Her life was not as eventful as Douglas's. She was going to the drugstore every day and filling prescriptions. She liked her job. For her it was not just rote; she saw it as a way to help people. That's why she chose it. All kinds of people came in with all kinds of questions and some didn't even realize they had questions; and she took the time to help each one to the best of her ability. If a pill had to be taken with meals, she made sure they understood why. She was filling in the gaps left by the providers. This did not always endear her to the manager, but she didn't care. She was a hard worker. She kept the lines short.

And of course she was thinking about Douglas. She had not seen him for a long time. She longed to see him but couldn't figure out how. She couldn't bring herself to call him. She flirted with the idea from time to time, but certain memories kept her hands off the cell phone. She was still kicking herself for not looking up at him in the kitchen on New Year's Eve—not even realizing he was there—and for not having the courage to go to his cottage after she realized he had left. She heard about the calamities at the Lendell house. She knew Mr. Lendell had moved out. This shocked her. She admired him. What could possibly have happened? Then she heard about Mrs. Lendell's cancer. She could not imagine what Douglas was going through.

Surely this last thing gave her a legitimate excuse to contact him? She thought about it. She was sorely tempted. She longed to let him know she was thinking about him—console him—sympathize—actually she didn't know what she wanted to do. And that was the problem. It seemed presumptuous to do anything at

all. She was not close to the Lendells, except in her own mind. She had no reason to act like she was some sort of family friend.

Still, she was dying to know what was going on with Douglas during all this reported turmoil. She was so much in love with him that she felt she couldn't live without knowing. She could not ask Jeff. It would be too obvious. Roger wasn't having any parties (that she knew of). She was so desperate for news that she even stooped to agreeing to go out with Mark a couple of times over the winter, specifically with the hope of hearing about Douglas. It was not difficult to get him to hold forth on the subject of his office mate, so enamored was he of his own opinions.

What he said about his *good friend* was not always positive, but she considered the source. If Mark thought Douglas was "too timid," what she heard was he was prudent and not a runaway train. If he said Douglas was "afraid of people," she took this to mean he was respectful of others and didn't go around with a soapbox and a foghorn like some other people she knew.

Was she ashamed of herself for this subterfuge? Not really. First of all, she had no desire to go out with Mark after what happened at the party. She had basically come to the conclusion, a little late, that he was a buffoon. But he kept calling and insisting, so in her mind he was fair game. If he was determined to play into her hands, then she did not feel obligated to try to stop him. And there were no unwanted advances, so she figured—why not?

Then she got a call that gave her an idea. He wanted her to go to a bar with him to meet Roger and Jeff and some of the gang.

"What about Roger's brother?" she heard herself saying.

"Douglas? What about him?"

"I thought he was your 'good buddy'."

"He is! Hang on." (She heard him talking in the background. "Hey, buddy. You busy Friday night?" "I don't think so. Why?" "Trish wants to know if you want to join us at the bar." Long pause. "Sure, that sounds great.") "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"He's coming. He hesitated a bit when he heard it was you. But I don't think we're talking about much of a social life here, if you know what I mean."

"Can he still hear you?"

"Sure! He's sitting right here. Hey, Douglas. You want to talk to Trish? Ha, ha! I think we're embarrassing him."



“Ha, ha! Some joke.” Trish hung up with more feelings than she knew what to do with. First of all, Mark was an ass. Second, she had just heard Douglas’s voice on the phone. Her phone! This filled her with warmth. She stared at the phone in wonder. Best of all, it worked. He was coming. She was going to see him again, and in just a few days. This thought was almost too much for her. After waiting all winter and wondering.

There was a pause before he agreed to come. That pause was an eternity for her. What did it mean? Was he hesitating because of being caught by surprise? Or maybe, as Mark implied, because of her? Was it the “runaway bride” thing again? Lord, she hoped not. She hoped that wasn’t the way he thought of her. It was how Mark and Roger thought of her. In a sense this wasn’t troubling because they were idiots. But Douglas? She definitely didn’t want *him* thinking of her that way.

Oh, well. The main thing was he was coming. It would be the first time she had seen him in months. True, she was going with Mark. She definitely wished she could think of some clever way to get out of that. She could call him and tell him she would meet him there, but she did not *want* to call him. She had never called him before and didn’t want to be sending the wrong signals just at the point where she was trying to divest herself of him. Also he was the one who had invited her.

She thought she could get past it, however. She would show up with Mark, as she had agreed to do—but she didn’t have to stay with Mark. His usual practice was to go his own way when they went to one of Roger’s things together. This would give her the freedom she needed to do what she wanted to do.

Which was what, exactly? *What* did she want to do? She wanted to walk right up to Douglas and tell him how she felt about him. Really! She fanaticized about doing this very thing.

But she knew it would never happen. First of all, they would be in a crowd. Second, she had no way of knowing how he would react to such information. His behavior with her up to that point had always been very polite, but reserved. She liked this—it was just her sort of thing—but it was not especially inviting.

Most of all, who was she kidding? She would never do it under any circumstances. She wanted to, she longed to, but simple pride prevented it. He would probably think she was crazy. Still, she was determined to make contact of some kind. She was not going to let

the opportunity go to waste, not after four months of wandering in the wilderness, not after blowing it on New Year's Eve.

Now try to imagine Douglas's perspective on this same cell phone interaction. He knew Mark was calling Trish. Mark had to announce everything he did like Caesar entering the Forum. He had no idea of Douglas's feelings toward Trish; he was safe on that score. But he was not so safe because he had no gauge on Trish's feelings about Mark. Before he knew what was happening, the woman he loved was on the phone with the man he hated, and his nervous system was on high alert.

They were talking. This was uncomfortable. Douglas was listening to Mark's side of the conversation and wondering what she was thinking. Then he heard his name! What was going on? Was he about to be teased again? He was so tired of being teased.

But then came the invitation. Did he want to join them? Of course he did. He wasn't so crazy about joining Mark but he was definitely crazy about joining Trish. It was like nailing a high B. He did not know what to say for a moment. Trish was apparently the source of the invitation, and he didn't know what to make of that. Also she was listening, which made him self-conscious. He did manage to bleat out a feeble reply in the end.

It was all so confusing. Did she really invite him? And if so, why? He was dying to ask Mark, but of course he couldn't. If she was going with Mark, then why did she want to know if *he* was going? Was it so she could stay away, avoid him, as she had on New Year's Eve? No, this was paranoia. Even Charlie Brown could not bring himself to believe it.

The most likely reason was that she *wanted* him to go; but why? A couple of possibilities came to mind. Maybe she was kind and didn't want Mark inviting her without inviting the person who was sitting right there in the room with him. Or maybe she had heard about his mother's cancer and wanted to invite him out of pity. He didn't mind being the object of pity, as long as it was Trish's.

There was one other possibility, however, as remote as it seemed. Maybe she invited him because she wanted to see him. Naturally this was what he wanted to think—which is why he refused to allow himself to believe it. Still, it was not completely impossible. She definitely invited him. There had to be a reason. But if that was the reason, then why had she done it through Mark? It didn't make any sense.

Douglas went into a state that was like a hundred powerboats on the lake and waves in all directions. He wanted so much for her to be just the tiniest bit interested in him, but he could not believe it was possible or that he had any chance of making her happy. In his mind, she was going with Mark. Besides, his self-confidence with women, never strong to begin with, still had not recovered from the great blow it received from the divorce.

Friday finally came and Douglas found himself at the designated meeting place a little early, in fact sitting at the bar all by himself because no one else had arrived yet and he didn't want to pick a table and have to suffer the indignity of having Roger and friends decide it wasn't what they wanted. He was full of excitement and full of dread. He had not seen Trish since the party. They were going to be together but they would not be together. They would be in the same bar, but she would be with someone else.

So much seemed to depend on this evening and her unexpected invitation. The poor guy almost paralyzed himself thinking about it. He wanted her to know how much he loved her, but what if she did not love him? What if love didn't have anything to do with why she wanted him invited? It would be rejection on a scale he had not experienced since Vanessa. This was the first time he had allowed himself to love anyone but Vanessa. This was the first time he had loved anyone the way he loved Trish.

And then there was Roger and Mark. He knew she would not be there if they were not there, but it was definitely a mixed blessing. Roger had teased him his whole life, the younger brother he could never get the better of, not in the classroom, not on the slopes, not on the baseball field, not in the eyes of their mother. The only thing he could do better was play the trombone, and both Roger and his mother thought that was stupid.

Meanwhile Mark loved to tease him for his stodginess and self-consciousness. Douglas had to sit in a small office with him five days a week, putting up with his little digs. Mark had no idea how Douglas really felt about him and his teasing, which in a way made things worse. The Golden Rule compelled him to refrain from lashing out in return, so Douglas sat there suffering in silence every day while Mark sucked all the joy out of office existence.

And now he had to see him again on Friday night. Worst of all he was coming with *her*. Douglas was still traumatized by the connection. Set aside self-interest and the fact that he loved her.

Couldn't she see what an imposter Mark was? How mean and unscrupulous he was underneath all that phony sunniness? Why was she still going out with him? He couldn't understand it.

Then he became aware of himself sitting at the bar alone and felt painfully conspicuous. There were other patrons but they were chatting and laughing and having a good time. Not he. Douglas was alone in the crowd, nursing his craft beer, which was actually pretty good, and pretending to be interested in the game on TV, even though it was the Yankees and not his Mets.

Roger showed up in a boisterous mood with Jeff and a couple of girls Douglas didn't know. Apparently Liz had fallen out of the orbit. His brother ignored him, but Jeff came over and greeted him cheerfully with a slap on the back, which caused him to jump and then to feel even more self-conscious.

Then came the traumatic moment. He saw it unfolding in the bar mirror like a scene from David Lean. The redhead appeared and was in fine fettle, greeting everyone with the usual bluster. Following a little behind was Trish with her head down. Douglas saw her and froze. He looked into his beer and tried to find something to intrigue him in the brown froth.

Suddenly the entire bar and Roger and Mark and everyone else was in his head. It was one loud undifferentiated Friday night cacophony. Where was she? What was she doing? He did not dare to look. He kept staring at his beer as if staring into a crystal ball, but there was nothing to see except a somewhat desultory bloom. He wanted to look at her but he could not summon the courage. He hated himself for being such a wimp.

Meanwhile Trish was equally confounded. She spotted Douglas at the bar right away. After all, she was looking for him. He had his back to her and didn't turn around while Mark was loudly hailing Roger and the group. She couldn't blame him. It was embarrassing. But what to do? She came with Mark but she did not want him to think she was there with Mark. In her mind she was there with him.

She had been dreaming about this moment for three days, but dreaming and acting are two different things. There were too many inputs in her mind. Why was he sitting with his back to them and why did he seem so distant? Was it because of his mother? Roger had told everyone he knew that Helen was in the fight of her life. Was that it? Was he upset about her?

The other thing that could be troubling him was his father

moving out. To tell the truth she was burning with curiosity about that—because she cared about Douglas. She felt like every burden he was bearing was also her own. Unfortunately it made her feel awkward just to know she knew something so personal, so private. For the sake of acting naturally she wished she *didn't* know.

There he was, sitting at the bar by himself and staring into his beer. He looked unapproachable. She stood poised on the tips of her toes for what seemed like forever. With a simple turn she could peel off behind Mark and take refuge in pretending to be engaged with their friends. Or she could keep going in a straight line and plop herself down on the empty barstool next to Douglas.

Her body made the decision for her. She was already leaning toward the barstool and kept going in spite of her reservations. It was not the most graceful mounting of a barstool in human history. First she almost fell off. Then she almost dropped her purse. He did not look up and did not seem to know she was there. She could see him in the mirror, looking gloomy. She could see *them*, like a picture, sitting together. This startled her. Together!

“Hi there!” she said at last with a good deal more confidence than she felt. He did not respond. This was disconcerting. Then she realized he might not have heard her or not realized she was talking to him. The bar was becoming Friday-night noisy and she had mouthed her timid greeting to his image in the mirror. She screwed up her courage and turned to him and tried again, this time only managing to croak out a “hi!”, but at least in his ear.

She said it so loudly that he jumped. He turned and looked at her and seemed a little—what? Confused?

“Hi,” he said with a sort of smile. “Didn’t see you there.”

“No, I slipped in. Off. Whatever.”

“Kind of loud in here tonight.”

“Yes, everyone seems a little giddy. Friday night, I guess.”

“Yes, thank God it’s Friday.”

There was a long pause as he tried to recover from the inanity of this remark and resumed staring at his beer and she tried not to stare at him—or them—in the mirror. She could not think of anything else to say. Then she became bold. She was going to thank him for coming. After all, she was the one who invited him. It was a little forward, but she wanted to do *something*. She was just about to open her mouth when Anna sat down on her other side and started talking animatedly about her recent trip to Aruba.

Unfortunately Anna was one of the few friends of Roger who had gone out of her way to be friendly with Trish. She always seemed to make a point of seeking her out and talking to her. Trish was grateful for this kindness and wanted to be kind in return, so she turned away from Douglas to this vivacious girl and forced herself to pay attention while she raved about her vacation and how much fun she had and how beautiful it was and how perfect the water was and the scuba diving, etc.

So there was Trish at the bar with Douglas on one side and Anna on the other and she could see the three of them in the mirror when she dared to peek. He was still peering into his beer. She was trying to find a polite way to pull herself away but Anna kept right on going and did not give her an opening. She smiled like a fiend and made a couple of pro forma responses and then became aware of a change going on behind her. Someone had spotted a couple of tables being vacated in the other room, and the group began to migrate in that direction—including Douglas, who was being herded off by Jeff.

It was the first time Trish had ever been annoyed with Jeff, whose solicitude was extremely inconvenient. And STILL she couldn't pull herself away from Anna. She could see the whole group moving off in the mirror, but she was stuck there smiling and nodding and trying to act like she was listening to whatever Anna was raving about—at this point she wasn't sure. In the end she managed to drag her little friend along with her, but they got to the tables too late. There was only one chair left at Douglas's table, and Anna seemed determined to pull her to the other table where there were still several chairs available.

Very reluctantly, Trish followed her. At least she could *see* Douglas from where she was sitting. It was dark but she could see his face. He seemed gloomy and uncomfortable to her in the candlelight, in spite of his pleasant smile. He was talking to someone and then he was not talking. He was glancing around the table intently, as if participating in the conversations, but for a moment she felt he was not participating at all.

She was sorry to see that he was stuck with Roger and Mark. It wasn't exactly what she had in mind when she told Mark to invite him. She knew he had a difficult relationship with Roger and found it hard to believe anybody could enjoy himself with Mark when he was being loud and obnoxious, which he was. She felt kind of

badly about dragging him there but on the other hand she didn't really feel badly. At least he was there! And she could observe him.

She just wished she could *talk* to him. But how? She wished she hadn't been so pliable when Anna tugged her to the other table. At that point there was still an empty chair. It was not next to Douglas, but it was the same table! Now the opportunity was gone.

She should have been happy where she was. After all, she was sitting between Anna and Jeff, both of whom she liked. She was not happy, however, because she wanted to be sitting next to Douglas. There did not seem to be any way to make that happen, but she was determined to be patient and stay hopeful.

As far as Douglas was concerned, disaster had struck again. He was almost overwhelmed when he realized Trish was sitting next to him at the bar. They really were there together. Unfortunately he was also tongue-tied. "Thank God it's Friday"? Really? It was so lame that it silenced him. He tried to come up with something better but the harder he tried the more befuddled he became.

Then Anna started bombarding Trish with girl talk. He did not know whether to be appalled or enchanted by this. It was painful to be sitting right next to Trish and not be able to talk to her. On the other hand, he discovered something new about himself. He liked girl talk, or at least the variety he was listening to now, full of life and cheerful chirping. Anna was doing most of the talking, but Trish's responses were wonderful. She was clearly the more intelligent of the two but eager to make herself Anna's equal.

They seemed so happy. He did not resent them for it. He just wished *he* could be happy. Happiness did not seem to be in the cards, however, at least not that night. The next thing he knew everyone was heading for the other room and Jeff was gently nudging him along, or not so gently. He did not want to leave Trish but he also did not want to offend Jeff. They reached the two tables and Douglas sat down at the one where Jeff was malingering; but then by a sadistic twist of fate Mark and Roger and some girls sat down and Jeff drifted off. And then Trish and Anna showed up and promptly sat down with Jeff!

Douglas was in a good position to see Trish and indulged himself in this great pleasure whenever he dared—and yet he was a million miles away, trapped at a table with the two people he was trying to avoid and compelled to listen to their self-promoting blather. He looked at Trish talking with Anna and he looked at her

talking with Jeff and she was smiling and seemed happy. It made him happy to see her happy; but he was not happy himself.

How long could he keep up the charade, pretending to be engaged in the conversations that swirled around him, occasionally trying to act like he belonged there by putting in his own two cents, when all he really wanted to do was look at Trish? Half an hour was formidable; an hour seemed like forever; after an hour and a half he was so self-conscious he was ready to go out of his mind. He knew he was not wanted at the table. Roger made him feel doubly out of place by casting disgusted looks in his direction.

What was he going to do? There were no empty chairs at the other table. There was no way to get close to Trish, not that night. Meanwhile the effort to keep things together at his brother's table was torture. He couldn't take it anymore. He did something so Douglas. He went to the bathroom and failed to return. He knew it wouldn't matter. No one would miss him. No one would even know he was gone. Or if they did they'd be happy about it.

But he was wrong. Someone did miss him. Trish saw him leave and was very much aware of the minutes that ticked by. Then she realized he wasn't coming back. She recognized the maneuver because it was the same one she had used herself the last time they were in a bar together. She couldn't blame him for leaving. He did not look like he was having any fun. But she did blame herself. She blew it again. For heaven's sake she was sitting right next to him!

It wasn't her fault that Anna was so talkative or seemed so happy to see her. It wasn't her fault that Jeff whisked him away. But she blamed herself anyway. She *let* Anna push her to the other table. She shouldn't have. Why was she so weak? Now she wanted to go home too. There was no reason to stay. Unfortunately Mark seemed to be having the time of his life.

She yawned. Jeff noticed.

"Are you all right?"

"Past my bedtime. I worked a ten-hour day today. And unfortunately I came with him," she said, nodding in the direction of the red-headed wonder.

"Do you want to go? I'd be happy to take you home."

"I don't want to spoil your fun."

"You won't, believe me. I'm ready."

She got Mark's attention on the way out and pointed to Jeff. He barely responded. He seemed very much absorbed in conversation



with the pretty blond on his right, whom Trish did not know. She didn't care if she knew her. She had no interest in Mark.

She went home a little sad but with a full heart. At least she had seen Douglas. She sat with him and spoke with him, no matter how briefly. It was better than not seeing him. It was a whole world better. He didn't have Barbara with him, which seemed like a good sign. Not that she had anything against Barbara—she just preferred it when she was not with Douglas.

Jeff was chatty on the way home. That was fine, too. She encouraged him to talk so she could look out the window at the house lights going by. She imagined herself in a cozy house with Douglas, lights shining against the dark night sky. She imagined an unspecified number of children on her knees. Then she scolded herself for being so ridiculous.

## XIX

*Big changes for Douglas  
A surprising conversation with Ralph*

**D**OUGLAS LEFT the bar because he had to. He couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't just the vulgar competition between Roger and Mark to dominate the table that was driving him crazy. It was the sense of doom with Trish. Well, maybe not "doom." It was the feeling there was no way to get close to her that night, even if she would welcome the attempt, of which he was by no means certain. It was the sense of being in the same room with her and so close and yet feeling so far, far away.

He had one thing to hold onto, however. She had sat down next to him at the bar. It could mean nothing or it could mean something. He was inclined toward the former, because he was a bit of a pessimist, and it was not in his nature to make assumptions about anyone having a positive interest in him. Or maybe *pessimist* is not the right word. He tended to refuse to allow himself to hope for good things because it was painful to be disappointed, as had happened to him so many times in his life.

Why did she do it? Probably because there was an empty chair. This was the most obvious explanation and least dangerous. Still, he could not prevent himself from wondering if there might be something else. This was now the second time she seemed to have singled him out. She sat down next to him and made an effort to talk to him. He fumbled the ball, acted like an idiot, but gratitude and wonder overpowered his embarrassment.

For all of its shortcomings, it was a wonderful evening. Just to be in the same room with her and see her was like a banquet of buttery roses. He did not know where things were going—or if they were going anywhere at all—but he felt better about life than he had in a long time. For some reason it did not seem impossible anymore, getting together with Trish, although he did not allow

himself to think it seemed possible either. He was inclined to put his chances at less than even, factoring in modesty, but at least he did not put them at zero.

Maybe best of all, it didn't seem like there was anything going on between her and Mark. He could not tell for sure, but they did not pay much attention to each other. They sat at separate tables. Mark seemed inordinately interested in the unknown blond. This made him feel better than he had in a long time about his prospects with Trish. He was not exactly a go-getter when it came to women, but it was easier to *fantasize* about being one when there wasn't someone else standing in the way.

The little get-together was, on the whole, a positive one for Douglas. He started to allow himself to have some hope as spring swept in and transformed the face of the earth. Something else happened of a positive nature as well—he departed from Callahan Associates. Honest to God, he could not wait to get out of there. He did not know if he could go another month sitting with Mark and listening to him talk all day long or being ignored by Ralph.

He was sending out résumés, almost on a whim, and before he was quite prepared for it he started getting responses. He simply said what he had done—he did not have to pad the résumé with a lot of accomplishments that were not really his—but the fact that he was from a small office and had worn many hats seemed to work in his favor. Or maybe it was just the simplicity of his résumé. Maybe the fact that he did not embellish was of value to decision makers who were not impressed with embellishment.

He was not expecting much of a response to his feeble efforts, not just because of his natural modesty, but because he didn't do any networking, which he knew was the gold standard for getting a good job. So he was a little surprised when he started getting calls. His first interview was a bit of a disaster; he was nervous and not forthcoming. Modesty is a virtue, but it can be too much of a good thing in job interviews, where one is required to talk, at least.

Douglas knew this and set about to correct his deficiencies. He wrote down the questions he had been asked when he got back to his cottage and spent some time rehearsing answers to them. He kept working at it because he was trying to strike a delicate balance. He wanted to be a truth-teller, to be sincere, but he did not want to be so much of Aristotle's "magnanimous man" that he refused to talk about his capabilities, character and accomplishments.

Thus armed with thorough preparation, he did much better in subsequent interviews. He could not fake friendliness but he did not have to fake sincerity or competence. There were a couple of offers right away. The first one was in the city and didn't seem worth it with the triple tax and commute. There was another one at a surprisingly high salary, but it was in a big company and he did not particularly care for the people he would be working with.

Finally he accepted an offer from a fairly new company, started by someone his own age who had been in a corporation and hated the bureaucracy and decided he could do better on his own. He liked Douglas and seemed unwilling to take no for an answer. The pay was a lot better than what he was making at Callahan's. It seemed like a different world. This wasn't the family store; these were smart people. They knew what they were about and had high expectations.

Douglas was looking forward to a change of that nature after nine years of the amateur hour. Okay, so maybe this wasn't kind. He had a fondness for Callahan's, be it ever so humble; for that matter he might never have thought about moving on if Mark hadn't arrived on the scene. Actually he almost changed his mind when he gave Ralph the bad news. The reaction shocked him. It seemed to Douglas—and had for some time—that Ralph had turned his smiling eye toward Mark and forgotten about him.

You would never have known it from the way he carried on. First he just sat there looking at Douglas with his mouth open. Ralph thought he was going to ask him for a raise, which he was perfectly willing to give. Never in a million years did he think he was going to resign. He got choked up. Douglas was shocked. He knew Ralph was emotional—it was one of the things he found endearing about him—although in certain circumstances it could also be unhelpful—but this was a complete surprise. He seemed personally hurt, like he was losing his own son.

Which was exactly how he felt. He was devastated. Douglas was the one he could trust, the one he had always relied on. Douglas had turned the office around and made it efficient and profitable for the first time after twenty-five years of floundering. In addition to being competent and knowing exactly what needed to be done, he was honest, thoughtful, and kind. The staff adored him. The clients adored him. Heck, his wife and kids adored him. What was he going to do?

Was it a raise he wanted? He offered him one on the spot. Douglas had never asked for a raise in all his years there, and he deserved something more than the annual inflation increase. In fact Ralph told him he had been thinking about making him a partner and putting him in a position to take over when he retired, which increasingly he wanted to do. The offer was refused! It seemed Douglas wasn't looking for a raise or a partnership. He wanted something else; Ralph wasn't sure what. He was hurt, but there was nothing he could do.

Ralph's troubles were just beginning, but Douglas wasn't going to be there to see them. The outburst of emotion made him pause, since all he had ever wanted from Ralph was appreciation and respect. But it was too late. There was sewage in the basement. It was time to leave.

Ralph wanted to throw a big bon voyage party—take the whole crew to a nice restaurant—but Douglas would not hear of it. Too extravagant. A couple of pizzas for lunch on his last day would be fine. And that is just what they did.

Well, there was something more. Ralph handed him an envelope at the end of the day, during a teary goodbye in his office behind closed doors.

"I just can't believe you're actually leaving me."

"I am. In fact I start my new job next week."

"Be honest, was it something I said? Or did? Because I can make it up to you."

"No, it's just time. I've been here almost nine years. Nobody stays in the same job that long anymore."

"I did. I've been here all my life."

"That's different. You're the boss."

"You could be the boss. You sure you're not interested?"

"I'm flattered, but no. I am very grateful for the opportunity you gave me and for my time here. This has been a very important part of my life. And I've learned a great deal from you—about business, but mostly about the right way to do business."

"Is that why you're leaving? Because I don't have anything more to teach you?"

"I'm sure I could still learn from you," Douglas politely replied. "No, this is about me getting out of my shell and showing I can do something else. This is about a new challenge and a new start."

"I just can't help getting the feeling there's something you're

not telling me. That you're unhappy about something."

"I think I've told you everything I can. I'm not sure I would do some of the things we've been doing, but that's your choice, and I understand why you made it."

"Is that what this is about? Is it this stuff with Mark?"

"Again, it's not up to me to tell you how to do business. Mark's doing the same things a lot of people are doing. Personally, I can't quite convince myself it's a good idea. But I also don't have any interest in trying to hold anybody back."

Ralph sighed and shook his head. "Anything else?"

Douglas hesitated. "I don't think you want to hear it."

"You don't trust me?"

"It's not that. All I'm going to say is I love Marissa and have always thought of her as my little sister. And maybe like Holden Caulfield I feel sort of protective about her."

"Protective? In what way?"

"She's at a difficult age. She's too young and too fresh to realize that things aren't always what they seem."

Ralph looked at him hard. "Do you have something specific in mind?"

Douglas shook his head. "I would just keep my eyes open. She comes to the office a lot when she's home from school, which she will be soon. She never used to do that."

It was as much as he was willing to say. It was more than he really wanted to say. He felt a little bit of a wall come between him and Ralph after that. He wasn't surprised. It is hard to be told how to be a good father. Ralph worshipped Marissa. Naturally he did not want to hear bad news where she was concerned.

The other farewell conversation was of a very different nature.

"So you really are leaving?" Mark said to him as he was straightening up his papers and collecting his few personal things. "Hard to believe. This place won't be the same without you."

"It's not the same with me," Douglas cracked, surprising himself.

"But you're like a fixture here. What's the old man going to do without you?"

"He has you. I'm sure that's more than enough."

"Is it because of?" —he gestured— "this? The staff and everything? Because believe me, I know how it can get you down."

"I'm very fond of the staff. They got used to me, and I got used

to them.”

“But what am I going to do? That’s the thing. Who am I going to talk to?”

“I’m sure you’ll find somebody.”

“No, but seriously. I can’t talk to these people. They don’t know what the heck I’m talking about. You’re the only guy here I feel comfortable with. And that includes Ralph.”

“They’re very good people. You just have to keep their good qualities in mind and everything else falls into perspective.” Douglas said this to protect them.

“Anyway, I can see why you want to get out of here. I’m just waiting for a good offer myself.”

Douglas wanted to say more but figured he had said enough. This was not the time to try to win all the battles with Mark that he had declined to fight in the past. He had endured his little jabs for almost a year but there was no point in trying to jab back. Mark was too thick-skinned to feel it anyway.

Something else changed for Douglas in that spring of momentous changes. He bought his own house. He had almost a hundred thousand dollars saved—he was very frugal and put everything into investments or saving. When his father found out what he was thinking, he added the \$90,000 that he had invested from Douglas’s “rent.” Douglas did not want the money but his father insisted. “What will Mother say?” he asked. “She’ll never know,” his father replied almost gleefully.

Anyway, through his father’s frugality and his own and the surprisingly generous parting gift from Ralph he had almost \$200,000 saved for a down-payment. On top of that the local housing market was at one of its tidal troughs—this was one of the things that inspired him to start looking in the first place. He found a nice little house, a Cape, in the woods on a country road not far from the reservoirs. The house wasn’t much but the property was pretty and private and there were wooded walking trails.

On the whole, Douglas was excited about this new change. As much as he loved the estate and his cottage, he also knew these things were not necessarily good for him. The fledgling cannot know the thrill of flying if it stays in the nest. Douglas had been very fortunate to have the cottage. It helped him get back on his feet after the divorce, was fun to renovate, and comfortable. But now it was time for a change. It was time for independence.

It occurred to Douglas, as he was moving into his new house during a glorious week in May, with lilacs blooming and a bluebird singing in the apple tree near the brook on his new property, that he was a somewhat more eligible bachelor now. He still could not impress someone like Vanessa. Even with his new job and a significant bump in salary he was making about a quarter of what his younger brother made. He was not in a position, in his own mind, to buy himself a Mercedes or country-club membership, if these were things he even coveted, which he did not.

But what he did have was a nice house with a low mortgage and a decent job. Douglas felt a little change in his self-perception. Getting out of Callahan's was good for him because it was too easy and too comfortable there. He was looking forward to a challenge and showing what he could do. And buying his own house was good for him because he no longer felt dependent upon his parents. He walked into his house every night, be it ever so modest by the standards he grew up with, and gave thanks. He was happy.

He was sitting on his front porch one glorious spring evening, with the marvel that is nature spread out before him, thinking about how fortunate he was and glorifying the God of blue skies and green things, when suddenly he felt an overwhelming desire to share it with Trish. He wanted her to be sitting there on the porch beside him soaking up the eternal joy of spring. And it seemed to him—he did not want to flatter himself—that she would not scorn his new home. It seemed to him he had something to offer. He was not so afraid of offering himself anymore.

One person he could not impress, however, was his mother. He was excited to tell her about his new purchase, thought it would cheer her up in the midst of her difficulties, since she had always wanted to have the guest cottage empty, and make her feel proud of him for once.

But all she said was, "Who's going to take care of the house?"



## XX

*Helen fights her toughest foe  
Bill tries to understand himself*

**S**PEAKING OF HELEN, she was going through one of those stretches in cancer treatment where the mind sets up defenses, apparently, through unreality. Time lost its definition as everyone held their breath that the therapy would work and she would come through it all right.

She started out well. She was a strong woman, both physically and in will, and for a while it seemed like she was going to conquer cancer just like she conquered everything else in life, with aplomb. Alas, this was not the case. The treatments started taking their toll, and then Helen did not seem like Helen anymore. She began to seem like a mere patient, and she knew it, and she didn't like it one bit. It made her very irritable. Every time she chanced to look in the mirror.

If you could look inside her, you might have seen what scared her. She could not pretend to be unaware of her mother's excruciating experience and pitiful descent into death. She read and read on breast cancer, everything she could find on the Web, and could not convince herself that it was going to be as easy as she hoped. It seemed it was not so much the age of medical signs and wonders where breast cancer was concerned. Every day she felt a little worse and lost even more of her famous self-confidence.

At first she was determined not to take any time off from work. That was what she told everyone and what she firmly believed. She was going to be stronger than the cancer; and besides, she couldn't afford it. Everything is always creeping up on you when you reach a certain status in a large company. You have to be there to ensure that the tapestry turns out right. You have to maintain connections and keep the nipping dogs at bay. She wanted to be there, but she received a stern lecture from her doctor, who was one of the few

people she had ever met who intimidated her. She received the same lecture from her boss, who saw her sitting at her desk with her head propped up in her hands one day and told her to go home and stay home until she was better—the place would still be there when she came back.

She didn't want to do it, but she had to. Her doctor was right. She simply did not have the strength to fight the cancer and also do her job. Both causes were suffering, and one of them could not afford to suffer or all would be lost. First it was just supposed to be a week or two. This turned into a month. Then the devastating news came—the test results were not improving quickly enough to satisfy the doctors. There was the recommendation of a radical mastectomy. Helen accepted it reluctantly. It was the thing she had been hoping to avoid, the horrible thing they had done to her mother. She was not used to losing battles, and this one really hurt.

Bill was wonderful. He really was. Other people didn't have to tell her. She knew it. He was her nursemaid when he was not at school. He was the perfect picture of patience when she was unwilling to be a patient. He was unfailingly kind, and as much as she hated to admit it, his kindness started to bring sunshine into her day. She fought the sunshine at first, resented it; but then in her growing weakness and her fear she relented. She welcomed him in the morning on the weekends when he came in with her glass of orange juice. She knew when he was coming, eight sharp, and made a point of sitting up in bed before he came in so she could welcome him. Even if it was not easy for her to sit up in bed.

He cooked for her, he cleaned for her (what the housekeeper didn't do), he did everything on top of doing his regular job. For the first time she began to have some appreciation of how stressful that job could be. He was teaching an AP class and AP standards for American History were high. Plus he was dedicated to his students and made it part of his mission in life to help them learn how to write, since their English teachers did not always seem to be sharing the load. He encouraged and rewarded rewrites, but this meant many more hours of work and a much higher level of personal involvement.

Honestly, it was the first time in their marriage that she had taken Bill's job seriously. She would ask him about it when he came into her and she *wanted* to know; she wasn't just humoring him. His kindness and service to her gave her a new idea about what he was

to the kids who were fortunate enough to have him for a teacher. Now she remembered her favorite teachers. In her whole time in school, nineteen years, there were only three; but she thought about their impact on her life, and she thought of Bill, and her view of him changed. She started to let go of old resentments.

He went to church with her every Sunday. This was something new. He had never been much of a church-goer. She found she enjoyed having him by her side, even if he seemed to spend a lot of time inspecting the stained-glass windows. She enjoyed the sound of his light baritone voice when they sang hymns. She remembered that he used to love singing Broadway songs around the piano at parties. Where had those years gone? She enjoyed the fact that other people saw her there with her husband—with Bill. It surprised her to feel this way, but she did.

He did everything for her when he was home, more than he needed to, in her opinion. All she had to do, as he often told her, was save up her strength to get well again. One day, when school was over and she was simply too weak to get out of bed, they had a little talk, the first serious talk they'd had since the whole mess began and he had moved out. She needed to talk to him. She let him know it was long since over, the "mistake" she had made that had driven him away. It was one of those confessions that is not quite a confession. Still, it was by far the most difficult thing she had ever done in her life.

She "did not know where his head was at," but she hoped he could somehow forgive her and come back home. She didn't really know what had happened to her, didn't understand herself. It made no sense. It was too much time away from home and too much empty flattery and, she guessed, a whiff of youth and excitement and power. She was very sorry for the pain she had caused. She said this twice, very plainly. It was striking. He could not remember her ever apologizing to him before, about anything.

Bill sat with his hands folded at his lips during this quiet monologue, looking down. He had not been expecting the topic to come up and did not know what to say. What did she want from him? Forgiveness? Gladly—he would give it, to the extent that it was possible for him. Assurance? This he could not give. Would he move back in permanently, would they go on as if nothing had happened? She may have been expecting too much. He was human, after all. He could do a great deal, but he was not sure he

could do that.

Still, the conversation made him feel better, maybe not so much right away, but over time, when he had a chance to let go of his ego and think things through. It was a conversation he had been avoiding for three reasons. First, he was not at all sure he would be able to engage her in such a conversation. Her defenses were formidable. Second, she needed her strength, and he did not want to do anything to upset her. But the other reason, he realized, was that it was too easy to avoid it. In his mind he wasn't living there anymore. He was helping her but he had moved out. And he was holding on to that, to the moving out.

When he thought about this he was glad she had brought it up. Surprised, somewhat embarrassed, but glad in the end. He realized he wanted to come back home; no, not just to the place, but to the family. It would never be the same, but maybe in some ways it would be better. Helen seemed genuinely remorseful. She made some promises that surprised him. Not just that it would never happen again, the thing that was standing between them, but she also indicated a desire for a change in their relationship, specifically in the way she treated him and his profession. She actually said this, much to his amazement. She said she had changed. Cancer had changed her. She wasn't the same Helen anymore.

Douglas turned out to be the more attentive of her two sons during this crisis in her life. She noticed. How could she not? He came up from his new home three, sometimes four times a week, and called or texted every day that he missed. If Roger showed up once a week or called at all it was a miracle. This did not change her opinion about who was the better man, or whom she loved more, but it did soften the frustration and anger she had harbored toward Douglas all of these years. He was changing. He had his own house and a new job. She was glad to see it—glad for him, because she thought it was best for him—and she showed this gladness by smiling when he came to see her. Sometimes she had to force herself, but she did it anyway. He had earned it.

Meanwhile Bill was making an accommodation in his mind. When he first moved out, it was over. That was it; no more. It wasn't just the latest thing, it was the accumulation of all the little slights and insults over the years, the lack of respect, sometimes even cruelty. But he found himself going through a change, now that he was back home. After all, it was *his* home. It was where he

grew up. On an intellectual level, he realized this was meaningless, but men are not just made of intellect. He liked being home. He wasn't sure he wanted to leave.

His view of Helen changed, too, just as her view of him was changing. She no longer seemed hard to him when she was too weak to get out of bed and lost all her hair. She seemed vulnerable. He noticed a change in her tone. She still spoke sharply sometimes, but it was less and less; and anyway, it was understandable that someone in her position, suffering as much as she was suffering, might occasionally lose her temper, out of frustration if nothing else; out of not being able to do what she was accustomed to do. He was amazed at the fight in her. She was not going to give in. In the past this quality had given him some pain, but now he admired it. He wanted her to fight. He became her cheerleader.

He started to rethink things and his former resolve. After all, he was not sure he was ready to throw away thirty-five years of marriage—his whole adult life! What was there to gain? Pride? He despised it. Independence? This too was a trap, an illusion. It seemed like such a waste, such a shame if something could be done. What was the endgame of separating himself from her? Divorce? He could not picture himself going through the nightmare of divorce proceedings and all they entailed. He did not want to see himself that way.

One night, when it was one of Helen's better nights, she invited him into bed, and they made love. It was not like being lost in it, like when they were twenty-something and the pages of life had not yet been sullied with content. But it was love-making. And in its own way it was intense. It was the first time in—how long? He could not remember. There was a tenderness in Helen he had not seen in some time, not since the corporation had taken over her soul. Then it happened again a few nights later.

She seemed to be trying to tell him something. But what? "Thank you"? He thought about just asking her. "Helen, what are you trying to tell me?" But then he laughed himself out of it. The thing seemed too delicate to be disturbed. He decided to accept it. He decided to be grateful for it, if he could, although the experience of making love to a sick woman was not perhaps as pleasurable to him as she wanted it to be. There was healing going on, it seems, in the midst of the sickness. He was a fan of healing.

Then came the mastectomy and the lovemaking stopped. First

she was in pain and then she was not comfortable with the change in her appearance. The not-comfortable part was much harder for her than the pain. She told herself she was glad the thing would be gone and the cancer with it, but when she woke up from the anesthesia she was not glad and wished she could have it back. It was like her youth going. It was her figure.

She did not forget Bill, however. She put her disfigurement aside after a few weeks and brought him into her bed again. Did he know this was her way of making things better? She thought he probably did. He was an intelligent man. Men have needs; she knew it. Women do too, but it's usually different after menopause. Did he understand she was reaching out to him, not in a physical way, although she used her body? Could he see the things she found so hard to say?

For a while after the surgery Helen sank so low a lot of people thought they were going to lose her. She wasn't sure herself. Then slowly things started to get better. Summer came and she found herself spending lots of time on the screened-in porch and almost didn't want to leave it because the honeysuckle air smelled so fresh and sweet and the scent felt so good coming into her body, healing her in other ways. Was that honeysuckle always there, all of these years? Where had she been, and why didn't she have the sense to cherish it?

The same was true of Bill. Had he been this same sweet and considerate man all these years? Where had she been and why didn't she see it? A change occurred for her. She *wanted* Bill to be home. She was glad when he was there and unhappy and unsettled when he wasn't. She did not want him to go back to his mother's house. She wanted them to be together. Could he see it? Did he understand why she invited him into her bed? *Their* bed?

Well, you know, she could have just told him. Funny, though, this was the one thing she was unable to do. Whether she was too proud or too embarrassed is hard to say, or perhaps they are the same thing. She wanted to tell him how she was feeling, but do people actually say things like that? In any case she could not see herself saying them. Dealing from weakness was not her strong point. Asking him to come to bed seemed better. She had something to give him, even in her diminished state.

We wish we could say her brush with the terrors of death converted her and made her give up her high-powered job and

start an orphanage. That would be a nice story, but it doesn't happen to be this story. As soon as she felt capable of it she started going back to the office, just for a few hours at first, but then more and more, and pretty soon she was almost back in the grind where she had started.

It felt good to be back at work and it felt terrible. She was strong there, she was in control, knew what she was about, what needed to be done. It was so unlike cancer, which she could not control. At the same time she now realized that she also hated it. This thought had never occurred to her before, or at least not so starkly. She was not stupid—she knew how tenuous the whole thing could be. One critical misstep and she could be done. It was a lot of pressure to be under for someone who felt as sick as she did. Much of what went on there was sheer corporate politics and had little or nothing to do with real value or anything of importance. She thought of all the phoniness and incompetence. She had tried to make things better, improve the culture, but couldn't. A large organization has a mind of its own.

Anyway, she was back, and it was the same old personalities and the same old nonsense and she was there but she was not there—her mind was not there, not completely—it was back on her porch with her honeysuckle and the birds singing their summer songs. It was back with the afternoon tea she had come to love so well, lots of sugar, Bill serving. She liked it when he served. She looked forward to that part of the day. They would sit and talk. Bill had always been a wonderful conversationalist. Quite a gift, really.

Don't misunderstand—she was still Helen Lendell, Senior V.P. But something had changed. For the first time she thought about retirement and about how nice that might be. She thought about Bill and how nice it would be to spend it with him. Yes, she actually thought this. They could travel. You know, they could do mission trips. A lot of people did those. Even her doctor had gone on some and told her how wonderful it was. They could go to exotic places and hand out medical supplies. Bill would like that. She knew he would. It was just his kind of thing.

She could make it happen. She would make it happen. That was one thing about Helen—she could do anything once she made up her mind.

## XXI

*A chance for a do-over  
The agony of not fitting in  
Trish wanders from the beaten path*

IT WAS SOME time before Douglas and Trish had another opportunity to see each other without being brave and actually calling each other like normal people. And basically it was “*déjà vu* all over again.”

There was a brutal heat wave after Father’s Day, so Roger decided to throw a pool party. Jeff volunteered to invite Trish. He liked inviting Trish, and he heard through the grapevine that Mark was out of the picture. Trish decided to go because why wouldn’t she? It was a chance to see Douglas. Besides, it was where she’d first seen him. She was hoping to see him again. “Hoping”! That was one word for it.

Of course she could not be certain he would be invited. Roger was just enough of a jerk to leave him out. She didn’t think she could go to the well one more time and ask Jeff to make sure, but she made up her mind what to do if he was not there. She was going to march right over to his house and get him. (It would have been a very long march. Trish didn’t realize he had moved out.)

Meanwhile *Bill* was the one who invited Douglas. He did not like his empty nest and being alone with Helen and was looking for any excuse to lure his son back home for some conversation and company. Well, no, there was another reason, too. He became extremely annoyed when he found out that Roger thought he could commandeer the estate for one of his parties without inviting his other son. Five minutes after Helen informed him he was on the phone to Douglas. And we must admit Helen agreed with him. Her feelings toward Douglas had changed considerably since her illness.

Douglas said yes, of course. He had reservations, another party with Roger’s friends, but he wasn’t going to say no to his father, who clearly wanted him to come. For that matter he wasn’t going to say no to Darth Vader if it meant having a chance to see Trish.



He didn't bother asking him if she had been invited. How would *he* know? But it seemed like she was usually at Roger's parties. He just hoped she wouldn't show up with Mark.

Mark! It was funny to think of him now. That name, once so traumatizing, was already fading from consciousness. Things were going very well in his new job. His instincts were right: it was a good fit. The small team was hard-working, smart, honest. They really did believe in providing value to the customer, just as they said in his interview, which suited him well. He had forgotten how much he liked a good challenge and how much fun it could be to develop new processes and procedures. There was no stodginess or inertia to deal with. He came up with an idea or a plan and showed it to Paul, his new boss, and they were off and running. The company was too new to have any entrenched bad habits. His co-workers were open to his innovative spirit and seemed to appreciate the value he was bringing.

Yes, Mark faded quickly from consciousness once he was liberated from the cramped cell they shared for a year. But was he coming to the party? More to the point, was he coming with Trish? Douglas did not want to see Mark—and he especially did not want to see him with Trish.

Douglas felt kind of funny about going to a party at his own house for the first time since moving away. He knew Roger probably didn't want him there. That was why his father wound up being the one to invite him. Nor did he love big parties in general. He could endure them if he knew everyone and felt some kind of kinship, but this was not the case with Roger's crowd. The only one he felt comfortable with was Jeff.

Why was this relevant? Because his main reason for even going was the *possibility* of talking to Trish—and in order to do that he would need all the help he could get. He would feel much more confident at this party if he felt more like a host than a stranger, Roger's uninvited guest, in spite of the Roman confusion over the matter. Confidence was his main problem when it came to women. His feeling of displacement at his own house did not exactly give him any. It was strange driving onto the estate as a party guest.

He arrived a little early so he could spend some time with his mother. He brought her some flowers, which she seemed to appreciate. She kissed him willingly, not in the old perfunctory manner, which he savored. But his mother scared him. He had not

seen her for a couple of weeks—he was busy with the new job and new house. She did not look well, sitting in the living room in her bathrobe with no lights on. Her wig was not quite straight and her color was gray and she was too thin. It was unnerving.

She seemed very interested in his new job, however. As weak as she was, she could not stop asking questions. She was a top officer in a large multinational corporation but wanted to know what he was doing at a start-up company in some rented office space in Stamford. A strange thought occurred to him—it seemed almost like she was proud of him, or wanted to be. The sensation was strange because it was so new.

Douglas did not know how to feel about it. He wanted his mother to be proud of him, but honestly what he wanted more was to feel that she loved him. She had never shown any interest at all in his job at Callahan's, so the questions were welcome in that sense, the attention, a simulacrum at least of approval; and yet he could not help wishing for a little tenderness.

She told him his father was out hobnobbing with "the kids." Douglas made his way to the screened-in porch and looked over toward the pool. He could see quite a few people but no one he knew. His courage started to fail him. Then he saw Jeff lugging a keg. This lifted his spirits. Not because of the keg—because of Jeff. At least *he* would be there. They would not all be strangers.

But then this thought made him feel even more displaced. He was at his *own house*, for heaven's sake, and here he was leaning on Jeff for moral support. How sad was that? A lot of responsibility was being loaded on poor Jeff without him knowing it. He was going to be Douglas's anchor; but the fact that an anchor was even needed made Douglas more aware of his awkwardness than ever.

He did not see Trish, but he could not see the whole crowd from where he was standing. He took a couple of deep breaths and meandered over to the pool in one of those unreal mental states that only people like Douglas can really know. He had his new sunglasses on, which helped, something to hide behind; the smile felt pretty well-tuned, although he had to take this on faith, since he couldn't actually see it.

After a short perp walk that seemed rather long he found himself confronted with fifty or so of his brother's closest friends. He was in the midst of a crowd of laughing people but his own smile was forced. He did not know anyone and felt his loneliness

all over again. He loved a good laugh, but not necessarily the kind he was hearing now, which involved artificial high spirits.

Douglas was not a misanthrope. He *wanted* to know Roger's crowd; he wanted to laugh with them if he thought something was funny. He was not one of the scowling outsiders, the rebels without a cause, the Marcuse acolytes, full of scorn for American upper-middle-class existence, or whatever. But he sensed he looked like he was. His shyness made him stand out in painful relief.

He made his way up through the shade and into the unforgiving summer sun, like Icarus, his wings already beginning to melt. He saw his brother and stopped, but nothing untoward happened. Roger gave him the usual smirky wave of acknowledgement and turned away. This told Douglas he knew he was coming, at least. Otherwise there would have been a lot more drama. He could thank his father for that.

Speaking of his father, he spotted him standing next to the pool and chatting with two lovely young ladies, looking tan and relaxed. Douglas shook his head. Why hadn't *that* gene been handed down? He could not imagine himself striking up a casual conversation with a couple of attractive bikini girls, even if it *was* his own house. He might as well try to play the Brahms Violin Concerto.

Let it be noted that this awkwardness was not evident to others. Anybody standing by the pool and watching him as he approached would have seen a good-looking young man with an easy, athletic stride and the appearance of intelligence and confidence. This is what most of the girls saw. Douglas would not have believed it if someone told him, but this is what they saw.

He followed Jeff into the pool house and shared the usual greetings with anyone he knew. It was all very friendly, but it didn't last long, partly because Douglas's mind was on other things, partly because he didn't fit in with the younger crowd. He drew himself an ice-cold beer and took a gulp. It tasted good. Then he got a cold-drink headache and stumbled back out into the sun in a daze.

That was when he saw her. She was standing with a group of people over by the diving board. The sunglasses gave him the freedom to observe her without being detected. He tried not to stare, but it was as if she was the only person he could see. He locked onto her and sent out his missiles of love. She did not appear to be aware of the exquisite bombardment.

His father summoned him and insisted on introducing him to

the girls. Then he did the unthinkable. He excused himself and left Douglas standing there in the sun with two complete strangers. In his mind he was helping him break the ice, but in Douglas's mind he was making him look like an idiot who needed his father's help.

He tried to think of something to say. Nothing came to mind except for "hot today," which, while true, was probably not very scintillating. The girls exchanged glances and giggled, throwing him into a downward spiral. He glanced over at Trish and was doubly mortified. She was watching them.

Just then they were joined by Mark. Douglas blinked at the apparition. It was the first time he had seen Mark in over a month—and the first time he had ever been glad to see him. The pressure and embarrassment faded away as Mark fell into his usual patter. Douglas mumbled something about "ice" and ran off. He heard Mark laughing behind him but didn't care.

Did Trish come with Mark? He did not know. He did know that Mark was turning up the wattage with two girls who were not Trish. This emboldened him. He did not feel the old impediment. He felt perfectly free to do what he had come there to do.

Which was what, exactly? Why, to see Trish. But he had already seen her. In fact he was looking at her right now from a shady hiding place near the pool house. He did not have a plan except to be there at the same time Trish was there and hope for some miracle. The first part had been accomplished. The miracle, it seemed, was a little harder to come by.

In fact he began to wonder if coming was a good idea. He could not think of any way to approach Trish in a crowd of strangers. He was Quasimodo, standing in the shadows and dreaming of his impossible love. He was not worthy to come into the light and mingle with all of these fabulous people. He was the older brother who was a failure. He was the one who never learned how to ski.

He was an outsider at his own house, a guest like any other guest. To some extent he had always felt that way because of Helen's attitude toward him, for which his father's love could not fully compensate. But then again he was a bit of an outsider almost anywhere he went because of his shyness.

All of these self-defeating thoughts and feelings washed over him like a foul stream as he stood there in the shade trying to think of some way to approach Trish. The longer he stood there by himself the more unworthy and isolated he felt. It was a self-

fulfilling prophecy.

Then he got mad at himself. He was determined to come out into the sun. He walked into the pool bar and drew himself another beer. He went to Jeff and chatted with him until he ran out of things to say. He ate some shrimp and took a swim. He went beyond his comfort zone and wore himself out, emotionally. But he still didn't get a chance to talk with Trish. There was this unknown woman with her. He needed to see her alone.

Eventually he went back to his place in the shade. But this was ridiculous. He could not live in the shade forever. It was comfortable for him, and not just because of the occasional cool whisper of a breeze on an oppressively hot day. It was comfortable to be alone and not feel naked and exposed in a crowd of people.

He knew he would have to fight this ingrown love of comfort if he was ever going to have any chance with Trish. Love will not leave you comfortable. Besides, he was not really comfortable being alone in a crowd of happy people. Every now and then someone would cast a curious glance in his direction and he would feel very foolish. What was he doing standing there by himself?

He was determined to talk to Trish. She was with a group of six or seven people. He was perfectly capable of joining a group. Or at least that's what he told himself. He started walking in their direction, but his new-found resolve drained out of him each step of the way as he realized he did not know anyone except Trish. They all knew each other, apparently, but he was a stranger.

Then he became aware of a certain logistical challenge. They had formed a tight circle. There was no convenient place to squeeze himself in, even if he happened to be the sort of person who was accustomed to squeezing himself in, which he was not. No one paid any attention to him or even seemed to be aware that he was there. They were all in various degrees of party stupor and quite noisy (except Trish and her friend). He almost wished he were in a stupor himself. It would make it easier to be bold.

Trish was still talking near the diving board and didn't see him when he arrived. He stood behind the circle for an eternity. Okay, it was probably only a minute or two. Then he sensed some subtle shifting of the amoeba. The next thing he knew the guy in front of him turned to someone at the pool, leaving just enough of an opening for him to squeeze in, which he promptly did.

He felt relieved. He was in! But then he realized he was standing

there looking at the faces of six people whom he did not know, six people who seemed to have been having a perfectly wonderful time without him. He noticed their puzzled glances. And Trish was *still* talking to the other girl. The one person he did know and who might legitimize him was not even aware he was there.

Finally she turned back to the circle and saw him right away. She seemed surprised. He did not know how to interpret the expression that came over her face. He gave her a little wave and she waved back, but they were too far apart for him to attempt conversation. It would be hard enough for him to gather the courage to talk with her even if they were alone in a forest; in a group it seemed impossible.

But at least he was in the group and she was in the same group. He kept looking at her, but after that first glance she did not look at him. She seemed deep in conversation. Then the amoeba started to shift again. The thing was that Douglas was not quite in the circle. He was mostly in, he had one foot in, but the guy on his left was still partially blocking him.

This same shirtless ruffian now turned to the gal on his left and started chatting with her with his back to Douglas. At the same time the woman on his right sort of stepped in front of him to talk to someone on the other side of the circle. And then she became animated and really did step in front of him! The amoeba shifted again. Without even moving once, he had somehow been cast out of the circle.

He was standing in exactly the same spot but now he was on the outside! It was humiliating. He did not have the courage to try to squeeze back in. Besides, there was no place to squeeze in. He stood there for a few painful moments and then retreated back to his place in the shade. He took a rambling route and pretended to be checking in on various conversations along the way. But that's where he wound up eventually, whether he wanted to or not.

Afternoon was turning into evening and dinner was being brought up from the kitchen. At least he could make himself useful, make it look like he was doing something and was not a third wheel. He helped carry out ice and plates and dinnerware. The crowd started moving through the buffet. He went to the house for another platter of hot corn, and when he returned he saw Trish seated at a full table, at which everyone seemed very festive

That did it for Douglas. He was literally exhausted by the

emotions and stresses of the day. There was no way for him to get to Trish at her crowded table. They would be there until dinner and dessert were done. And how long would that be? Another hour? Two hours? More? She seemed very popular. Would he ever have a chance to see her alone?

He didn't think he would. He wanted to but couldn't. And then the old Douglas reared his ugly head again, and he began to feel the need to run away, to be by himself and recharge his batteries in the safety of solitude. He could not stay any longer. There was no reason to. He was not enjoying himself. In fact at this point he was torturing himself. He went into the house and said goodbye to his mother and got into his car and drove away. He was surprised to see lights in the guest house—was someone staying there? Roger or his friends? It was strange to think of someone else being in his old house. It completed the sense of alienation.

Meanwhile Trish was in a panic. It was getting dark and they were eating dinner—and she *still* had not had a chance to talk to Douglas. She saw him; she kept her eyes on him, to the extent that it was possible without being too obvious. She saw what happened with his father and the two girls and how awkward he looked, which made her smile. She saw him standing in the shade by himself and looking very aloof in his sunglasses.

He was alone. Why didn't she go to him? Why, indeed? But it seemed like he didn't want to be approached. He was not just standing by himself; he was completely apart from the party. As hot as it was, she got cold feet. She wanted to go to him but couldn't bring herself to do it. She decided to wait for a better opportunity, less exposed.

She saw him go swimming and thought about jumping in the pool with him—no, too obvious. She saw him come out and chat with Jeff and go back to the shade in his shades. Later on she was startled to realize he had joined the group she was in. Then she saw him get pushed out of the circle. She was horrified. Didn't they realize who he was?

She lost track of him for a few minutes—and then she saw him back in his spot in the shade. This time she made up her mind to go to him but could not disentangle herself from a drug rep who had attached herself to her like a barnacle and seemed to be trying to mine her for information.

They started bringing out dinner and Douglas disappeared

again. She looked for him but didn't see him. Eventually she decided to fill a plate and find a place to sit. The table she chose was empty when she sat down, but then the same group she had been standing with earlier saw her there and decided to join her, including the talkative sales rep.

After dinner she went looking for Douglas and could not find him. She did not know what she was going to do if she did, but she went looking anyway. She had seen him helping Roger with the food and dishes. Was he in the kitchen? She found a spot where she could see the kitchen door and stood there for quite a while poking at some strawberry shortcake, but he did not come out.

Then she noticed that the lights were on in the guest house. She remembered the last time she had been at the house and had seen the same thing. Had he left the party? She made up her mind to do what she had come to do. She didn't care if she made a fool of herself. She had to talk to him.

She made her way down the driveway, shielded from the pool crowd by the arbor vitae. Each step that brought her closer to the guest house made it easier to cut off her retreat. She could hear the sounds of a baseball game filtering through the window screens. She smiled—it made her think of Citi Field.

She drew up her courage and knocked on the door. Nothing happened. She knocked again. A light went on in the kitchen and she could see his shadow approaching through the curtains. She went on high alert. The door opened. It was Mr. Lendell!

"Oh!" she said startled.

"Hello there, young lady. Can I help you?"

"I was just looking for—"

"The party? It's up at the pool. This is the guest house."

"I'm so sorry. I guess I got confused."

"Easy to do. The guest house is the first house you see."

"Sorry to bother you. I'll just mosey along now."

She hardly knew what she was saying. She backed down the porch and almost fell down when she missed a step. She waved again and ran off. She did not return to the pool. She went straight to her car and drove home.



## XXII

### *Fishing expeditions of various kinds*

**D**UGLAS DID NOT KNOW how to feel about the party. Instead of going to church the next morning he sat on his porch and brooded. It was another brutally hot day and he was full of conflicting emotions. He had seen Trish again, spent several hours with her—well, not exactly “with her,” but not too far away—and loved her more than ever. He sat there on his porch looking out at the white pines but he was pining for Trish. So many poses imprinted on his memory from the previous day’s festivities. So much to cherish.

And so much to regret! Starting with himself and his awkwardness. He was a different person from when he first met her. He had his own house and he had a new job with a respectable salary. But in some ways he was not a different person at all. He was in love with Trish but did not seem to be able to do anything about it. He hated himself for his shyness and cowardice.

Why are some people made differently from others? He did not want to be different; he wanted to be like all those easygoing people who had no problem with a crowd. His own father was like that, and there was no one he loved or respected more. Jeff was like that and he was very fond of Jeff. It was not that he looked down on people who were more socially adept than himself. He had never looked down on them in his life. No, he looked down on himself for his perceived deficiencies.

Especially because of Trish. He was paralyzed where she was concerned. It seemed she was not with Mark anymore—and still he could not act! The longer he went without acting, the more it became clear to him that he was not up to the task. He did not deserve Trish because he did not have the fortitude to approach her. Mark deserved his popularity with women because he *made* himself popular with women. Douglas could not do that.

Modern courtship was not conceived for people like him. It was not conceived at all. It was a free-for-all, the survival of the fittest, and he did not feel very fit. He was not the rough buck who was determined to best his rivals and take the object of his admiration

by storm. He was modest and would never presume to impose on others. He was not exactly a salesman of himself; indeed, he did not know if he could make any woman happy. He certainly had not succeeded with Vanessa.

These thoughts made him feel very low. He went for a walk and then he came home and played his trombone for a couple of hours, perhaps a little violently. He was trying to make the feelings of inadequacy go away but not succeeding. It did not matter how skillfully he played; the trombone made him think of Vanessa and how much she hated it. Could he find someone who wouldn't mind him playing his trombone?

He took his fly rod down to the reservoir and caught a couple of rainbow trout, which he pan fried and ate for dinner. When that was done and the kitchen was cleaned up he did not know what to do with himself. He was just settling into a very unsettled evening when his father called to commiserate about yet another traumatic Met loss, their fifth in a row.

"By the way, something strange happened last night," he said. "I was watching the game in your cottage, far from the madding crowd, and all of a sudden there was a knock on the door."

"Mother?"

"No—what are you thinking? She would never do that. No, it was some winsome lass who seemed to be quite lost. I sent her up to the pool but I'm not absolutely sure that was what she was looking for."

"Why not?"

"Well, first of all, it was kind of late to be arriving at the party. And second, I thought I had seen her earlier. Pretty girl with chestnut hair. Looked vaguely familiar."

Speaking of hair, Douglas's stood up on the back of his neck.

"So what do you think she was doing there?"

"I was kind of wondering if she was looking for you."

"Me? Why?"

"It was your house, until recently. Maybe she didn't realize you weren't there."

"I don't know. Why would anyone be looking for me?"

"I was wondering that myself," his father replied with a chuckle.

This conversation rocked poor Douglas. Was it possible that someone was looking for him after he left the party? More—and this was too wonderful to contemplate—was it possible that this

someone was Trish? The description seemed to fit. She was certainly pretty and could be described as having "chestnut hair."

Now the almost-despair he had been feeling over his ineptitude was replaced with a tentative joy. He wanted to be overwhelmed with joy but it had to remain tentative because he did not know if this unknown seeker was Trish. Could it be? What did it mean? Did she want to see him? Did she have something to tell him? If so, he was dying to know what it was.

His soul was on fire. As dead as he had felt walking back from the reservoir with his two dead trout on a sultry summer afternoon, now he was reenergized and full of life. Trish on his porch? Was it possible? He did not know what to think. Then again, who else could it be? Who would have any reason to be knocking on the guest house door at the end of the party? He thought of the beach thing, still so fresh in his memory. Then too she had come to him, sought him out and surprised him. He thought of the bar stool.

Now everything changed for Douglas, alone in his new house, even though he could not be sure it was Trish. If it was, and if she had come looking for him, then it made all the difference in the world. It indicated some interest in him. This was his stumbling block all along, the thing holding him back. Was there any interest on her part? He so much wanted there to be. But she seemed inscrutable, and it was hard to make himself believe it.

Funny, Trish was thinking about exactly the same thing. She was sitting on the patio at her parents' house and had a cool lemonade on the table beside her and a good mystery novel in her hands—but she was thinking about the porch and being found there by Mr. Lendell. "Found there"? She knocked! She had put herself in that precarious position.

It was bad enough that she had gone to the guest house looking for Douglas. But to run into his father instead! She was so embarrassed she wanted to die. She blushed every time she replayed the scene in her mind. The bemused look on his face. What did it mean?

He seemed to think she was looking for the party, but it was a little late for that. The party had already been going all afternoon and was in the process of breaking up. Or was he just letting her off the hook? Had he seen through her? He was clearly a very intelligent man. It was not hard to put two and two together and figure out why she was there.

At least he didn't seem to know who she was. He did not show any sign of remembering the conversation they had at Roger's birthday party. To tell the truth, in one sense this sort of hurt her. She wanted to be remembered by him because she respected him—and because of Douglas. But in another sense it was a relief, since she had been caught acting like a fool.

The only problem was there was a part of her that *wanted* to be found out. That was why she had gone to the guest house in the first place. She wanted Douglas to know she was interested in him. It was not the sort of thing she normally did. Just the opposite. She had never done anything like it in her life. Still, she could not be completely happy with her narrow escape. Her feelings for Douglas were too strong.

A couple of weeks went by without hearing from or about Douglas. She went to work every day and smiled at her customers and smiled at her co-workers and tried to make a positive contribution. Then she went home to her parents' house and Grandma's old in-law apartment and felt miserable.

She did not want to be living at home. She wanted to be out on her own. She had been there for four years after the wedding disaster because she was trying to compensate for making such a mess of things. This she had done; there were no more debts, at least of the pecuniary kind. There never were any "debts" per se—except in her own guilt-ridden mind.

But then Douglas came into her life and it seemed like everything was put on hold. She was not thinking about moving out or finding a place of her own because she was thinking about Douglas. Pretty much all the time. A whole year went by. They saw each other only a handful of times, and still her life was on hold. That was how strongly she felt about him.

She went over the party again and again in her mind. There were, she believed, positive signs. She had the impression of him looking at her. She could not tell for sure because of the sunglasses, but in any case he was often looking in her direction. He did not come and talk to her, but he did try to join the group she was in and gave her a cute little wave.

Or was this just wishful thinking? If he was interested, why didn't he come and say hello to her? She knew he was shy. Jeff told her. She could see it in the way he acted. But she did not know if shyness was the reason why he stayed away. There was no way to

know this. She wanted him to come to her so much. She tried to will him to come.

Why didn't she go to *him*? Women have been known to be relentless when it comes to pursuing someone on whom their compass has fixed itself, even when love does not seem to be returned. But Trish was the runaway bride. She had a secret that kept her frozen to her spot when it would have been easy to go talk to him, since he was often standing off by himself.

She knew she could not go on like this indefinitely, however. Her parents were great to her and refused to allow her to pay rent, but their kindness only made her more eager to get out of their hair and start acting like an adult. She needed some resolution about Douglas. She needed a thumbs up or a thumbs down. No, she needed a thumbs-up. The other was too painful to contemplate.

She called Jeff. "Listen, I was wondering if you would be willing to do me a really big favor."

"I would love to. What did you have in mind?"

"Oh my gosh—I feel so stupid asking this. Do you think you could talk to someone for me?"

"Let me guess. Douglas."

"How did you know that?"

"It's always Douglas, isn't it? Aren't you always worried about the poor recluse and wanting to see what we can do to bring him out of his shell?"

"By 'always,' I assume you mean that one time."

He laughed. "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Oh—how can I even say this?"

"You want me to ask him if he likes you."

"Wow, when you put it like that it sounds incredibly stupid."

"Not at all. I wouldn't put it like that. I could just have a little chat with him and happen to touch on the interesting subject of you and see what he says. I'll have a full confession by sundown."

"Okay—but whatever you do don't tell him about this conversation."

"Of course not. Have a little faith, will you?"

Jeff was more than willing to accept the commission—because of Trish. He liked the fact that she called him about Doug. He liked the fact that she called him at all. Of course he would do what she wanted, but he was hoping the answer would be "no." He was hoping she would give him a chance to show some interest himself.

Besides, he couldn't imagine Doug liking someone like Trish. Doug didn't need any more excitement in his life. He certainly didn't need to get involved with the runaway bride.

Trish was surprised and also horrified at his willingness to help. She couldn't quite believe she had called him. She wondered if she was going crazy. She tried to imagine them talking about her and almost called him back and told him to forget it. But she didn't want him to forget it. She wanted to know how Douglas felt.

She was a jangle of nerves as she waited for the outcome of this potentially humiliating conversation. It turned out that "sundown" was just a poetic turn of phrase for Jeff, however. There was no call from him that day. There was no call from him the following week. The suspense was killing her. She called him.

"Have some patience, will you?" he said laughing. "I have to do this the right way."

Another week went by, and another, and suddenly it was muggy August and Jeff definitely was on a different mental clock from her. Then at last she heard from him.

"Okay, so we had our little talk."

"You did? How did it go?"

"It went great. I invited him to the Inn for a drink. I kept thinking there would be something with Roger, but I guess he has a new girlfriend so nobody's hearing from him anymore."

"I don't really want to hear about Roger."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. You're interested in the other one."

"And?"

"I'm not quite sure what to tell you."

"He doesn't like me."

"No, it's not that. I just couldn't pin him down on anything. I couldn't come right out and say 'Do you like Trish?' So I asked him what he thought about you—of course after asking him what he thought of some of Roger's other female friends. I was discreet, if I do say so myself."

"Okay, this sounds promising. Sort of. What did he say?"

"His exact words were, 'She's interesting.'"

"That's it? 'She's interesting'? What is that? He could have been talking about Hillary Clinton."

"Oh—and he also said he didn't really believe the whole runaway bride thing."

"He said *what?*"

"He feels like Roger's always making up stories and he doesn't believe half the things he says."

"There's just one problem with that—he didn't make it up. It happened."

"That's not the point. What I'm trying to tell you is he doesn't like his brother talking about you behind your back."

"Roger talks about me behind my back?"

"Oops!—I guess maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"What else did he say about me?"

"Roger or Doug?"

"You know! I couldn't care less about what Roger thinks."

"That was pretty much it. I didn't push him. You told me not to make him suspicious."

"So basically he said nothing. Now what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"I want to see him! I just don't know how."

"Why don't you call him?"

"No, I can't do that. It's not me."

"Well, I suppose I could get some of the gang together Friday night at the Roadhouse."

"That won't work either. We don't do well in bars."

"Okay. So what's your great idea?"

"That's just it. I don't have any great ideas."

"So maybe the Roadhouse isn't so bad after all."

"Okay. I give in. But not a lot of people. And no Roger!"

"You got it! It's your party."

Trish had mixed feelings after this call. She knew she had no right to be choosy. It was nice of him to offer to help. Did she want to risk seeing Douglas in a bar again? No, but it was better than not seeing him at all. Besides, things would be different this time. There was no Barbara.

As for Jeff, he was playing the long game. He really did not sense any strong interest from Doug in Trish. Doug hardly reacted when he brought her up. He didn't mind getting them together because he didn't think anything would come of it. Or maybe one thing—Trish would be grateful for his help.

If so, it would all be worth it.

## XXIII

*Trish goes to the pub in a foul mood  
Crowd noise leads to an interesting conversation  
A blast from the past*

**D**OUGLAS DID NOT remember this conversation in quite the same way. Jeff invited him out for a cold beer on a hot summer evening. He was a little surprised but happy to accept. They went to the Inn and were having a good time talking about music when somewhere in the middle of the second draft things drifted around to his love life, in which Jeff had apparently taken a previously undisclosed interest.

Jeff asked him what he thought of Anna. Douglas said he liked her and her effervescence. Jeff questioned whether he could see “like” turning into anything deeper, and the answer was no. This was repeated with a couple of the others in Roger’s orbit. Finally he asked him about Trish. Specifically, he asked if he thought she was interesting. His reply? “Yes, she’s interesting.” He simply repeated Jeff’s words back to him.

Now it is true that he did this with an inexpressive face. But what was he *supposed* to do? Jeff had asked him about Trish. He could either give in to his feelings and have a melt-down or he could keep a stiff upper lip. He chose the latter. He liked Jeff, he was happy to talk to him, but he didn’t feel *that* close to him. He did not feel like he could confide in him, not about Trish.

In fact his expressionless face was the means through which he controlled his emotions. This was the first time anyone had ever asked him how he felt about Trish. He was tempted—sorely tempted—to pour out his heart. He had been holding in his love for too long, his great secret. Fortunately it was only the second draft or he might not have kept his composure.

That was how *Douglas* remembered the evening. He was glad Jeff had asked him out. It was the first time they had gone out



alone together and they had a good time. He was a little surprised when Jeff called a few days later and asked him again. Two times in one week! How was he so favored? Then he got the answer. It seems they were going to meet some "friends."

Under normal circumstances Douglas would have politely declined. He was happy to spend another evening with Jeff but had no desire to endure the rest of his brother's friends. On the other hand, there was always the possibility that those friends might include Trish. Thus he could not turn him down.

Jeff called Trish and told her it was all set.

"Does he know I'm coming?"

"He knows some friends are coming."

"Did you say anything about me?"

"Of course not. You told me not to."

"No, I guess it would be a bad idea."

Trish should have known better than to play telephone. She wanted to know if Douglas was interested in her, not if he thought she was "interesting." That could mean anything. But what rankled her the most was the part about the runaway bride. She had no idea Roger and his friends were talking about her behind her back. This did not make her happy.

It made her even unhappier when she walked into the bar and saw Roger. He wasn't supposed to be there! She was looking forward to him *not* being there, especially after talking to Jeff. But there he was, standing at the bar in all his glory. "Trish!" he bellowed with a big smile. She wanted to smash it all over his face.

Douglas also was there. She sort of said hi to him and he sort of replied. Her coolness surprised him. Was something wrong? He could see why she might be annoyed with his brother and his big mouth, but was she annoyed with him too? He was not aware of having done anything to annoy her.

They found a table. Douglas tried not to look like he was rushing as he made a beeline to the chair across from Trish. Then he tried to think of something to say. "Have you been here before?" was what he came up with, staggering like Atlas under the burden of love.

"No, first time," she replied. "You?"

"Same. Nice place. Great atmosphere."

"I think it's supposed to be like an English pub or something."

"Could be," he said. "I'm not much of a pub-goer myself."

What did he mean by *that*? Was he implying she was? She felt a little of her Irish blood rising. Then she scolded herself out of it. She didn't know what he meant. That was just it. She didn't know anything about him, not really. And at this rate she never would.

The place was rapidly filling up and getting louder and louder. There was the following edifying discussion:

"I hear you have a new house." She saw him looking at her blankly. "NEW HOUSE."

"Oh—*bouse!*" he said shamefaced. (He thought she said something else.) "Yes, it's about time. My parents have been very kind, but it was time for me to move on."

"I hear it's a nice Cape."

Again he looked at her for a moment. "I don't know if I was trying to escape. I think it's just better to be on my own."

"No, I said NICE CAPE."

He laughed and shook his head. "Sorry. So loud in here. Yes, it's a nice cape. I think you'll like it."

She did not hear this last part clearly in the din. She definitely knew what she *wanted* the words to be—but she could not be sure. And if they were what she thought they were, she could not ask him to repeat them. She did not trust herself.

For his part, Douglas was shocked that those words had come out of his mouth. It was as if they were already in a relationship together—this was the import as well as the tone. He wondered if she heard him or what she was thinking if she did. She looked a little puzzled, and he was afraid to ask.

In a sense they *were* in a relationship together—in his mind. And that was part of the problem. He already felt married to her. They were married in his heart. This was what made the small talk so hard for him, even harder than usual. He was trying to do too much all at once, jump over the intermediate steps. Unfortunately those steps can be important.

After that it was hard for either one of them to get up the courage to try to converse. The conditions were too intimidating, not just the noise but the all-seeing company. Trish kept hoping he would get up to go to the bathroom. If he did, she knew what she was going to do; she was going to go after him. No, not into the bathroom, silly. The plan was to stop him before he got there. She had to talk to him.

He did not move, however. He did not want to leave her even

for a moment. An hour went by, and they stumbled through some more unedifying shouting matches. At one point Trish found herself engaged in a face-to-ear conversation with Margaret, who was full of good news about a mutual friend of theirs who had finally managed to get pregnant. Just trying to make out this conversation and rejoice with those who rejoice was exhausting.

While Trish was talking to Margaret, their faces very close together, she saw someone come up to Douglas out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't help it—she looked. It was Barbara. She continued to pretend to listen to Margaret but all she saw was Douglas and Barbara. She greeted him and he looked surprised. She bent over to talk to him. He tried to respond, but they could not hear each other. After a couple of minutes of frustration he got up and led her to a quieter part of the restaurant.

Trish could not believe it. The one thing she thought she would not have to deal with was Barbara. Where did *she* come from? Jeff wouldn't have invited her. Now Douglas had gone off with her. She did not know where they had gone or how long he would be away—or if he was coming back. Her head was starting to pound. She waited a few minutes. Then she decided to go look for him.

She stood up and walked through the bar toward the restaurant. Finally she spotted the two of them outside on a terrace. They were standing and talking. They did not seem overly friendly, but it didn't matter. She felt like she had to get out of there. She didn't even bother going back to say goodbye. She walked to the front entrance and out into the night and looked up at the thick summer stars. What were they trying to tell her?

Did it really have to be Barbara? She didn't dislike Barbara, but she was starting to think she could try. He seemed surprised to see her, but was he *happy* to see her? It was hard to tell in a dark room while she was pretending to talk to Margaret. All she knew was he had gone off with her. This by itself was enough to drive Trish away. She was tired of being sabotaged by Barbara.

Also she was angry with herself. She knew she couldn't do what she wanted to do, needed to do, in a bar. She knew it was not the right setting for a difficult and potentially intimate conversation. Why did she agree to it? Because she didn't think she had any other options. But she had plenty of options! Girls can talk to guys. Her father had never raised her to be afraid.

But she was angry too because she knew where the fear was

coming from. It wasn't just a fear of being rejected, although there was some of that mixed in. No, it came from something else, from her secret pain, her lingering wound. She wondered if she should give up on love, stop torturing herself. She didn't seem suited for it. She couldn't overcome her own emotions.

But then when she was in the car and on her way home she saw Douglas sitting across from her and she saw the little smile on his face and the fact he was...looking at her. She wondered what that smile meant, and what the looks meant, and then she felt like crying. If she hadn't been driving she might have done just that. There was nothing she wanted more than to be sitting there with him. She was glad she had come, in spite of it all.

They thought she was the runaway bride. In one sense she was just what they thought she was. She had strong emotions, and sometimes when those emotions became too complicated they made her run away. She did not want to run away. Then again she could not imagine going back to the table without Douglas. Jeff would just have to get along without her.

As it turned out, Barbara's arrival at the Roadhouse was not entirely fortuitous. Roger told Helen he was going there with his friends and with Douglas. It was his excuse for not coming to dinner with some lawyer she wanted him to meet. She told Barbara because she knew Douglas still wasn't seeing anybody. Maybe he was ready to come to his senses, now that he had his own house and a new job.

Douglas's first reaction was shock. What was she doing there? It took him a few moments to believe what he was seeing. Then he became highly embarrassed. She tried to talk to him but he could not make out what she was saying. Barbara was quiet and could be a little hard to understand even in normal conditions.

He kept shaking his head uncomprehendingly and her mouth kept getting closer and closer to his ear until he could feel her breath and simply could not stand it anymore. He jumped up and led her away from the oppressive racket. He knew how this might look to Trish, but it seemed better somehow than the ridiculous show they were putting on. They made their way through the bar into the restaurant and out onto the terrace, which was almost eerily quiet after what they had just experienced.

It turned out that Barbara was trying to tell him about Helen.

"Your mother told me I would find you here."

"My mother? Roger must have told her."

"I don't know. As you know, I live just a few minutes away. So I thought I might as well stop by and say hello, if that's okay."

Etiquette dictated a number of responses that Douglas could not bring himself to utter. "Yes, we don't usually come here. But I guess Jeff heard about it from someone who works with him."

"Nice place. I've eaten here a couple of times. I didn't realize the bar was so loud."

"I know. Impossible to talk. It's kind of silly, really. Must be the low ceiling."

"Why don't we sit here? I'm sure they won't mind."

Douglas blinked. "The thing is I'm kind of with someone."

"Trish, I assume. I saw her at the table."

"Yes, Trish."

"Well, that's that. I knew this probably wasn't a good idea."

"Not at all. I'm glad to see you. Thanks so much for stopping by." He said it, but he didn't really mean it.

She knew. She smiled a world-weary smile. "Well—goodbye." She held out her hand and he shook it. Her hand was very soft.

"Can I walk you to your car?" he said as they drifted toward the entrance.

"No, I'll be fine. You should get back to your friends."

There were goodbyes again as she disappeared out the door. It was awkward. Douglas liked Barbara, but it was absolutely the worst time for her to make an appearance. He was not happy with his mother. He thought she had stopped meddling in his affairs.

He went right back to the table and felt an unpleasant jolt when he realized Trish was gone. He sat down, wondering where she was, and then to cap off a perfect evening someone else came and took her chair, a tall fellow with a smirk. Probably one of Roger's co-workers.

That was it. He was done. He waved to Jeff at the end of the table and went out to his car and went home. His house looked particularly lonely in the moonlight. He knew with whom he wanted to share it. He hoped he hadn't scared her away.

## XXIV

### *Trouble at Callaban's*

IT WAS ANOTHER trying night for poor Douglas. He was so much looking forward to seeing Trish, and she was there, and he actually talked to her—sort of—but then Barbara showed up and everything went south.

One thing he noticed was that Trish did not come with Mark. In fact Mark was nowhere to be seen. It was the first time he could remember not seeing him with his brother's crowd in a long time. But then he received a call from one of his former coworkers that provided a possible explanation.

Apparently things had gone beyond mere flirting between Mark and Marissa. The connection started heating up during spring break, as Douglas himself had witnessed, but the explosion came when the school year was over and Marissa moved back home for the summer. Somebody saw something on her Facebook page that shouldn't have been there and told her parents.

Ralph was furious. The same qualities that endeared Mark to him as a salesman and employee had a very different effect when he thought of him dating his daughter. In short, he didn't trust him. He saw the same things Douglas saw. Mark was too old for Marissa, too experienced, too self-serving.

Ralph had a funny relationship with Mark. He admired his sales abilities. Ralph was a salesman himself and knew a great one when he saw one. Mark could converse with anyone with confidence and ease. People liked him and wanted to be liked by him. Because of his larger-than-life personality, they wanted to do things that would please him. Even with their own money.

But in other ways Mark was not like him at all. Ralph was a

salesman, true, but he was *never* phony. He cared about his clients; he wasn't just pretending. With Mark it was different. It seemed like he could hardly wait for them to get out of the office so he could make fun of them.

At first this didn't bother Ralph too much. Mark was young, and he was getting good results. He talked himself into thinking Mark was only pretending to make fun, playing the curmudgeon, or maybe just letting off steam. The contempt he sometimes exhibited for clients was so far from Ralph's own thought-world that he could not quite believe it was real.

But over time these feelings began to change. He went from being amazed and beguiled by Mark to having doubts about his methods. The outlandish things Mark said and did, which had seemed so amusing before, gradually began to take on a sinister appearance. They were making money and getting new clients and everyone was happy, but Ralph was becoming addicted to antacids.

A contest of wills was developing between him and Mark. He started to feel like he was no longer in control of his own business. Mark was settling in and putting down roots and it was becoming increasingly difficult to dislodge him.

This was partly why he was so upset when Douglas left. He was depending on him to help him in his struggle with Mark. He offered to let him take over the business. He'd always had an idea along those lines in the back of his mind, but he thought there was plenty of time. He wanted to retire in ten years or so, and then Douglas could have his turn.

Things became urgent when he realized Douglas was leaving. He did not know how he was going to stand up to Mark without him. He was offering an alliance but could not come right out and say so. He did not know what kind of relationship Mark and Douglas had. To the casual eye they appeared to be good friends.

Ralph felt naked when Douglas left. It wasn't just the Mark thing; it was everything. Douglas pretty much ran the office and had for years. He was scrupulously honest and would never do anything to hurt the staff, which was very important to Ralph. In short, he had ceded the day-to-day stuff to Douglas. He didn't like doing it anyway. And he had a lot more free time.

Now he was paying for this self-indulgence. There was no one who could step in for Douglas and do the things he did so well—not even Mark, whose talents lay elsewhere. Ralph would have to

do them himself. He wasn't entirely sure he could. He definitely didn't feel like he had the energy.

Then came the Facebook thing. Public shame and humiliation. It almost drove him mad every time he thought about it. He was afraid to go to church. He was afraid to shake Father Dan's hand and see the expression on his face. What was the world coming to? Why did everybody have to share their private business online?

Ralph found himself trapped in a contest of wills with Marissa. The same free-spiritedness that he coddled now made it impossible to rein her in. There were marathon shouting matches. He and his daughter were too much alike, emotional and stubborn. She would date whomever she wanted. The age difference didn't bother her. Wasn't he five years older than her mother?

Anyway, she was taking "precautions." This was just what a good Catholic father needed to hear. It was one thing to suspect that one's daughter was sleeping with some smirking young wag while using various mental tricks to make the reality go away—half the dads in America were doing this. But it was quite another to have it thrown in your face. Mark was dead to him. He would never be able to look at him again.

But he wasn't really dead to him, was he? Mark still showed up at the office every day, still greeted everyone the way he always did as if nothing had happened. This was the most annoying thing of all. He did not seem to show any compunction or consciousness of wrong-doing. As far as he was concerned it was business as usual. If the Facebook kerfuffle troubled him he didn't show it.

A silent war broke out between Ralph and Mark. Everybody knew it—there were no secrets in their little space. They knew about Marissa. They knew Ralph was on his high horse. The strange thing was he seemed to be losing. He had handed over so much authority to Mark that now he was having trouble regaining the upper hand in his own office.

He called him in for a chat and said he was sure he had noticed it "just wasn't working." Unfortunately Mark disagreed. As far as he was concerned, everything was working nicely. He turned the conversation around and showed Ralph how much he needed him and how many problems there would be with the clients and contracts if he decided to leave.

Ralph tried to make an accommodation with the new normal. Mark was commandeering the business and he could not stop him.



Every day seemed to bring a new misery—but he was the one who had allowed the situation to get out of hand. All he could do was hope that Mark would get tired of them and leave. Preferably while there was still something left of the business.

Douglas could not help feeling vindicated when he heard what was going on at his former workplace. He always felt that Ralph's infatuation with Mark was leading to murky waters. He felt sorry for Ralph and what he was going through. He was a good man and didn't deserve so much unhappiness and turmoil at this late stage of his career. His great strength—his trusting nature—was also his downfall in this instance. Mark was simply too subtle for him.

True, he had brought it on himself. He was complicit in his own downfall. But the blame, as far as Douglas was concerned, fell on Mark. He should never have come to a humble country outpost like Callahan's in the first place, where the staff was essentially defenseless against his breed. His talents were more appropriate for the kinds of places where his mother worked.

He also felt badly for Marissa. She had a sweet temperament, and he was quite certain she did not know what she was getting herself into. He'd had a lot of exposure to Mark and heard the kinds of things he said in private. "I want to get paid and I want to get laid" was a particularly memorable phrase that he loved to utter every payday as if it were the very first time.

Marissa did not know Mark the way he knew him. It seemed unlikely that Mark had exposed this darker side to her. After all, he did not show it to her father, not even for a moment, and Ralph was completely taken in. Douglas feared the same would be true of the daughter.

## XXV

*Trish revisits her scheme  
Douglas finds reasons to be hopeful*

**M**EANWHILE TRISH WAS still reeling from the debacle at the bar. She called Jeff.

“Did you see what happened?”

“I saw you get up and leave.”

“No—I mean Barbara. Who invited *her*?”

“Nobody invited her that I know of. I certainly didn’t.”

“And who invited Roger! You said he wasn’t going to be there.”

“Oh—he kind of invited himself,” he said sheepishly.

“But the whole idea was for me to talk to Douglas. How am I supposed to do that with Roger and Barbara there? Then he gets up and goes off with her! What was I supposed to do after that?”

“Exactly what you did, I suppose. Go home. Even though the party was for you.”

“They didn’t know it was for me. I doubt anyone missed me.”

“Okay, so you probably didn’t spoil the evening by going home. But *I* wanted to see you.”

“You can see me anytime. The idea was for me to see *Douglas*.”

“You did see him.”

“But I didn’t talk to him. That was the whole point.”

“You were sitting right across from each other.”

“It was too loud in there! I couldn’t hear myself think, never mind what other people were saying. As it was I made myself look like an idiot trying to shout at him across the table.”

“You could never do that. I’m sure it was just as hard for him. I couldn’t have a decent conversation either.”

What he didn’t say was he didn’t try. He was too busy watching Trish and Doug. Yes, he saw Barbara come in; it was the highlight of his evening. Then he saw her drag Doug away. Even better! At least until Trish disappeared. Not exactly what he was hoping for.

For her part, Trish was furious with Barbara. She could still see her leaning over him with that cool smile of hers, saying something

in his ear. She hated Barbara and her meretricious feminine arts. No, that was the problem. She didn't hate Barbara at all. She didn't hate Douglas for going off with her—there was no way they could hear each other, especially with Barbara's low voice. The only person she hated was herself, for being so stupid, for allowing herself to think something wonderful could happen in a bar.

Later in the day she began to calm down. Her father asked her if she wanted to play some tennis, and that was fun. She always enjoyed playing with him—beating him, that is. He took it so well. They went for a swim in the pool when they got home and it felt great on a day when the temperature was over ninety and the humidity was about ninety-five percent. Trish loved the salt-water pool. The water felt so light. She stayed in for quite a while in spite of her father's corny jokes and her mother's prying questions when she brought up some cucumber sandwiches and iced tea.

Her mother asked her if she met any "nice boys" at the bar. Trish did not know quite how to answer this question. She met a very nice boy at the bar and bungled it. Trish was close to her mother and longed to talk to her about Douglas. First of all she wanted to reassure her parents. She knew they were afraid that her unhappy experience with weddings had knocked her out of the marriage market, which was not quite the case. But also she craved some girl-talk. She wanted to share her news about Douglas.

"News"? What news? The only news was she was in love and love wasn't going anywhere.

But something curious from the night before kept coming back to her. It was when Douglas was talking about his new house, during the mortifying attempt at conversation over the crowd roar. She thought she heard him say "I think you'll like it." She couldn't be *sure* this was what he said, but that was what it sounded like.

The more she pondered these words, the better they made her feel. It made her think he was thinking of her. It made her think he wanted her to see his new house and he wanted her to like it. No, he seemed sure she would like it. Why? What reason did he have for such assurance? She wondered if it meant what it seemed to mean. Was he thinking about her in the same way she was thinking about him? She wished she had reached over the table at that moment and grabbed his hand. Like that was ever going to happen.

There was more. The evening had not been as disappointing as she made it out to be. He came and sat directly across from her.

Now it was not possible to know what this meant, if it meant anything at all, but it also was not necessary to discount it. He had plenty of seats to choose from. He could have sat next to Jeff, with whom he seemed to be close. He could have sat across from one of the other girls. But he sat across from her.

She drank in this fact and felt happy. It indicated an interest on his part. Also, he looked at her. Right at her. Not just when they were trying to have a conversation but a couple of other times. Thus armed, she allowed herself to think about Barbara again. He seemed startled to see her. Clearly he was not expecting her to be there. They did not seem to be on intimate terms when she saw them in the restaurant. It pained her to see them together, but they did not appear to be together in the way she feared.

Trish began to feel better as she sat there in the sun munching on cucumber sandwiches. Quite a bit better, in fact. She had “seen” Douglas after all, now that she thought about it. She had seen some evidence of an interest in her. It was all she was really looking for. To expect anything more in a public setting was unreasonable.

Meanwhile Douglas also was thinking about the strange evening that had just transpired as he worked in his yard under the hot sun. First there was his awkwardness. Every time he tried to talk to Trish he felt like Andrew in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. He was so much in love with her that he could not even say “hi” without making himself look like a complete idiot. And yet he was not an idiot. Was he?

He happily grabbed the chair across from hers when they sat down at the table. He did not even try to hide his eagerness. Then he became aware of the noise level in the bar. It was not nearly this loud until they got to the table, where most of the crowd was. He said “hi” again, as a test, and the word came out of his mouth and fell flat on the ground.

Then she was saying something to him. “Not a pub-goer myself” were the words he heard himself saying. They made him blush. He could not think of anything to say and this non-sequitur popped out of his mouth instead. But in another sense he was trying to say too much. He was trying to communicate that the bar scene was not his scene, for a number of reasons that even he only half-understood. The only problem was they were sitting in a bar. It made him look like a hypocrite and apparently embarrassed her.

Douglas was perceptive. He saw her reaction and felt badly. He

didn't mean it the way it sounded and wished he could take it back. A little while later she started talking to him again. This time it was about his house—once he realized what she said—and he became eager to make up for his previous blunder. That was when he said “I think you'll like it.”

Unlike Trish, he did not have to *guess* at the meaning. He knew that these words were uttered in complete tenderness. Actually they were uttered in a white void of self-consciousness, but tenderness rushed in to fill the void as the words were coming out of his mouth. He wanted to communicate the strong feelings he had for her. He wasn't at all embarrassed about having unleashed such a frank expression of warmth and regard. If anything, he wished he had said more.

Then Barbara appeared out of nowhere. Douglas did not dislike Barbara and would never dream of being rude to her, but he felt painfully embarrassed. She was trying to talk to him and it was like a weird dream. His whole heart and soul were with Trish but he was trying to make out what Barbara was saying. The awkwardness was overwhelming. That was why he whisked her away.

Trish was not there when he came back. But in a way this was intriguing, the timing. Was Barbara the reason she left? The thought did occur to him. He was torn between thinking this was sheer egotism and half-hoping it could be true. If she left because of Barbara, then that might indicate some interest in him. On the other hand it would also indicate that she had a very wrong idea about what he was thinking and feeling.

Douglas wanted to call Trish and make sure she understood him. He did not want her to think he was interested in Barbara. He almost felt like he could bring himself to do it—call her, that is. He had already broken the ice with his spontaneous comment, his confession of tender feelings for her, as he saw it (how did she see it?). He was eager to disabuse her of any false notions she might have based on what she had seen.

He liked Barbara, but he was in love with Trish. He found himself wanting to say this to her. He told himself he would have called her if he had her number. But he would have to call Jeff to get it, which was a step he was not quite ready to make.

## XXVI

*A relapse for Helen  
Bill's feelings about being a caregiver*

**T**HE NEXT DAY at church he got the disheartening news that his mother's numbers had taken a turn for the worse. All this time he had been hoping she would beat cancer like she beat everything else in her life, but it seemed this was not the case. She was starting treatment again. He looked at his father and his father looked away. He did not know what to think.

Faced with the recalcitrant monster within her, Helen did not react as might be expected. She was not humbled by the second occurrence. No, she became angry. She had sacrificed an important part of herself, her beauty, for the sake of her health, and the sacrifice had been in vain. This made her mad. At the cancer, at the doctors, at everything.

The Lendell house was once again a sick-house, and this time it not only had the cloud of uncertainty hanging over it but also the cloud of ill-temper. Douglas had been a regular visitor during the first round of treatments, always bringing along something of interest, usually flowers, or something he knew she liked to eat, never staying long enough to weary her or wear out his welcome; but now he found it more difficult to visit because she never seemed happy to see him and did not feel the need to hide it.

He tried not to be offended. He had never been her favorite son, and there could be a lot of reasons for her short temper. He kept coming, however, maybe once or twice a week, because this time they really were spooked. The family entered into the terror of the word "cancer" for the first time and began to wonder if she was going to come through.

Then they went into the gray zone where no one seems to know exactly what's going on but the general impression is things are not going well. The subject of time never came up. No one ever said to Helen she had such-and-such a number of years or months

to live. She refused to hear such talk.

Bill was there, faithfully taking care of her. He seemed perfectly cheerful through it all, never complained, but to Douglas he also seemed quieter and more distant. He had started a new school year. Helen was not happy about it. "Why don't you just retire?" she said to him crossly one day. "You don't need the money. I think they can probably get along without you."

He didn't retire because he loved teaching and didn't know what else to do with himself. It had never been about the money for him. He felt called to teach. It gave him a sense of purpose he otherwise lacked. He was not like teachers who could not wait to retire. How much free time can you have on your hands before your brain turns to mush? He was not ready to find out.

Helen's darkening storm made it very tempting for him to return to his mother's house. After all, he had been there for five months, nursing her, taking care of her. He had given all he had to give, and the foul moods that came with the recurrence made it difficult for him to feel he was required to give anything more. Living at his mother's house was fun, in its own way. Sure, he felt lonely there from time to time. Sure, he had misgivings about allowing his marriage to fall apart and the possible breakup of the estate that would follow.

On the other hand he was away—from Helen. He was not a vindictive person, but this was the way he felt. It was like being on vacation. Since her affair he had been trying to come to terms with the apparent series of events that constituted his life. He had never really been happy in his marriage. Maybe at the outset, but not for a long, long time. He could not imagine sitting on the sofa with his arm around Helen watching some confection of a movie. But this was what he wanted. He wanted a wife who was also his friend.

He felt he'd had a happy life, all in all. He was fortunate to have been born with a happy disposition and was able to find joy and pleasure not just in his beloved books but in fishing, in a spirited game of hearts, in doing little projects, in playing golf, in brewing beer in the basement, in opera, which was his musical passion, and in his Jeep, top off, tooling around on summer afternoons.

"Immature," Helen called it, but he never responded to her jibes. It seemed like a waste of good air. He knew he couldn't change her mind about him. It takes two to make an argument, and since he hated arguments he chose not to take the things she said

personally. Something about putting the words into a box. They hardly even rattled around anymore.

Unfortunately this box was made of bitter wood. It gave him satisfaction because it was hard and it kept her away from the soul of him, but he did not want to be indifferent to Helen. He wanted her to be his wife, his companion. He wanted her to lean on him; he wanted to feel worthy of her. But she refused to lean, and he knew it was because, in her mind, he was not worthy.

He had played the father role to the best of his ability over the years. The only really hard time was when Douglas's marriage broke up. He was sorry for Douglas, but he was not sorry to see Vanessa go. He had never been impressed with Vanessa and pretty much held his breath when Douglas married her.

Getting Douglas into the guest cottage was the one great coup of his married life. He wanted to help him recover from the terrible blow, but human nature is such that generous motives are rarely present all by themselves. There was a benefit to him in having Douglas there. He could go visit the guest house whenever he wanted. He could have the companionship and conversation that were not available at the big house, things he craved.

He was proud of Douglas. He wasn't sure what had happened to Roger, but Douglas was a very substantial young man. He was kind and considerate. He had a strong work ethic and—Bill believed—was very good at what he did. He was not frivolous and had no interest in certain things that seemed to attract young men of his generation and background. He read books. He played in the brass band. He loved nature. What was there not to admire?

He regretted the treatment Douglas received from the rest of the family. Roger disappointed him, but what really upset him was Helen. Did she not have enough mother-feeling to get past the fact that Douglas was not like her, was not made like her and did not share her values? So what if he was not hard-driving or competitive like her family? So what if he was not headed for the corner office? Could she not love him for his kindness? Could she not love him for his sincerity? Did he have to be hard, like her?

Bill liked having Douglas in the cottage because it was his way of making it up to him. He enjoyed using his little tricks to keep him there and he enjoyed annoying Helen. He would sneak over to the cottage and sneak back in and act like nothing happened while she glowered at him in her usual way. It was betrayal of the most



delicious kind: perfectly innocent.

Then came the affair, and his playful double life ended. He found out about it when she clicked the wrong button on an email. He thought he was a rational guy, but all reasonableness fled. This construct he had made of his life—the idea of himself and his happy existence he had been playing in his mind over the years—simply collapsed. It fell apart and was no more.

A great and terrible bitterness enveloped him. The house he had grown up in and loved became hateful—because *she* was there. A week went by, two weeks, but he could not go on. He had to get away from her. Fortunately there was somewhere for him to go. There was his mother's house, which she bought a couple of years after Bill's father died from Alzheimer's and she decided it was time to get out of the way and let the younger generation take over the estate. He loved the little house and the associations it had for him of a mother he loved, even idolized. He had never been able to bring himself to sell it. He was glad now that he hadn't.

He printed out the misdirected email and left it on her pillow the day he moved out, that gloomy, misty day, he would never forget it. He did not say anything to the boys, not even Douglas. What could he say? How could he explain himself without implicating their mother? He did not want implicate her. He did not care if they blamed him. He just had to get away.

Bill did not realize how difficult this would be until he had a visit from a visibly shaken Douglas. It made him sick in his heart to sit there and allow his son to blame him when he was not to blame. All Douglas knew was his father had moved out. How could he not blame him? Bill understood, but it was not until then that he realized how much pain he had caused or how much he would have to endure in order to protect Helen.

Helen did not respond to the note he left her. She did not call. He knew what it meant. The email was exactly what it seemed. If he was wrong about it, she would be screaming. She did not bother trying to respond because she had nothing to say. She could call if she wanted to save the marriage; if she wanted to apologize and try to get him to come back home. But that wasn't Helen, was it?

Besides, what reason did he have to think she even *wanted* to save the marriage? He could almost imagine her asking for forgiveness if she had any real love for him—but this is just what she did not seem to have. She never showed him any tenderness.

She never said the things to him that married people say to each other. She never said “I love you.” He used to say it, but she would kind of laugh and wave her hand. So he stopped.

It didn’t really matter why she didn’t call. The *fact* that she didn’t call meant he was right about the email. Therefore he entrenched himself. As far as he was concerned, he had given up the house and would never live there again. Now that she had betrayed him, he wanted a new life. Not necessarily with another woman. He wasn’t even thinking about that. Just life without Helen.

He was, well, happy in his mother’s house; there was no other way to put it; especially at the outset. He found himself very much enjoying his new independence. He did not miss Helen because they had basically been living separate lives for years. He was hurt by the discovery that there was someone else in her life, but in a strange way he was not surprised. Part of him went into a jealous rage and part of him said “that’s that.”

The old tension that gripped him when she was home simply melted away. For example, he had become the main meal maker because of her brutal work schedule. He enjoyed cooking to an extent, the creativity, but he was tired of the criticism he endured when one of his creations was less than successful. Now he did not have to cook at all. He didn’t even make himself an egg in the morning. If he felt like one, he went to the diner.

About two weeks after he moved out, he received the following email (his heart jumped when he saw the familiar handle):

Hi, there. I don’t know if you want to hear from me, and I can’t say I blame you. I’m a little surprised that you didn’t talk to me before you decided to leave, but you always had your own way of doing things. I am grateful to you for keeping things quiet and protecting my reputation.

It may interest you to know that the matter referenced in your note is over. It was never much of anything to begin with, just a lot of foolishness. I know this doesn’t change the past, but I hope it may have some influence on the future. I hope there won’t always be this wall between us. It is very painful.

Nonetheless, I just wanted to remind you that next week is our usual Christmas party. Unfortunately the invitations have already gone out. I bring this up only to keep you informed. If you want to come, I would certainly welcome it. Everybody would miss you if you don’t. This is your house, after all.

Hope all is well. Things are fine here. Marbles misses you.

Marbles was the cat. He noticed she didn't say *she* missed him. It was classic Helen. He not could tell whether she did not have normal human feelings or simply was unable or unwilling to express them. For her sake, he assumed it was the latter. In any case, she got what she wanted, especially after enlisting Douglas. She always did. He went to the party and played the role of host and, as far as he knew, no one was the wiser; or if they knew, they weren't letting on.

That's how life was carried on for several months until the cancer thing hit. He was content to be apart from her; she was content to have him on the scene when he needed to be seen. To tell the truth, she softened toward him. When she saw him now she greeted him with a friendly "hi." She put some feeling into the word and she had never done that, not for years. It threw him. He didn't know what it meant, if anything.

He called her after Douglas told him about the cancer. Helen cried. He was shocked. He couldn't remember ever hearing her cry, but she was scared; he could tell she was. Whether she was also lonely he did not know, but it must be lonely to face something like cancer by yourself, even if you are the senior VP and chief legal counsel of a multi-billion dollar corporation.

He thought about it for a couple of days and then he called and made the crazy offer. Her reaction surprised him. "Oh, would you be willing to do that for me?" It was the first time he could remember her sounding like she needed him. He moved back in. He did everything for her, even taking time off from school when the treatments brought her to her lowest point and she almost didn't have the strength or energy to get out of bed.

She was changed by the terrible thing she was going through, which was a little surprising. She even invited him to come to her, not just once but several times, and seemed to enjoy their times together. He went along with this in spite of having mixed feelings about it because he thought she saw it as healing. He did it more for her sake than his own.

Actually their marriage was better than it had been in years. He felt a degree of intimacy again. She was not going to work much and work was not consuming her life. She was too scared not to let go and became available again at an emotional level. It was like they were rediscovering each other. The doctors said the breast had to

come off, and it did, and she clung to him more than she ever had in their entire marriage, not so much physically but in her soul.

Then the cancer made a comeback and everything changed again. Helen thought the lacuna in her life was over, and when she found out it wasn't she became enraged. She was furious with the doctors for telling her about it and furious with Bill for trying to console her about it, because that meant it was real. The old Helen seemed to return, the one with no time and no patience.

To tell the truth, Bill had mixed feelings about this. He was glad to see her in a fighting mood. She had become so soft over the summer, so unlike herself, that it scared him. Now she was feisty again, and he was more optimistic about her prognosis, in spite of what the doctors said. What did they say, anyway? It all seemed like a lot of mumbling and doubletalk.

Helen would pray at church in a low voice but distinct enough for Bill to hear. "Lord, please heal me." It was startling to hear this prayer from her. He wasn't sure if he believed that prayers could help. He found it hard to pray himself. But he did ask Douglas to pray. His son was religious. He hoped it would have some effect.

Douglas surprised him. "I pray for her every day."

## XXVII

*Ralph makes one last plea  
Jeff shares some interesting information  
A memorable summer evening*

IT WAS A DARK summer for the family, but in some ways it was a bright summer for Douglas. He was thriving in his new job. His bosses were thrilled with him, and, more importantly the company was doing well and he was contributing directly to its success. He was good on the ground floor because he thought in structures. He was able to come up with solutions they missed, since he was able to look ahead and see what would be needed as they grew. They weren't thinking about that. They were just thinking about growing.

Meanwhile the news was grimmer than ever from his former place of employment. It seems Mark had managed to get Marissa Callahan pregnant. Whatever "precautions" she was taking were not enough. The very thing Douglas feared had come upon them. He wondered if he should have been more explicit in his attempt to warn Ralph. Then again, what good would it have done? Ralph was so besotted with Mark that he would not have believed him. Nor did he have enough control over Marissa to stop her from seeing Mark even if he did.

Late in August, on one of those hot, sultry summer evenings when the beetles are buzzing and the ends of the earth are somewhat frayed, Douglas received an unexpected call—from Ralph. He begged him to come back. It seems some of Mark's investment schemes were causing problems. The economy had hit one of its cyclical dry patches and a lot of the new customers were suddenly finding themselves in a precarious position.

Ralph said a lot of flattering things and even implied that he had always wanted Douglas to take over the business when he retired. Mark was gone—he did not say exactly why—but Douglas knew why. Even so, he could not return to Callahan Associates. It had

no appeal for him, in spite of his warm feelings for Ralph. Where he was now was so much more professional and challenging that it would be like being sent back to the minors.

Of course Douglas did not say this to Ralph. He felt sorry for him. Ralph had lost his way with Mark and apparently was paying for it, but Douglas still liked him and wished him well. It was a case of temporary insanity. Ralph was back to being himself. Douglas hoped it was not too late.

Another strange call came about a week after the Roadhouse incident. It was from Jeff, who found himself in a bit of a thicket. He knew Trish liked Douglas. He was kind of hoping Douglas liked Barbara, for reasons of his own. He found it hard to believe that Doug could be interested in Trish, because of her history, but he was aware that this might be wishful thinking. The thought that he was letting himself be ruled by selfish motives was making him feel guilty, especially since Trish had made him her confidant.

“So listen, I noticed you and Barbara last Friday,” Jeff said.

“You ‘noticed’ us, huh?”

“Of course. You make such a nice-looking couple. It didn’t seem like you knew she was coming.”

“No. Believe me, it was a complete surprise.”

“Oh, I see. Well, she didn’t seem to stay very long.”

“No, I think there was a misunderstanding there. My mother told her to come, for some reason.”

“But what difference would that make? No one had any problem with her being there.”

“That’s not what I meant. I told her I was there to see someone else. Please don’t share that information or I’ll have to kill you.”

“Wow. Things are getting violent these days. But who are we talking about? Anna?”

“I told you, I don’t feel that way about her.”

“Margaret?”

“Who’s Margaret?”

“Who is it then? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Are you blind? You didn’t see who I was sitting with?”

“You mean Trish?” Jeff said, a tad disingenuously.

“I know—it’s ridiculous. She’s way over my head. You probably think I’m wasting my time.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like *that*. I’m just surprised.”

“Why?”

"She's the runaway bride. You don't care about that?"

"Not really. I don't know all the details. I don't know if she really did run away, or if she did she might have had a very good reason. Besides, people could say the same thing about me. I barely managed to stay married for four months."

"That was different. She was a psycho."

"Not according to my mother. She thought she was the best thing I ever did."

"Okay, point well taken. Trish may not be what she appears to be to certain people, specifically your brother. But in that case I believe I may have some good news for you. Apparently she feels the same way about you."

"What? Who told you that?"

"She did. Somehow I seem to have been chosen as the go-between. Remember when I invited you to all those parties? That was Trish. She asked me to. She acted like it was because she felt sorry for you, living in your bungalow and all that, but lately she's been a little more open about things."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying you've known all this time?"

"No, not really," Jeff said, glad that his blush could not be seen. "I mean, I guess I was a little suspicious. But I didn't find out for sure until just a little while ago. That was why I asked you out for a beer. She wanted to know how you felt."

"You're kidding. That was *her* idea? What did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her much. I didn't think you liked her. You hardly reacted when I asked you about her."

"I didn't want you to know how I felt. But why didn't you tell me this last week? You acted like you didn't know anything."

"That was what I was supposed to do. She didn't want me to."

Jeff felt better after this call, or worse, depending on how you looked at it. If Doug really did like Trish, as he claimed, then this was bad news for him personally, partly because he wasn't sure if Trish was the right girl for his warm-hearted friend, but for selfish reasons too. On the other hand, he had done the right thing. He was no longer withholding information or feeling guilty. He heard the happiness in Doug's voice, and this made him happy too—for his friend. It occurred to him after he hung up that he had done exactly what Trish asked him not to do. But he didn't think she would mind.

And Douglas? Needless to say, his soul was on fire after this

surprising conversation. He actually had to lie down in an attempt to becalm himself. He just lay there floating on a cloud for some time, not thinking, just floating. “She feels the same way.” He drank in the words. Then he drank them in again. He laughed out loud. He cackled like a madman. No one could hear him even with the windows open—the neighbors were too far away—but he wasn’t really thinking about that. He would have cackled anyway.

His mind went immediately to the conversation at the beach, almost exactly a year ago. Was this one of the times she had asked Jeff to invite him? If so, it provided the missing explanation for why she came up to him and talked to him and invited him for ice cream. It was better than his wildest hopes. Not only was she interested; it was possible she had arranged the whole thing.

He thought about the night at the Inn when she sat down next to him at the bar. He wanted so much to see it as a sign of interest, but only now did he allow himself to believe it. Everything seemed so different when he thought about it that way. She did sit next to him, after all. She did try to engage him in conversation. It wasn’t her fault that he was too smitten and too stupid to respond.

Trish liked him. At least according to Jeff! An entire year of suffering was instantly redeemed and forgotten. He lay there in his house on a Thursday evening as day turned into dusk and the house grew dark and did not bother to get up and turn on any lights. He had not eaten supper and did not think about fixing himself some. All he was thinking about was Trish.

Probably an hour went by before the path forward became clear. He had to call her, of course. He had to talk to her. There was no longer any reason to put it off. There was just one little problem—he did not know her number. He knew he could get it from Jeff, but he was a little peeved at him. Oh, well—some things cannot be helped. He called, and Jeff was glad to give it.

He went outside and walked around the house a couple of times to gather his courage. Then he sat down on the porch in the twilight and called.

“Hello?” he heard *that voice* saying into his phone speaker, and he melted.

“Hi, this is—Douglas. Lendell,” he added, shaking his head at the sing-song formality.

“Hi, there. I was wondering when you would call.”

“You were?”



"Yes. I just heard from Jeff. He told me you asked for my number."

"I understand you and Jeff have had more than one conversation about me."

"We have. And I just learned that one of those conversations was rather misleading. I asked him to find out if you were interested in me, and he came back and told me you said I was 'interesting?'"

"*He* was the one who said that."

"No, I know. Fortunately we got it all cleared up. But I can't believe I'm saying this to you. You must think I'm crazy."

They both laughed awkwardly. (Was it "awkwardly?" Is that the right word?)

"What are you doing right now?" Douglas said.

"I'm home watching TV. Why?"

"Is there any chance you would meet me somewhere? Say, the Inn?"

"I've got to be at work early. Oh—what am I saying? Of course I want to meet you."

"Okay. See you in about an hour."

Douglas showered and put on some nice clothes—he agonized over this more than he ever did—and drove over to the Inn. He was in an exalted state of mind. The drive was almost perilous because he did not feel connected to his car, which was definitely connected to the winding state road. A couple of times he almost forgot to turn when he needed to avoid running into a tree or the reservoir. That would be amusing—if he got into an accident on his way to see her and missed their first date.

He reached the Inn and parked and got out of his car—and then the old awkwardness caught up with him again. Where to wait for her? He stood by the door under an August moon for a few minutes, but no cars appeared and there was no sign of Trish. Was she already there? He went in and searched all the rooms. He was standing by the door wondering what to do with himself when she walked in.

"Hi," he said simply with a shy little smile.

"Hi," she replied, and for a moment they just stood there looking at each other, in silent recognition. Then they laughed again. It was getting to be a habit with them.

"Well, this is weird," she said.

“Weird? Why?”

“I don’t know. Here we are. Together.”

“At last,” he said, and caught himself and blushed.

Trish smiled. “Let’s go find some place to sit.”

What was *weird* was that it wasn’t weird at all. At least not for him. This was not like a first date. They both had spent so much time together in their minds that they didn’t experience the usual wall. They *knew* they wanted to be there together.

“So Jeff told me you were the one who got me invited to all those parties,” he said, dispensing with the small talk when they found a table for two and had their drinks.

“I did ask him to invite you a couple of times. I guess it was kind of sneaky.”

“Would that include the beach party last year, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Why?”

“I was just curious. I don’t usually get invited to my brother’s parties.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“To find out it was you? Of course not.”

“No, I mean to find out it wasn’t your brother.”

“Oh! Not really. I’m used to being left out.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So what else do you want to know?” she said with a smile.

“Well, I feel kind of funny asking.”

“No! Go ahead.”

“When did you—I mean—”

“When did I become ‘interested’? I can answer that. Roger’s pool party. The first time I saw you.”

“Really? Me too. I know, I didn’t act like it. Storming out like that. I did go looking for you later. I walked over to the driveway but didn’t see you.”

“I was there. I was sitting alone at a table, waiting for you to come back.”

He shook his head. “Then there was the baseball game.”

“Oh, yes—let’s not forget about that. You and Barbara.”

“And you and Mark.”

“Pffff! I never had any interest in Mark. Are you kidding me? He kept asking me out and I didn’t have the strength to say no. But what about you? You were sitting next to me and then when we came back with the food you sent in Barbara.”

"I had to. I was afraid of making a fool of myself. Sitting there next to you. It was driving me crazy."

"Oh—is that why?" she said laughing. "I was thinking exactly the same thing. Mark was yak, yak, yaking away and I wasn't even listening to him."

"Boy, I wish I'd known this before. You have no idea what kind of torture I went through listening to him talk about you."

"Right, and every time I turned around I saw you with Barbara—including last week!"

"Poor Barbara. She was one of my mother's experiments in matchmaking."

"She's very attractive."

"I don't really think of her that way."

"Come on. How could you not?"

He paused. "I guess I was in love with someone else."

He didn't really mean to say this. It just came out. It took her a moment to recover. "So do you want to know when I first thought you really were interested in me? It was what you said about your new house. Something about 'I think you'll like it.' Or maybe I just imagined it."

He smiled. "No, that's exactly what I said."

"Oh, good! It made me think you wanted me to see it. That you were maybe thinking about me. I don't know. I'm not expressing this very well."

"I said it because that was how I felt."

"Then you ran off with Barbara and left me sitting there by myself?"

"I was embarrassed. I wasn't expecting her to show up. I guess my mother told her to come."

She sighed. "Why couldn't we have had this conversation before? It would have saved us so much trouble."

"I wanted to call you but you were going out with Mark."

"Really? That's the reason? I wish I had known. Mark meant nothing to me."

"Well, all I can say is I'm glad you were persistent."

"I wish I could take all the credit. Jeff's a good friend."

Douglas refrained from saying what was on the tip, the very tip, of his tongue.

"What about that time we came here? Remember that?"

"You mean when I was on the phone with Mark and I asked

him to invite you? That was too funny.”

“You did that on purpose?”

“I knew he shared an office with you. It was just a spur of the moment thing. And he fell right into it.”

“Then we get here and you’re sitting right next to me and I can hardly talk to you.”

“Then we wind up at different tables.”

“That was a truly horrible night. Or maybe it was a great night. I can’t make up my mind.”

“But you ran away again and left me by myself.”

“I couldn’t take it anymore, sitting there listening to Roger and Mark, trying to act like I thought I belonged there. I didn’t want to go. I just didn’t see any chance of trying to talk to you again.”

“Well, it’s not a good excuse, but it will have to do. What is truly inexcusable is the *other* pool party.”

“Oh, I know. I feel terrible about that. I was watching you the whole time. I just couldn’t bring myself to go walking up to you in a crowd. One thing you should know about me—I’m a little self-conscious.”

“No, really?” she said laughing.

“I just don’t have Roger’s gift for being able to walk up to anybody, anywhere, and start talking.”

“So you were *afraid* to come talk to me?”

“I guess so—although it doesn’t sound too good when you put it that way.”

“I’m just teasing you. I don’t expect you to be anything like Roger. I wouldn’t like you if you were. Oops! I did it again.”

“So you weren’t mad at me?”

“I would just say I was a little puzzled. And then maybe a little hurt when you disappeared. I did something almost unbelievably stupid. I went and knocked on your door.”

“I know. My father told me. I didn’t know for sure it was you, but I was hoping it was.”

“Well, you have to admit—some very funny things have happened to us over the last year.”

“True, but they didn’t always seem so funny at the time.”

They talked like this for two hours straight. There was no pause, no lack of fodder. And the entire conversation was in this same purgative but exquisitely tender reminiscing vein. They did not talk like two people who were having their first conversation together.

They talked like two people who had been dating for months, years. But the strange thing was it didn't really have anything to do with the talking. The words could almost have been random words. The bond between them was real, and they both knew it.

They were talkative because they had a lot to make up for, but it was more than that. They were completely comfortable with each other and wanted to make sure they both knew it.

## XXVIII

*Sweet togetherness*

*An uncomfortable moment for Trish*

*Bill finally realizes who she is*

THEY SPENT EVERY day together, as much as they could with work. Sunday afternoon they went to one of Douglas's favorite parks for a leisurely walk. It turned out to be not so leisurely after all. At some point his hand happened to brush against hers, and she grabbed it and held onto it with all of her might. A little later they came to a silent grove with a carpet of pine needles. They turned to each other and Douglas took her in his arms and kissed her on the cheek, with emotion, and then on the lips. Right then and there they both died. Then they recovered, somewhat, and strolled on.

"So how do you think we finally wound up together?" she said.

"I guess we just kept seeing each other until we couldn't help it."

"Now you know that's not true. If I hadn't taken the initiative we never would have seen each other at all."

"Oh—so now you're giving *yourself* all the credit."

"But do you know what I'm talking about? Doesn't it seem like we were drawn together somehow?"

"I guess I would tend to believe that anyway. I do believe people are drawn together, so to speak. You know, Adam and Eve and all that."

"You think God draws people together."

"I do, yes. Maybe that sounds silly."

"Not at all. I don't know, though. There were a couple of times when I saw you with Barbara and I was definitely ready to give up."

"So now you're disagreeing with yourself."

Trish laughed. "Might as well get used to it. I reserve the right to change my mind."

"Personally, I was never ready to give up."

She glanced at him. "I dreamed of having conversations like this with you, but now that we're actually doing it somehow it doesn't seem quite real."

"Must be the enchanted forest. It has you under its spell."

"But doesn't it seem strange to you? The two of us just walking here as if nothing ever happened, as if this was what we always did, when just a week ago we were practically strangers?"

"I know what a stranger is. Most of the people in my life have been strangers. You and I were never strangers, not from the first time we met."

Trish could not believe he said this. She could not reply.

The following Saturday was the annual Labor Day bash at the Lendell house. Yes, Helen was still having it, sick as she was. In her feisty new mood there was no way she was going to let her dark foe defeat her. Douglas picked up Trish at her house. It felt like a milestone.

"They do know I'm coming, right?" she said.

"They don't know anything about you—I mean, us."

"Oh my gosh, no. Turn this car around right now."

"Why?" he said laughing.

"I can't just waltz in there out of the blue. What's your brother going to say?"

"I'm looking forward to that most of all."

"I'm glad *you* are. I'm terrified."

"Don't be. I've already thought this through. There will be a huge crowd. We'll be outdoors with plenty of room to roam. It will be a lot less awkward than just seeing them alone, believe me."

"I guess you're right. Hopefully Barbara won't be there."

"No, I took care of that. I told my mother not to invite her."

Thank heaven the party was in the evening because Helen looked a little under the weather. Douglas hadn't seen her since she started the new treatment, but the makeup was not quite right and it was a little jarring, especially with her trying to act like a hostess instead of just sitting in an easy chair somewhere with her feet up, which would have been perfectly understandable.

"Douglas!" she said as he walked into the kitchen with Trish. "So glad to see you! I might need your help tonight. And who is this you have with you?"

"This is Trish. You've met her."

"Yes, of course—Trish! I remember now. You baked my

pastries for me on New Year's Eve."

"I would be happy to do that again, if you want me to."

"No, as you can see the caterer has things well in hand. I still can't pry myself out of the kitchen. Force of habit, I guess."

"Well, we're going to go say hi to Dad," Douglas said. "But let me know if you need help."

"I will. Thank you."

Douglas hurried Trish out toward the lawn.

"What's the matter? Are you all right?" she said.

"Didn't you see her? She looks terrible."

"She did look kind of weak."

"Weak! You don't know her. That's not what she looks like at all."

"Why in the world did she have the party?"

"You would probably have to know my mother to know the answer to that one."

They found Bill straightening things up at the drinks table. He greeted them warmly.

"And who is this attractive young lady?" he said.

"This is Trish, a good friend of mine," Douglas replied.

"A *good* friend. I see. It's very nice to meet you, Trish, although I must say you look familiar."

"Don't let him get away with that. He knows exactly who you are."

"What do you mean?" she stammered.

"You know—the cottage."

"Oh! I am so sorry about that. I had no idea you were there."

"Don't worry, I was glad for the interruption. Who wouldn't be happy for an interruption from a pretty girl? They were losing anyway. I did call Douglas to let him know that some nice young lady had just shown up on his doorstep. I see he drew the right conclusion."

"Would you stop! You're embarrassing her."

"I'm so sorry, my dear. Am I embarrassing you?"

"Not at all," she said laughing.

"So what do you think of our young man?" Bill said, putting his hand on Douglas's shoulder.

"I think he's very special," Trish said forthrightly.

"He is indeed. The world does not know half his good qualities. But that's a good thing. They still have time to discover them. Has



he played his trombone for you yet?"

"I didn't even know he played the trombone."

"Ah yes, see? He is a first-class player. All-state, all four years in high school. A stand-out in college. But for some reason he likes to keep these deep, dark secrets to himself."

"Yes, he is very modest. That's what I like about him."

"Fortunately he has a great deal to be modest about. Oh—that didn't come out right. I mean he has a great many hidden gifts about which one *can* be modest, as opposed to people who have no gifts at all and are modest for nothing. Oh! This is getting worse and worse. But you know what I mean. Anyway, don't give up too easily. I have to warn you, he's kind of bashful."

"I have no intention of giving up," she replied with a smile.

After that they found their way to the pool house, where Roger's crowd had gathered for heavy consumption.

"Where's Mark?" Anna said to Trish, not realizing that she and Douglas were together.

"I have no idea," Trish replied coolly.

"Mark moved to Chicago," Roger said, chiming in. "He got a cushy job at some investment company. I forget which one."

"One step ahead of the shotgun," Douglas muttered under his breath.

"What does that mean?" Anna said wide-eyed.

"He got the boss's daughter pregnant or something," Roger replied helpfully.

"Yes, and then he dumped her."

"Hey—it's not his fault if she wants to keep the baby. Catholics!"

"You don't know anything about it. She is a very sweet girl."

"I bet she is," Roger said, and his cronies laughed.

Douglas was so angry he thought he was going to explode. But he managed to curb his tongue. He went to Jeff and did some catching up, and Trish continued talking to Anna.

Later they were sitting by the pool. They were both quiet. "Are you all right?" Trish said.

"Sorry I lost my cool in there. He does it to me every time."

"I didn't realize about Mark."

"Yes, he was interested in her for a long time."

"While he was still asking me out?"

"Umm—yes. It was one reason why I was so upset with him."

“So this poor girl’s life is basically ruined.”

“The thing is none of them know her,” he replied, gesturing to the well-lighted pool house where the hilarity went on unabated. “She is a good person, kindhearted. And what he did to her was just inexcusable. Completely brutal. I can’t even tell you.”

“You think he should have married her?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to think. I don’t have a very high opinion of him, so I can’t say I would want to see her stuck with him her whole life. But to blame her for having the baby—that’s too much. That’s just sick.”

A lot of feelings came over Trish at this point. She had tears in her eyes that he could not see and decided not to try to reply.

They stayed through dessert. Douglas introduced her to many old family friends and acquaintances. This cheered him up after the argument with Roger. He found he enjoyed introducing Trish. He was extremely proud of her, and it was a pleasure to see how she handled herself and how others reacted to her.

They did not return to the pool house. Douglas was used to being teased by his brother but this was different. He felt very protective of Marissa and still had not gotten over the bitterness of his year-long internment with Mark, who had destroyed Ralph’s business *and* his family with a cold-bloodedness that he would not have believed if he had not seen it with his own eyes.

Later, after the party was done and all the guests and the caterer had gone home, the following interesting conversation occurred between Helen and Bill as they relaxed in the living room after a long, exhausting day.

“What did you think of the young lady who was with Douglas?” Bill said.

“I’m very impressed with her. I remember her from New Year’s Eve. She jumped right in and knew exactly how to handle herself in the kitchen.”

“That is high praise indeed, coming from you. She’s very pretty and seems to have a pleasant personality. I received positive reports from more than one quarter.”

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of her for Douglas.”

“Why not? He can’t stay single forever.”

“But isn’t that the one Roger calls the runaway bride?”

“What!”

“I’m pretty sure it is. Apparently she was having a big wedding

somewhere and walked away at the altar.”

“Uh-oh. That’s not good.”

“No, especially with Douglas’s history.”

This was not what Bill needed to hear. And just when he was inclined to like her.

## XXIX

*Helen's new treatment is working  
Bill is reconciled to her in his own mind  
Painful memories for Trish*

**H**ELEN'S WAN APPEARANCE at the party was not indicative of her progress. She looked weak and sickly because the new medications were working, or at least that's the way the doctors were spinning it. Her numbers were getting better and continued to improve into the fall.

With the cooler weather and the course of treatment completed, she started to revive. Fall was her favorite season, and for the first time in a long time she felt a partial renewal of her optimism and strength and even her zest for life. She started going into the office. She was eager to get back and glad to be back. The days were short at first but gradually grew longer.

She did not go back to her old killer schedule, however. She never did. Something had changed for her. The things that had once seemed so urgent now struck her as rather ordinary. She saw them as they were, perhaps. It was as if she had been pulled out of her old self and made to see that much of what she used to invest herself in was meaningless. Or at least it did not have the meaning it used to have for her—because it was no longer personal.

The battles did not look like battles anymore but simply problems to be solved. She realized when she thought about it that this was because she was no longer in the battle—as Helen Lendell, a person to be reckoned with. It seems that person had died, been killed by the cancer. The new Helen was no less eager to do a good job and get things right, but she did not care so much about winning. She had learned that winning wasn't what it seemed to be.

Her way of relating to her staff also changed. She was much more likely now to send a thank-you email than to question or criticize. Naturally as a result the mood on her staff improved. They became motivated by a desire to please her rather than the fear of making her angry. And the results, she noted with some amusement, seemed pretty much the same. The quality of work did

not go down as her touch softened; it might have even gone up.

She tried to apply these same lessons at home, but frankly it was hard. There it really was personal and she could not get around it. A lot of the old aggressiveness and seeming compulsion to criticize Bill was gone, but some of it was still hanging around, like an inner demon with a mind of its own. She struggled against it. She did not want to be critical, especially after everything he had done for her. Sometimes her better nature prevailed and sometimes it didn't, although to her credit she usually felt regret.

For his part, Bill was resigned to acceptance. He did not feel he loved Helen anymore, not the way he loved her when they were young, but his respect for her started to return. He respected the talent and intelligence she exhibited in so many ways, her command of people, of solutions. He respected her for the way she battled cancer and seemed, to this point anyway, to show resilience.

Did he ever think about leaving her when she became difficult? Probably, but he was able to chase such dark thoughts away. First of all, he remembered belatedly that he had made a vow somewhere in the distant past, and he believed in vows. Second, Helen was his wife. What was he going to do, try to take up with some twenty-five year old girl, like some men he knew? It was too ridiculous. An older man with a young woman—all you had to do was to play out the scenario over a few decades if you were having illusions about happiness.

No, he was very much a realist when it came to getting old. He wanted to get old with Helen because that was the course he had chosen and because it was, in his mind, the most natural course. He wanted to get old gracefully. They had plenty of money. They would never be a burden to the boys. If she could not show him tenderness, then this made him sad, but it no longer made him angry. He preferred a close bond but was not opposed to living separate lives together.

Also this was his house, where he had grown up, his home and in so many ways the center of his life. He loved it more and more with each passing year. He did not want to give it up. He had enjoyed his sojourn at his mother's house, his one great act of rebellion; he had enjoyed being alone and being in a new place after so many years. But the enjoyment had not taken long to wear off. It could not be compared with his own home.

Were these mere mercenary considerations? No. Bill had a lot

of reasons to put the past behind him and try get beyond what happened. He was determined not to be Menelaus, determined not to allow his life to be ruined by empty notions of honor and false pride—or Helen’s life, for that matter. In short, there seemed to him to be a lot of reasons to stay. Yes, the comfort of home was one of them. It may not have been a pristine reason, but there are worse things in the world, as reasons go.

Besides, there were definitely good times with Helen, when she was not barking at him. Helen was, in many ways, a magnificent woman. He thought about the little chat they had after the party, decompressing in the living room. It was annoying that she felt she had to have these end-of-summer bashes, and especially annoying that she went ahead with it when she was so sick, but there was pleasure in sitting quietly afterward and chatting with her about it.

Her revelation about Douglas’s new friend was a bit startling. He did not know how he felt about that. He was very protective of Douglas. He did not tell Helen about the little incident after the pool party and how the girl showed up at the guest house looking for her son. He did not know how she would react to such information. He did not know quite how to react himself. Part of him thought it was cute and amusing. Part of him was worried about Douglas getting mixed up with another flake.

Meanwhile Trish’s joy had no sooner appeared than it seemed to be in danger of foundering. She could not get the conversation in the pool house out of her head, nor the one that came right after. Marissa’s story was almost as disturbing to her as it was to Douglas, but for different reasons. First of all, she had gone out with Mark, many times. He had never shown her the dark side that apparently he showed to Douglas, the side that came out with Marissa; but to her this was not comforting. No, it was shocking.

As far as Marissa was concerned, her whole heart went out to her. She understood what Douglas meant when he said Mark was too old for Marissa. No young girl should have been dating someone who was so full of himself and such a good salesman, in the sense of someone who feigns and is not reliable. She was sick when she thought about what Marissa must be going through. She did not even know her, but still she was sick. She trusted Douglas’s description implicitly. It was easy for her to imagine a sweet, innocent girl at home crying in her bed.

Marissa’s sad tale was unnerving to her in another way as well.

Some of the things Douglas said were very hard for her to hear. It did not change her feelings about him. Indeed, she may have loved him even more. But she could not help wondering if a change was coming in his feelings toward *her*, in fact was inevitable. She was conscious of being put on a pedestal by him. She saw it in the way he introduced her to his parents and friends.

Douglas thought very highly of her and wanted to show it; but she did not feel so highly of herself, and this made her skittish. The more he reveled in his connection to her, the more she worried about letting him down. The very thing that should have brought her happiness instead brought a measure of pain and worry. She loved him so much. She agreed with every word his father said about him. And for this very reason she was afraid of disappointing him. She did not know if she was worthy of him.

After all, she was the runaway bride! Nobody could know the pain she had gone through and was going through even now, in the quiet moments when she forgot to be diverted. Sometimes it went away; those were the good times. It had gone away completely in the first ecstatic days with Douglas. She should have known she would pay for being so happy, however. She was paying now and was afraid of how much she would have to pay in the future.

She remembered their little talk when he said he thought God had put them together. She thought about the thrill she felt when those words left his mouth. She realized how sincere they were. His faith was important to him, and this was very sweet. But in another way it was very bitter. He did not know everything about her. Would he still believe God had brought them together if he did?

He dropped her off from the party and she went into her little in-law apartment on the north side of her parents' house and just cried. She did not know what else to do. What could she do? She almost wanted to send him an email and tell him never to see her again, never to call her or try to contact her; go away, dear boy, and have a good and happy life. But she couldn't do that, could she? She could not hurt him that way. She also did not want to hurt herself. So she just cried.

## XXX

*Spending time together  
Douglas meets her family  
Sweet schemes, bitter endings*

**T**HE FALL WAS GOLDEN for Douglas. A new job at which he excelled, a new home and independence from his family, his mother's gradual improvement—but most of all, of course, he was in love.

They were together a lot. They never seemed to tire of it. Always on weekends and several times during the week, meeting for something as simple as a walk or elaborate as a trip into the city to hear a concert or go to a play. They simply enjoyed being in each other's company, and when they weren't they were almost always thinking about each other. Always.

For him the highlight of their relationship was when she came to his new house. He wanted so much to share it with her, not because he was proud of it—he was accustomed to much grander houses—but because of how much he loved her. Douglas had an almost antique vision of them as the honest couple in their honest little house, living quiet lives and loving and caring for their children, and being good neighbors, full of charity and kindness, their doors always open.

A little of the old self-doubt crept in, it must be admitted, when she was coming. He could not help thinking of Vanessa and how she would react to such a house. Some of his shyness returned as he hurried to greet Trish at her car and welcome her. But Trish did not disappoint him in any degree. She loved everything about it. She loved the situation, the property with a vast nature preserve behind, but most of all she loved the house. She said it was perfect.

He did not know if he believed her completely, but if she was fibbing for his sake he loved her for it. The house was, after all, rather humble. He had great plans for renovating it and had already begun to do some of the work, but he had no illusions. It was not



the kind of house that was in style in their little part of the world. It had a good deal of character but was not made to impress.

He said this to Trish. She insisted that she loved it and it was just her kind of thing. She had no desire for a mansion, either a real one or the kind of faux mansions that were popping up all over and dominating small pieces of land. She liked a quiet, country house, and it was perfect for her. She saw the same possibilities as he. She had very much the same notions of happiness.

With such intimacy and constant contact, and with the deepening love that came with getting to know her better, it did not take Douglas long to lose his fear of relationships. Any frost that lingered in his bones from Vanessa melted away just as real frosts began to appear on invigorating fall mornings, bringing bright colors to the trees. He had been living in restraints of his own making, enforced by pain and shame, but now he gave himself permission to loosen them and learn to trust Trish and the intense feelings he had for her.

Trish was worthy of his trust. She loved him very much and, one might say, without the illusions of youth. Douglas had many admirable traits which she saw and was fully able to appreciate. She could give him the sincere respect his mother and brother could not give because her way of looking at the world was very much like his. The things she wanted were the same things she had known at home—sincere love, good friends, family intimacy.

When there is a rising of two such souls, they cannot help but converge. They were drawn to each other instinctively at first, and then by habit, and finally by reason and recognition. And in this case it was a meeting of two *lost* souls, as we know. The force drawing them together was strengthened by their sense of loss and need. It was not necessary for them to learn to recognize each other's worth. They were eager to recognize it, eager to look for the good in each other.

At the end of October, Trish invited Douglas to have dinner with her family. This was a big step for her, for the reasons already hinted at. It was a big step for any couple, since it could be taken to indicate commitment, but it was an especially big step for Trish because of her problems with commitment in the past. It wasn't because of Douglas that she hesitated about bringing him home; not at all. She was proud of him and wanted to introduce him to her parents. It was because of herself.

Still, she was very glad for them to meet him. She was close to her parents, who had always been wonderful to her and loved her unconditionally, both in the good times and in some very bad ones. She wanted to share Douglas with them. He was just the sort of “young man” they would be able to appreciate, with his thoughtfulness, his seriousness, his gentle manners. And she was right. They loved him, particularly her mother, who couldn’t stop raving about him. Her father had a hard time believing anyone was good enough for Trish, but he did concede that Douglas seemed like a “surprisingly solid guy.”

Douglas was also very impressed by them. They struck him as being down to earth and openly affectionate in a way his family had never been. He was surprised and delighted by the relationship between the four sisters. They seemed like such very good friends. The way they talked to each other was almost startlingly kind. He compared them with Roger and himself and felt ashamed. The youngest, Cara, was a tease and attached herself to him, which was both flattering and amusing.

Not that there was no friction between them. They were, after all, sisters. But the basis of their relationship was a decided affection. Douglas could not help looking at Trish again and again as she talked and laughed with them. It was just the kind of family life he imagined for himself, the kind of life that could make up for so many years of frustration and unhappiness and loneliness. He thought of his father and wished he were there. He wondered what he would think of them.

Trish’s father was stolid but not remote; in one sense the master of the house, in gravitas, and in another sense not the master at all, as he observed the flurry of activity around him. He loved puns, a form of humor of which Douglas himself was not particularly enamored; but he admired his cleverness and was willing to laugh when everyone else rolled their eyes. Trish received her dark good looks from him. Her mother was sensible, smiling, and a very good hostess. On that first visit and every subsequent visit she seemed to know exactly how to make Douglas feel at home.

After that there were many visits to Trish’s house, and they were always happy visits. Douglas liked going there and being with her family. They seemed to feel the same way about him. Mrs. Duggan’s comment was that he “fit right in.” For him, this was a big compliment. Fitting right in was the hardest thing in the

world for him and very important. He was not used to feeling that way with his own family.

He could not help comparing the two families. His own seemed to him like two separate families—his mother and Roger versus his father and himself. There was not a great deal of kinship between them in his mind. Things were different in the Duggan family. They were organic. The girls were very different from each other, but it was almost as if each one had a role to play in the whole. It was like being in an orchestra. Stringed and brass instruments can come together to harmonious ends.

Douglas was overwhelmed by the exuberance of their family life. There had been little or no exuberance growing up in his large, stately home. Helen would not have put up with it. Everything was charming and lively at the Duggans'. It seemed like a whirlwind of cheerful activity. The girls were always laughing, chatting, making plans. Well, maybe not always perfectly cheerful, but then nothing in this life is perfect. The Duggans seemed to fill their house; Douglas's sense of his own home was of space and emptiness.

He felt so very much at home there and so welcomed almost as one of the family that he began to get certain ideas in his head as the holidays approached. He started to think about asking Trish to marry him. He was pretty sure she would say yes. She told him she loved him. They had spent practically the whole fall together. He got along very well with her family, who certainly seemed to think a marriage was in the offing. One of the girls even asked at the dinner table—"So when are you two getting married?"

He had brought her to meet his parents on a little more formal basis as well, although just once. His mother was having a dinner party and he asked if he could include Trish. He was almost embarrassed to bring her there because her home was so very different from his. Everything seemed so stiff and formal in comparison, and he did not know how Trish would react. But his father was wonderful. He had never appreciated his warmth and easy confidence more than when he watched him put Trish at ease.

Douglas wasn't living at home anymore, so he did not have an opportunity to overhear what his family thought about Trish after they left. Helen seemed to have been impressed by her facility in the kitchen back on New Year's Eve and to have determined from this that she was a very capable young woman, which was probably the highest compliment she was capable of giving. She was not sure

what Trish saw in her older son, but of course she did not share these thoughts with Bill, because of his partiality. In any case she felt he would be very fortunate to have her.

Bill's feelings were a little different. He liked Trish as a person, but then he liked everyone as a person. Or rather, he always looked for something to like in everyone he met, and almost always succeeded. There was a great deal to like about Trish, but he was a little dismayed at the idea of Douglas bringing her to the house. What did it mean? She was the runaway bride! He asked Roger, and he confirmed Helen's suspicion. This scared Bill. He did not want his son getting hurt, not again.

Roger, of course, thought the whole thing was hilarious—his hapless brother dating the runaway bride. He was looking forward to the fireworks and expecting to be entertained. He was a little surprised when he saw them together. They seemed very attached. But that would change as soon as she got to know him. He could not imagine someone like Trish spending her life with his brother.

For his part, Douglas felt reasonably sure that a proposal would be welcomed by Trish. There was no opposition from her family and none that he knew of from home. He and Trish were highly compatible; indeed, they were so close it almost felt like they were already married. There was one thing they had not done that married couples are known to do, but this was by design. He did not want to take advantage of her. And he had his own ideas about those things.

There was the question of the ring—whether to go ahead and buy one or discuss it first. Part of him wanted to surprise her and part of him wanted to share the plan just as they were sharing everything else. Finally he opted for the fun of surprise. Thanksgiving was coming; it seemed like the perfect time to do something outlandish and romantic. Besides, he didn't want to disappoint her. This time he wanted to do everything right. Weren't men supposed to orchestrate the proposal? He called Mrs. Duggan and asked her Trish's ring size. The response was encouraging.

He had just received an unexpected bonus of a surprisingly generous nature, a little sign of gratitude from his employers for the phenomenal work he had been doing and his long hours. It inspired him. He went to a place in Norwalk suggested by his boss and looked at all the engagement rings. The one he really liked would have been out of bounds except for the large bonus check

he had just deposited. He bought it and barely came out even.

They had a date that night. At this point they were having a date just about every night. Dinner and a movie seemed right for the Saturday before America's favorite family holiday. Douglas thought long and hard about how to handle his delicate task. He could surprise her during dinner. That was how they did it in some of his favorite movies. He was tempted, but it did not seem very practical, and moreover it was taking a lot for granted.

At the movie, perhaps? Pretend to have dropped something and come up with the ring on his knees? No, that was the other Doug, the funny one on *King of Queens*. Take her out for a drink and find a quiet booth, maybe even prime the waitress to bring it over on a serving tray? No, it still didn't seem private enough, personal enough for the intense closeness he felt with Trish, for the intense intimacy he felt.

Should he wait? No, he couldn't wait. He was too excited. He wanted to give it to her that very night. But he put it off for so long that the only time left was in the car when he was dropping her off. They often just sat there at the end of a date, not wanting to part. She would not be expecting it.

She certainly wasn't.

"So I kind of wanted to ask you something," he said, as he realized his heart was beginning to pound.

"Ask ahead!" she said cheerfully.

"Well, I was wondering—I mean, I was hoping—"

"Hoping what?" she said, her eyes now starting to get wide as she became aware of his tone.

"I was hoping maybe you would want to marry me. We've been spending so much time together. We might as well be married, don't you think?"

This did not come out the way he intended. Instead of a forceful "will you marry me?" it was almost like an apology, or a joke. He realized as the words were coming out of his mouth that he still did not feel very confident about his ability to make a woman happy. He could not be bold, although he wanted to be.

Trish looked at him for a moment. A long moment. Her tone changed. "I think it's a lovely idea. I do. You know how I feel about you. Let's talk about it and see what develops."

This completely threw him. It seemed almost like a "no." It definitely wasn't a yes. What in the world did she want to talk

about? Either she wanted to marry him or she didn't. Or maybe she didn't realize he was proposing. Maybe she thought he was just *talking* about proposing. He certainly was beating around the bush.

He blundered on. "I'm afraid I might have jumped the gun a little. I got you something."

"*Got* me something? Like what?" she said, now looking positively alarmed.

Douglas reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the little box and held it out to her. For a moment she just sat there and stared at it. He became flustered. He reached over with his other hand and opened it for her to see. She blanched. Even in the dark he could see something was wrong.

"I'm sorry, it's way too much," she said, holding up her hand.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I don't deserve it."

"I think you do."

"I know, and that's the problem. I can't accept this right now."

"Really? I mean, are you being serious?"

"I am serious. I'm so sorry."

He looked at her for a moment. "Will you ever be able to accept it?"

She paused. "I don't know." With that she practically leaped out of the car and ran into her apartment. Douglas watched in utter astonishment as she unlocked the door and disappeared inside.

He did not know what to do with himself. His first instinct was to go knock on the door. He wanted to talk to her, but what if she did not want to talk to him? He did not want to risk making a scene in front of her family.

What had gone wrong? They were having a perfectly wonderful evening up to that point. Was it the way he said it, something he did that upset her? He had no idea. He hadn't exactly been elegant. He hadn't been forceful. Was that why she reacted the way she did?

Why she *refused* him? He forced himself to acknowledge the truth. He had just been refused. It was stunning, but he had to be honest with himself. There was no point sugarcoating it. He had done too much of that in the past and reaped nothing but trouble. He had been rejected. As hard as it was to believe.

And now the pain, the embarrassment! He did not know if he had ever felt such pain. Then he remembered Vanessa. Yes, he had felt worse pain than this. But that did not make it any easier. It was

not as if he were some guy taking a shot with a girl just to see what she will say. No, this was someone Douglas was deeply in love with, someone who he thought was deeply in love with him.

He had spent the entire fall making plans in his mind with this beloved girl, planning his whole life. Was it over? Before it had even begun? He started the car and pulled out of the driveway in shock. The drive home was an out-of-body experience. He did not drive fast. He was conscious of the sound of the new snow tires on the pavement. It droned and he droned right along with it. The droning was the only thing keeping him grounded.

## XXXI

*Douglas in a tizzy*  
*Thanksgiving at home*  
*A walk around the estate*

ALL THE CONFIDENCE he had been building up over the fall now simply vanished like a tall tree cascading over a cliff. Somehow he made it home—he wasn't quite sure how. He parked in the driveway and sat there staring at the dark outline of his house. This was the house he was supposed to share with Trish. This was the house they had talked about renovating. This was the house where she said she would love to plant a garden. No, he didn't imagine it. She really said all those things.

The feeling of rejection was absolutely crushing—it was magnified because he had been rejected before—but even more crushing was the fear of loss. Douglas could not comprehend the prospect of losing Trish. She said “I don't know.” He did not have enough alchemy to turn this lead into any kind of gold. She might not ever accept the ring he was still holding in his hand. And then what was he going to do?

He took the ring inside and flicked on a couple of lights and went upstairs and put it in the back of his sock drawer. Why *there*? He had no idea. There was no logic to what he did because he was incapable of thinking logically at that moment. It just seemed like a natural place to put it.

Douglas had his usual smile on his face while he did this—the one he put on like a nice shirt to present himself to the world—but to whom was he presenting himself now? He did not know. Still, the smile was comforting somehow. Made him feel like he was in control. Which of course he wasn't.

He went back downstairs and walked around aimlessly, bumping into things, not knowing where he was going, not having any place to go. He went outside and sat down in the pine rocking chair and watched his breath turn to icy steam. Became quite fascinated with it, really. But it was too cold to stay out there. He went back inside but did not know what to do with himself. When



all else failed, he lay down on the sofa.

A tremendous amount of pain was coming his way, apparently, and he could not avoid it. He could not hold it off, no matter how much he smiled. Eventually it would come and roll right over him. He thought she loved him; didn't she say she did? He thought they were doing so well. He thought she was thinking of him as her paramour. She invited him to her parents' house. She said all those things when she saw his house. What was he *supposed* to think?

He did not know what to think. He was too amazed and stunned and deflated to think at all. It wasn't just the fact that she said no; it was the way she said it. There was a coldness or distance that he had not experienced before. What were all those nesting signals she had been sending out? What were all those lovely conversations about the future? Had he imagined it all? No—it happened. They really did say all those things together.

Now it was true they had never talked about marriage, at least not explicitly. They had never had an open conversation about the thing he proposed. Was that why she reacted the way she did? She said she wanted to “talk about it,” but wasn't this the kind of thing people say when they don't really want to talk about it; when they want you to go away but are too polite to say so?

Apparently she did not want to marry him. But what a way to find out! Putting himself out there only to be knocked down! A beautiful diamond ring, of which, up until just an hour ago, he had been so very proud! All foolishness. He had done it again. He had thrown himself into a relationship with someone who did not really want him and allowed himself to be crushed.

It didn't make any sense. Okay, it was true that they had not made love. But they had kissed; they had caressed. Was it all she was she was looking for? Someone to kiss and caress and nothing more? Was he playing into her hands by trying to be a gentleman? Was that why they called her the “runaway bride”? Because she ran away from real attachment?

Douglas felt ashamed of himself for having such thoughts. He had been hurt, and now he was trying to hurt back. But he was still very much in love with Trish. He did not want to think negative thoughts about her. He could not hurt her without hurting himself. But now what? Where did this refusal leave him, exactly?

Did she still want to see him? It *seemed* like she did. She said she wanted to “talk about it.” But what was there to talk about if she

didn't want to marry him? He did not understand her. He could not help feeling he had been cast off. She did not mind seeing him; she did not mind spending time with him; but she did not want to marry him.

It was the same thing all over again, the same old hurt. He was not suitable marriage material. Vanessa left him because he wasn't good enough for her and now the same thing had happened with Trish. Part of him wanted to drive right back over to her house and propose again, be more forceful this time. Part of him wanted to demand his rights—but what rights? He could not make her love him. She said she loved him, but apparently not in that way.

Still, she left the door open a little. She had refused his proposal and his expensive ring, but she did indicate a willingness to talk. There was no question about it—he had to talk to her. If nothing else, he needed an explanation. He could not just simply put her out of his life, refuse to call her, stop seeing her, no matter how hurt he was; not after everything that had happened that fall. There was too much ambiguity. Nor did he want to.

But he was hurt. Very hurt. He went to bed hurt and he woke up even more hurt on Sunday morning. He made up his mind not to call her that day. He did not want to appear to be in a hurry. He did not want to go crawling back on his knees. He had his pride. He had been wounded, slighted in his mind, and he felt like he wanted her to know it.

It was probably the longest day of his life, as long as Joshua's long day. He went to church, which took up some of it. He saw his parents there and smiled his fake smile. When he got back home it was still blaring morning and he still had the rest of the day to contend with. He went for one of his walks. It was a particularly long one on a fine November day. He was a lover of November. He loved the cool November light and the fact that the grass had not yet been annihilated by frost. Annihilation was coming, sooner than anyone expected.

He came home and put on a football game but could not be diverted. The two teams were not very good, and the game was a little too violent and the showboating a little too vulgar for him in his tender frame of mind. He played his trombone for a while, but that was the old stand-by, wasn't it? When he was at his wit's end and did not know what else to do with himself and did not know if he had a place in the world he would pick up his trombone.

It did not soothe him the way it normally did. Nothing could soothe him now—except Trish. He felt his firm resolve melting away. He did not even make it through the day. He called her. It was the hardest call he had ever made and perhaps the strangest conversation he'd ever had in his life. She seemed distant, cool. Or was it his imagination? One thing was certain: a barrier had come between them.

She agreed to meet him at the Inn for a drink. He didn't really want a drink, but he felt awkward inviting her to his house. The Inn seemed safe, familiar. Still, seeing her after being refused was very, very difficult. They did not greet each other in the usual way. They just stood there looking at each other. She seemed uncomfortable, and he did not know how to act. He wanted to embrace her but did not know if she wanted it. He did not know *what* she wanted at this point and was unwilling to put himself in a position where he could be hurt even more.

The conversation started out completely and weirdly impersonal. It was as if they had never been alone before and had not just spent the entire fall together. Douglas kept it impersonal on his side because he did not know if she wanted anything else, and she had her own reasons. He kept thinking things would change. He kept thinking she would get tired of banalities and become the old Trish again.

This did not happen. Things stayed on a surface level for an hour or so until Douglas felt completely worn out and frustrated. He made no attempt to touch her, to take her hand. There were no welcoming signals of that kind coming from her, and he did not want to intrude and especially did not want to make a fool of himself again, like when he tried to give her the ring. It was a long hour of smiling and forced pleasantries and frankly pure torture.

There was an awkward silence when their drinks were done and they both seemed to have run out of energy. He simply said, "Should we go?" She nodded and they left. They still did not touch each other. It was dark out so he walked her to her car but made no attempt to touch her. "Well—bye," he said as she opened the door. "Bye," she said with a nervous little laugh and climbed in.

Were they having a fight? If so it was a very strange one. He would have preferred a real fight—at least he would know where he stood. There was no unpleasantness between them, and this was what disturbed him. He felt like he was running into a wall. He had

a wound that needed to be lanced. If she did not love him and did not want to marry him, so be it. Either way his wound needed healing—but it could not be healed if they were both determined to pretend it wasn't there.

Back home he received the following text: “Nice to see you at our usual place. Thanks.” He did not know what to make of this. So formal, so unlike her! After many fits and starts he tried to reply in kind: “It was great to see you, too. Let's do it again!”

She did not respond, which was troubling. The more he thought about it, the more troubling it became. Did it mean she did *not* want to do it again? Couldn't she even bring herself to muster up a meager “OK, sounds good”? It would have been nice. It would have gone a long way toward salving his ego and restoring his self-confidence. She didn't, and this seemed ominous. It seemed like a polite way of declining. Or maybe not so polite.

The ball was in her court, in his mind anyway. He did not feel he could text again until she texted; okay, his pride would not permit it. Monday went by with a twelve-hour workday and everything else and there was no text from Trish. Then Tuesday, Wednesday; same thing. He agonized. Should he text? Should he call? No, he shouldn't. If she wanted to explain herself, she would. He had reached out and it led to nothing.

The next day was Thanksgiving. He was with the family and assorted guests, including his maternal grandfather and step-grandmother, who had not been “up north” for the holiday for many years; but all he was thinking about was Trish. He had not heard from her in four days. He kept checking for messages but there were none. Actually it was kind of silly to keep checking, since the chime told him whenever one landed. He kept checking anyway, even at the dinner table, incurring the wrath of his mother, who seemed to have regained much of her strength.

Dinner was over and the men were watching football in the family room. Douglas sat there half-watching the game and half-listening to the conversation, but what he really wanted to do was to call Trish. He thought about her family undoubtedly having a wonderful time. He thought about how cheerful Thanksgiving must be at the Duggan house, a contrast to the cold formality of his own. He knew they always went for a walk after dinner, before pie. Trish had told him so. He wished he were there to walk with them. It was a fine Thanksgiving day, bright sunshine, in the fifties.

He wished he were there to walk with them.

But he could walk himself, couldn't he? He wasn't needed in the kitchen. He had already put all of the dishes in the dishwasher for his mother. No one would miss him. He slipped out the front door and felt his whole soul come to life as he stepped out of the shadows of the brick house and into nature and sunlight. It was not summer anymore; it was almost winter and winter colors. But he loved the winter in its own way. He loved the very serenity of it. He loved the ice that was beginning to form at the edges of the brook. He loved the rugosa roses and their cherry rose hips.

As he walked along he looked at the bare branches of the hardwood trees swaying gently in the breeze. So delicate and intricate against a pale blue sky. He looked at the trunks of the trees; for the first time in his life he actually saw them as aesthetic entities. It was a revelation. There was so much character and subdued beauty in those trunks. The oak, the maple, the whorly cedar! They were speaking to him. He thought of character and he thought of strength. He thought about what it meant to be firmly rooted. Was he firmly rooted? Without Trish, was he rooted at all?

He walked all the way around the property, slowly, taking everything in and saying his thanks, as much as he was able, maybe even compelling himself to say them, and then when he returned to the driveway he found himself being drawn to the guest house. He looked at it as he approached and remembered all the work he and his father had put into it. This made him smile. He knew it was locked so he didn't try to go in, but he sat on the porch in the gentle November light and looked at the view he knew so well.

The house was empty and emptiness made him sad. He wanted there to be life in the house. He thought about his own new house, not so new now, also empty. Would it be empty forever? He did not want it to be empty but he also did not know how it could be filled without Trish. He did not know if he *wanted* it to be filled without her. What if she would not have him? What if they really had reached an impasse in their relationship? What did that mean for him? Where would he ever find anyone like her again? Would he ever find love again—real love, not the kind that comes and goes in a moment? Would he ever find someone to love him?

## XXXII

*Douglas insists on talking with Trish  
Trish has a little run-in with her mother*

**T**HANKSGIVING WAS OVER, the holiday we mean, and then it was Black Friday, and Douglas, who was not a shopper, and had no fondness for crowds, was home from work with nothing to occupy his mind—except the long expanse of the weekend stretching itself out before him without Trish.

He went for a walk in the morning. It was cold and cloudy, and suddenly it began to flurry, and he loved snow flurries; but then it made him think of Trish again and the romance of the snow—and then this made him think of *La Boheme*. Trish was not a “boheme,” whatever that was, and he was certainly not an artist; but was their love just as doomed? He thought of the devastating love duet. Was it his destiny to find love and lose it as well?

Eventually he wound up back at the house. He stood there for a moment looking at it. The next logical thing after a long walk was to go inside, but did he want to go in? What was he going to do with himself? Read a book? He could not concentrate. Play his trombone? He was tired of it. He thought of the room he had started renovating. This was what he decided to do. He liked doing it, not so much the work itself, perhaps, as the working. He needed to keep himself occupied. He hummed to himself while he worked.

This was how he spent most of his day off—working. He didn’t even bother to stop for lunch. But then it started to get dark and he turned on the lights and the longing returned stronger than ever, the longing for Trish. Almost a full week had gone by without seeing or hearing from her. He was still waiting for her to respond to his text, still trying to preserve his pride, but was he going to wait forever? It seemed self-defeating. Especially since what he really wanted to do was see Trish.

He called her and invited her out to dinner. It sounded like she was with a lot of people, and he wished he were there with her.

They agreed to meet for pizza—it seemed like the easiest thing to do. But it was bright and open in the pizza restaurant and he felt very exposed. He wished they had gone to the Inn. He could not say the things he wanted to say, ask the questions he wanted to ask. There still seemed to be a curtain over her emotions.

They finished their pizza and then he invited her to his house to listen to music. He didn't really want to listen to music, but this was the only excuse he could think of to entice her. She agreed but seemed reluctant. This stung him. Didn't she want to come to his house? He found himself staring at the car on the road ahead of him. What was she thinking? Was she wishing she did not have to go so far out of her way? Was he imposing?

It felt strange, walking into the house with her. They had done it so many times before but always with unspoken joy, always with the mutual understanding that this was *their house*. Douglas did not have this beautiful feeling anymore. She was quiet while he unlocked the door, which also unnerved him. Why wasn't she making any of her jokes, for instance teasing him for his clumsiness with the old lock? Why wouldn't she talk to him? Did he really want to know? Or was he afraid to find out?

He offered her a drink. She said no—she was driving. He hung his head. They were not communicating. “Not that kind of drink—a Coke or something.” She still said no. She was resisting him; he could feel it. What to do? How to overcome this resistance, so telling? He decided to jump in.

“So listen, I guess I need to apologize to you.”

“Apologize! For what?”

“For last Saturday. I must have misunderstood. I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“You didn't hurt me. Not at all.”

“Well—okay; maybe ‘hurt’ isn't quite the right word. I shouldn't have presumed. I should have talked it over with you first.”

“It's not your fault,” she said, not looking at him. “It has nothing to do with you.”

Douglas was startled by this statement. What did she mean? Was there someone else? He'd been there before. Was that why she was being so tight-lipped?

“Okay. So I guess what I'm wondering is—what happens now? I mean, you don't want to get married. I get that. I don't understand it, but I get it. I'm just not sure what you want me to do, if

anything. Should we go back to the way we were before and pretend nothing ever happened?”

“I don’t know if that’s possible. It’s not what you think. I just don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say I *think* anything. I’m kind of waiting for you to tell me what to think.”

“I can’t tell you that, either. Honestly, I don’t know what to tell you. You would probably be better off if you never saw me again.”

Douglas was stunned. “You don’t really mean that.”

“I don’t know what I mean. I kept thinking it would be different this time, but it isn’t. In fact it’s about a million times worse.”

“But I love you.”

“No, you don’t. You just think you do. You don’t even know me.”

He did not know what to say to this. Then he got a little angry. “So that’s it, then? Just like that? I mean, after everything we’ve done together, everything we’ve said?”

“It’s better this way. Trust me.” She would not look at him. “I think I should go.”

“Go ahead. I’m not stopping you.”

“Don’t be angry with me.”

“How can I not be angry? You just ruined my life.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m trying to save it.”

“Save it! By cutting me off?”

“Believe me, it’s probably the best thing that could happen. I’m going to go now. I’m sorry.” She turned and walked out the door.

Douglas felt like dying. It was over, it really was over. And he had absolutely no idea why. He could not believe it had anything to do with her. As far as he was concerned, Trish was perfect. No, it was because of him and his many shortcomings. It was the same old thing all over again—he could not make a woman happy just like he could never make his mother happy. She said he didn’t love her. She was just trying to be kind. What she really meant was she did not love *him*. And she would never be able to love him.

That was why she refused the proposal. That was why she wasn’t calling. That was why she said she was trying to save his life by walking away. She did not want him to be trapped in a marriage with someone who did not love him. It was the only possible explanation. “It’s probably the best thing that could happen.” She



might as well have come right out and said it. She wanted to break up with him.

Douglas went down for the second time, and this time he told himself it was the last time. He did not know what it was about him that drove women away, but he knew he could not take this kind of pain, worse even than when Vanessa deserted him. He had just been left bereft by the woman he loved and, as far as he knew, the only woman he could ever love.

He had his whole future planned in his head and now that future was gone. Why did he insist on flattering himself? Why did he think he could make someone like Trish happy? He thought about how pretty she was. He thought about the cool, calm demeanor that she had apparently inherited from her father and the sense of humor. He thought about her high ideals and deep thoughts. What made him think he deserved someone like her? Would he never learn?

As for Trish, she ran away to hide the tears. Now she fought them all the way home. She knew she had to get home and she knew she could not afford to succumb to her emotions. But as soon as she was safe in her apartment she threw herself down on her bed and cried. She could still see his uncomprehending face. It broke her heart. She cried and cried.

After a little while there was a light knock on the door, and then her mother came in.

"You *are* here! I thought I saw you come in. Don't you want to come join us? The kids are playing Mexican Train."

"No, thanks."

"What's the matter? You look like you've been crying."

"I'm not having a very good day," Trish said—and she burst into tears again.

Her mother came to her and put her arms around her. "What is it, honey? Are you all right?"

"No."

"What happened? Tell me."

"We broke up."

"You and Douglas? No, that can't be. He adores you."

"I know. That's why we broke up."

Her mother looked at her. "I don't understand."

"I haven't told him."

"You haven't told him what—oh! But you have to tell him. We

can't go through *that* again."

"I can't. It will ruin everything."

"Why would it 'ruin everything'? You're not the only one. He loves you so much. He'll understand."

"He loves me too much. That's the problem."

"There are a lot of girls out there who wish they had that problem, believe me."

"You don't understand. He's religious."

"So? We're religious. We go to mass."

"No, it's different. He thinks God brought us together."

"Well, I believe that too. Don't you? I know he brought your father and me together."

"That's why I can't tell him. I can't do that to him. Don't you get it?"

"You mean you don't want to tell him because you think it will hurt *him*—or you don't want to tell him because you think it will hurt *you*?"

"You don't understand. I just can't."

"Well, there are some things I do understand. This is a very nice young man, one of the nicest young men I have ever met. It's not just me; your father thinks so too. And your father never approved of any of the boys you dated, not just the one he wanted to kill. Douglas is different. He's respectful. He works hard. He owns a house. He has a good job. He's even 'religious,' as you say. Not to put too fine a point on it, but you would be crazy to let him go just because of your pride."

"It's not my pride. I just can't tell him. I literally cannot get the words to come out of my mouth."

"You have to tell him! Come on! I'm telling you, he will understand."

"I can't. I want to. I just can't."

"All right," she said, pulling out her phone. "I'll do it myself. Give me his number."

"Don't you dare! Do not call him."

"Obviously I'm not going to call him. Give me a little credit, will you? But you can't keep doing this to yourself. You have to learn to trust people."

"I'm trying. I just need a little more time."

Her mother was too upset to say anything more. She thought Douglas was the one. She carried a mother's burden for her four

## TRISH'S SECRET

daughters. If she was angry or frustrated with Trish it was only because she loved her and was worried about her happiness. She was lucky. She found Bob. He was a great guy—but there were not too many Bobs out there. She ached for her daughter. She hoped she was not making a terrible mistake.

### XXXIII

*Douglas goes out with Jeff and loses his rudder  
A meeting in the cold*

**T**RUST HER? Douglas did not want to trust her—not with this, anyway. He would have gladly trusted her with his heart, his treasure, his life; but the one thing he did not want to trust her with was the strange insistence that somehow he would be better off without her. “You don’t love me. You don’t know me.” What did all of that even mean? He did not have the slightest idea.

The holidays went by but they were not holidays for Douglas, in any sense of the word. He managed to hang on by throwing himself into work. His long walks became even longer. He had an interesting conversation with his father at Christmas.

“I can’t help noticing that you seem a little down.”

“Do I? I don’t know. Maybe it’s the holidays.”

“I know people can get depressed during the holidays, but you always seemed to enjoy them.”

“I guess it’s easier when you have someone to enjoy them with.”

“Ah! I see. What happened to that pretty brunette you were going around with?”

“She’s not interested in me.”

“What! Where do they get these girls these days? How could she not be interested in you?”

“I guess it’s just the Vanessa thing all over again. I don’t have what it takes to make a woman happy.”

“Then women are idiots. But I was afraid this might happen.”

“You were? Why?”

“Isn’t this the one they call the ‘runaway bride’? Your mother and I were both apprehensive about that.”

“You were? You never said anything.”

“Would you have listened if I did?” his father said with a smile.

This conversation didn’t really register with Douglas at the time—it was Christmas, after all, and he had other things on his

mind—but it came back to him later, when he was home by himself, and it kept coming back. Had his father struck on the missing explanation? Was it because she was the runaway bride and had a hard time making a commitment? Could it be that simple?

Douglas spent New Year's Eve at home, thinking about the party one year ago and how unhappy he had been, thinking about the fact that even in his unhappiness he was happier than he was now because he had hope, and wondering what the future would bring. Two more long, cold weeks went by with no word from Trish. It had been over a month now and Douglas was going out of his mind. He did not know if he should call her—that is, if she wanted him to call. He did not want to call if she did not want him to call. He wanted to honor her wishes.

At least that's what he told himself. What he wasn't perhaps acknowledging so much was his pride. He was still smarting from the humiliation of rejection, as it seemed to him. He had been rejected by women all his life, starting with his mother, and was unusually sensitive on that point. But it was easier to blame Trish for his reluctance to call and possibly put an end to his misery than it was to blame himself.

He lost all confidence in himself. Well, maybe not *all*. He did not lose confidence in himself as a worker—things were going very well in his new job. He did not lose confidence in himself as a musician—he was an undisputed star of the brass band. But there seemed to be something lacking in him when it came to women. It was the only possible explanation for Trish's behavior.

All he knew was he had been rejected emphatically, and now twice. Pride kept his hand away from the phone, sometimes just barely, but sometimes just barely is enough when electronic devices are our means of communication. Phones are on or off; there is no gray penetrable area, as when people are physically together.

Besides, he kept thinking maybe *she* would call. She was the one who had done the breaking off. He could not believe she would just simply end it and not try to talk to him, not try to give him some explanation. It wasn't like her. They had been so *happy* together. Or at least *he* thought they were. She said she loved him. It seemed like all she wanted to do was spend time with him, when she was not at work.

She would call; he was sure she would. But the long winter days went by with complete silence on her end. At first this made him

sad and hurt, but after a while it started to make him angry. *Why* wouldn't she call? Was his father right? Was it the "runaway bride" thing after all? He was searching for a complicated explanation, but maybe the correct answer was the obvious one.

There was a big snowstorm in the middle of the month. Douglas liked snowstorms and went for an invigorating walk in the thick of it. He had certain morbid fantasies that do not need to be explored here. In any case he made it back home. Jeff called later in the afternoon. Would he like to go to the Inn and listen to a folk singer who'd had a cachet a couple of decades ago? Sounded good to Douglas. Why squander the excitement of the storm?

They found a prize table near the fire. Actually the place was relatively quiet—people were probably snowed in. Douglas put off his gloom for a while, being out with a friend, which was something that had not happened in some time, and had a cocoa with schnapps, which seemed appropriate for the occasion. Neither one had eaten, so they ordered dinner. He had fish and chips. At some point the conversation took the following turn:

"So how are things going with Trish?"

"Going? They're not going at all."

"They're not? [*wide eyed*] What happened?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. Okay, so that's not exactly true. I proposed to her and got turned down, I know that much."

"Wow! That couldn't have felt good."

"No, it was devastating, to be honest."

"But it's not really over."

Douglas shrugged. "She told me not to call. She just basically said she didn't want to see me again."

"No explanation? Nothing?"

"None at all. I mean I realize I'm probably not exactly a prize catch. My former wife certainly didn't think so. But no, she didn't say anything. She tried to make it sound like it was her fault, which was a little strange, since I never found any fault in her."

"*Very* strange. I wonder what's going on."

"My father said maybe it's the runaway bride thing. After all, it's happened before. Maybe she just isn't capable of getting close to anyone. I guess some people are like that."

This came out a little more harshly than intended. He noticed the surprised look on Jeff's face.

Douglas forgot all about this conversation in the week that

followed. There was another snowstorm and he was doing his own shoveling and things were especially hectic at work. He bought himself a pair of cross-country skis and found a new passion, swishing across the clean white snow and exploring new places. He was glad to be busy, because when he wasn't busy his mind seemed to turn immediately to Trish and to the pain of missing her.

Then he saw a text message from that very same person on a frigid Sunday morning. An electric surge went through his soul. He happened to be sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a breakfast of pancakes and sausages, but now the whole universe came to a complete standstill. He paused—he did not know if he could take any more pain—but he opened it. The message was a fiery one.

“Listen to me, Douglas Lendell. Don't you ever say I can't get close to people or I don't want to. Don't you ever say that!!!”

Coming as it did completely out of the blue, this message startled him. He had to read it several times just to get it to make sense. Then a mortal blush spread over him as he remembered. This was what he had said to Jeff. He must have told her.

Douglas wasn't expecting the conversation to be shared. Was nothing sacred? Could he not even say a few words to a friend and have them kept in confidence? He looked at the message again. The tone was jarring. She sounded angry. And he couldn't blame her. What he said to Jeff was definitely not kind. It was the product of bitterness, which has no good fruit.

He was mad at himself. Why couldn't he have kept his mouth shut? There was no way for Trish to put those words into context. She had no idea how much he was suffering, how hurt he felt; how much he loved her and was longing to see her again. All she knew was he'd said she was cold. Not exactly in those words, but the net effect. She could not get close to people. That made her cold.

Of course the irony was he did not think any such thing. It was just his pain talking. He did not really believe the runaway bride theory. He certainly did not *want* to believe it. He never should have been talking to Jeff about it, that much was sure. What was wrong with Jeff? Was he really that stupid? To share something like that with her? Or was it something else?

These were his first reactions to the text, his first jumbled feelings. He finished his breakfast and calmed down a bit as he stood at the sink doing dishes. It occurred to him that there was another way to look at the message. Yes, she was mad at him, but it

did not seem like the kind of anger that comes from hate.

Wasn't she saying—strongly implying—more than implying—that she had been close to *him*? Wasn't she basically saying that he of all people should have known better than to make such an accusation when he knew it wasn't true from personal experience? Besides, if she really was cold—if she really did not want to get close to people—then why would she be angry? Her very anger indicated an attachment to him of some kind.

Now he went back to the breakfast table and sat down and studied the message again. The angry tone was painful for someone in his sensitive state of mind, but the more he looked at it the more he became convinced he was right. If she did not feel close to him then there was no reason for her to be *angry*. He had basically accused her of not loving him. This appeared to be what she was upset about. But then did she love him after all?

Armed with his new interpretation, he read the text again and started to laugh...and even to cry. He was laughing because, for all of its bristling tone, the message was kind of cute—if his interpretation was correct. She was stamping her adorable little feet. She called him Douglas! He wasn't laughing *at* her; he was laughing because he loved her so much. He was laughing for joy.

Meanwhile a tear or two escaped from the corners of his eyes because of sheer relief from the emotional strain he had endured for two months. He had been afraid she didn't love him, and now it appeared that maybe she did—again, if his interpretation was correct. There were tears for the simple reason that he had received a text from Trish. The silence had been broken. The terrible silence that he hated so much.

Of course he was going to call her. The text was an open invitation. All right, so it was a somewhat peevish invitation—but it was better than nothing. He had to call her anyway to apologize and explain himself. It would be wrong of him *not* to call.

He pulled out his phone and touched her number with his finger and her phone started to ring. Now he wished he'd invested a couple of minutes in thinking about what he was going to say, because he wanted this call to be perfect. He was trying to make things better but definitely did not want to make them worse.

"Hello?" she said in a tone of voice that could not exactly be called sunny.

"I got your text," he blurted.



"Obviously. Otherwise you never would have called me."

"I thought you didn't want me to call you."

"Oh, so now you're going to use *that* as an excuse."

He sighed. "Listen, is there any chance we can just get together and talk?"

"Do you really want to?"

"Of course I want to! Why do you say that?"

"I thought I was someone who couldn't get close to anybody."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's what I need to talk to you about."

"All right, I guess it couldn't hurt."

Oh, well; at least she didn't say no. She agreed to meet him at one of their old parks. He went there right away and waited; he wanted to be first so she wouldn't have any excuse for not waiting. She arrived about fifteen minutes later. He hopped out and went to her car, banging his head in his eagerness to get in.

"Oops!—are you all right?"

"I'm fine—just stupid," he said, rubbing it. "So how have you been?"

"Good, I guess. I can't complain. How about you?"

"It's been interesting."

"Interesting? Why?"

"It just has. I miss you," he blurted in the cold.

She looked down. "I miss you, too."

"So about your text—I guess you're kind of upset with me."

"Just don't say things about me that aren't true, that's all. Especially to my friends."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it."

"You did mean it, and you know it's not true. You have no idea how that made me feel. If it came from anybody else I would have just ignored it. But you! It was like being clubbed."

"Okay, but that's what I wanted to talk about. It *sounds* like you're saying—I mean if I'm not misunderstanding you—"

"What?"

"It sounds like you still feel something for me."

"Douglas, come on! How can you even say that? Oh my gosh."

"Okay, but 'say' what? This is where I'm not too clear."

"This is impossible. Of course I 'feel something for you!' I'm here, aren't I? I can't even believe you asked me that question."

"But then why did you tell me you didn't want to see me?"

"I never told you that. I said it would probably be better for *you*

if you didn't see me. Those are two completely different things."

"They are?"

"Absolutely, they are. Don't you understand?"

"Well, no, not really. So—then you *do* want to see me?"

"Yes, Douglas, I want to see you. I love you. I just *can't* see you. I'm sorry. I don't know what else I can say. Hopefully now we understand each other."

"I'm afraid I don't understand at all. I love you so much. I don't understand why we can't be together."

"Because it's better this way, believe me."

"You keep saying that. *Why* is it better?"

"Because it is!" She started to cry. This shocked him. He couldn't bear to see women crying.

"You said you loved me."

"Of course!"

"And you know I love you?"

"I know you say you do. Except when you're out with your friends."

"But in that case, why can't we be together?"

"It's *because* I love you that we can't be together. I don't know how I can make it any clearer."

For his part he did not know how she could make it any more unclear. He did not have the slightest idea what she was talking about. He also did not know what to say. Now they seemed to be right back where they started. They just sat there for a few minutes, both completely miserable.

"I guess I better go. We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea."

"I'm just going to say one more time that I love you. I don't know what happened. I don't know why you're so angry with me and don't want to see me. But I just want to make my own feelings clear. Even if it doesn't do any good."

"Thank you."

She did not say anything more. She was crying again, silently weeping. He knew it was time to get out of the car. He wanted to touch her; he wanted to console her. He did none of that. It was cold outside and it was getting cold in the car. He walked a solitary walk to his own car, his feet crunching in the snow.

## XXXIV

*Douglas goes down into the depths  
A conversation with Jeff turns on the light*

**A**T LEAST SHE said she loved him. That was something, right? Or was it? He wasn't sure if it made things better or worse. She loved him but she didn't want to see him. She loved him but she wasn't willing to show him any love. Did she really love him at all, then? Or was she just trying not to hurt his feelings? No, she insisted she did. If he loved her then he had to take her at her word.

It was a strange kind of love, however. It was a love, apparently, that did not want to be together. Love, to him, *meant* being together, but she seemed to think it meant being apart. This did not make any sense to him at all. He wanted to believe her but frankly did not understand her. If she really did love him, then why in the world didn't she want to see him?

He went to the park looking for illumination and received none. She was upset about *something* and simply refused to tell him what it was. He had no success trying to break through the wall. The more he pressed her, the most distant she seemed. He thought about her sitting there in her gray coat and her burgundy turtleneck and not even looking at him, looking straight ahead at—what? The snow pile the plows had made? Was it really that fascinating? Could she not condescend to look at him, if just for a moment?

Then again she was not exactly cold and impersonal. There was the crying. What was he supposed to make of that? He didn't have any idea what to make of it, except that he hated to see her cry. It was almost physically painful. He longed to make it go away, make her happy again, but how if he did not know what it was about? It seemed like he was the cause of her unhappiness. That was why he left the car. He did not want to make her unhappy.

But was that why she was crying, or was it something else? Again she said she loved him. She was almost emphatic about it. If she loved him, and she was sitting there in the car with him, then why in the world was she crying? His instinct—the forward chin of

his whole personal history—was to blame himself. Somehow he was making her cry. He did not know how, but he also did not want her to cry. He would give anything for her not to cry.

What to do? It seemed he had two choices. He could blame himself for the crying that made him so miserable and not pursue things any further. In short, he could give up any hope of ever being with Trish again, since it seemed he was causing her pain. In a sense this was the easier path, although about as pleasant as sawing off one of his own limbs. Or he could put himself at risk and assume the crying was *not* his fault. He could assume she really did love him, as she said, and wanted him to keep on trying.

Both paths were painful. The first one preserved his pride, perhaps, but led to losing the woman he loved. He did not want to believe this was his destiny. He wasn't ready to believe it. The second involved the possibility of more rejection if he continued to pursue someone who did not want to be pursued. It wasn't just the humiliation; it was bad manners. If someone tells you she wants you to stop, doesn't she have the right to be taken seriously?

*Did she want him to stop?* Was this really the message she was trying to send? She was sending very mixed messages, and he was not sure he understood what they meant. It seemed like something was preventing her from being open with him—and yet she said she loved him. It seemed like she didn't want to see him—and yet she sent the text message and readily agreed to see him. He did not know what to think. What was she really thinking?

Most of all, though, there was the frustration. If she really did love him, then why could they not be together? He wanted to be with Trish. Not a single minute of his waking day went by without thinking of her. He loved her smile. He loved her kindness. He loved her intelligence. He loved spending time with her. What if he could not have her in his life? How could he live?

The first thing he did when he walked in the door was call Jeff.

"Hey, buddy! Thanks for throwing me under the bus."

"No idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you do. Telling Trish what I said about her not wanting to get close to anyone."

"Isn't that what you said?"

"Yes, but you weren't supposed to tell *her* that."

"She asked me how you were feeling. I just told her what I knew. But it sounds like you saw her."

"Just now. First time in two months."

"Are you—back together, then?"

"Hardly. She still doesn't want to see me."

"That's really strange."

"No, what's really strange is she refuses to give me a cogent reason why. I could accept it if I knew what was bothering her. But she won't tell me."

"Hey—something just occurred to me! You do know she's Catholic, right?"

"Yes, I had managed to figure that out after dating her for three months and being in her house about a billion times."

"A billion! That's a lot. But did you know about Catholics and divorce?"

"I know they're not fond of it."

"That's one way of putting it. As far as the church is concerned, the sacrament of marriage is forever. It cannot be broken. They don't even recognize divorces, and they won't let you get married if you are divorced."

A light went on in Douglas's head. "So you think it's because I'm divorced?"

"Think about it. She's telling you she can't see you, but she won't tell you why. She doesn't want to hurt your feelings. She knows she can't marry you but she won't say it's because of the divorce."

"I never thought of that. But is it true? They really won't let people get married if they're divorced?"

"Not in the church, no. I mean if you have enough dough and you make a nice contribution they might look the other way—but not for the rest of us. Come to think of it, you're kind of in that category, aren't you? Your parents could afford to make a nice contribution."

"Oh, sure. Like I'm going to ask them for that."

This conversation got Douglas excited, in a miserable way. At least he had a parsable explanation for her strange behavior. It was not a good explanation, in the sense of being a happy one, but it made sense—and nothing else had made any sense in his life for two months. The good news was he had the missing piece of the puzzle. The bad news was he was the piece that was missing.

For the first time Douglas thought about the implications of his divorce as it pertained to Trish. He'd felt shame over it in the past,

but mostly from having been abandoned and feeling inadequate. Suddenly he felt a different kind of shame—because of the divorce itself. He found himself having to come to terms with the idea that he was divorced; that it was part of his identity, his history.

Douglas was very much an idealist when it came to marriage. He was not a Catholic, but marriage was a sacrament to him in the sense of being sacred. In fact if any human arrangement was sacred in his mind it was marriage. And now for the first time since his divorce he began to see himself as someone who had broken the sacrament he himself believed in.

It made him feel deeply unworthy of Trish. He thought about how much he loved her, but the very love he felt also made him feel unworthy. He was not good enough for her. He had felt that way for a long time after Vanessa abandoned him; he had come to think of himself as someone who had no right to expect a woman to marry him or to be interested in him.

This was different, however. This was a much more profound sense of unworthiness. Living in a divorce culture, and not being a member of Trish's church, he had never felt it before. It had not occurred to him to think of himself as someone who was broken on account of divorce for its own sake—as someone who had a dark mark, which apparently was how her church saw him.

The problem was he was inclined to agree. Not only did Trish's protestations make sense to him now, but he was even more emphatic about them than she was. It was not right for him to think of himself as her suitor. She was too perfect, too wonderful. Her family was too perfect. Her whole life was too perfect.

Now he had a dreadful thought—did her parents even know he was divorced? He knew they were faithful Catholics. They always seemed to be heading off to church. They had been so welcoming to him. Was it because they did not know? Was this another reason why Trish did not want to see him? Was it too hard for her to tell her parents about his past?

During the last long week of bitter January, Douglas went down into a hole that was deeper than any hole he could ever remember being in before. In a sense it was worse than Vanessa. Sure, she had abandoned him, but it was not because of some moral flaw that he had. It was because he was not a good enough provider. It was because he did not measure up to the nouveau American ideal.

He was redeemed from this shame to some degree because he

was not complicit in the ideal. He thought his own country, or at least his own part of the country, had become a very shallow place, with its worship of money and position and fashion and things. It was embarrassing, perhaps, not to be as "successful" as his younger brother, but at least he was not materialistic. This was something for identity to hold onto, however slenderly.

There were no such mitigating flatteries when it came to the shame of divorce, however. He had a stain on him and there was no way this stain could be washed out. He thought again of her parents and the high opinion she said they had of him; the high opinion they were not afraid to show. What would they say when they found out? He wanted to crawl under his rug and hide.

This new pain, this shame, was different. It was not ever going to go away. He had gotten over Vanessa but he could not get over this. He could not turn back the clock and undo what had been done. It was like a tattoo; it could not be removed. He could never look forward to a time when things would be brighter and he would not be divorced. This was who he was.

No wonder Trish wanted him to stop calling! He thought about how difficult it must be for her. Maybe she really did want to marry him but knew she couldn't. Maybe that's why she reacted to the ring the way she did. It was the hard reality of the impassable divide between them, this shiny symbol of the marriage bond, which he had broken, which he had tarnished, thus forfeiting any right to marry her.

It was better to know why she had been avoiding him for two months; truth is better than ignorance. But he now knew she was being too kind. She could not have him because her own church told her he was not good enough for her. He was impure. This was why she talked in riddles. This was why she said it would probably be better if they never saw each other again.

Douglas now knew what he very much did not want to know, but it seemed better to know than not to know. His consolation was the thought that maybe she really did love him after all.

## XXXV

*Douglas gets excited about telling Trish what he's learned*

*She is not so excited about telling him what she knows*

*Her mother gives her some important advice*

ANOTHER WINTER WEEK went by with Douglas in a state of suspended animation, or hibernation, and all he was doing was thinking about the new information, and what it meant for him and his situation. He found himself faced with a momentous decision, or so it seemed to him. Should he accept the church's judgment—Trish's church—and not trouble her anymore with his impositions, stop making her cry, or should he at least go to her and tell her that he knew the truth?

If Douglas were like Jeff, and shared his apparent cynicism regarding the institution and its rules, he would have gone to her without hesitation and tried to convince her to marry him outside of the church. But the problem was he agreed with the church in principle. He was divorced, and this made him unsuitable for Trish. Freshness has no place with putrefaction. She was unspoiled; what right did he have to force himself on her?

On the other hand, he did want her to know that he knew. He wanted her to know he understood her dilemma and did not blame her. He could see how much she was suffering. Her crying now became clear to him and made him love her even more. He was willing to give her up if he had to, if he could not have her because of his failure at marriage, but he was not willing to live with the breach between them or the idea that she had to carry the burden alone. It was his burden; why shouldn't he carry it?

Another week went by, and then another, and February brought more winter snows, but Douglas could not be content with his cross-country skis or new hobby. The beautiful woods and meadows covered in white simply made him want to share them with Trish. The more he thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that he had to talk to her. If nothing else, there needed



to be some sort of closure between them. He hated the word "closure," but for this very reason he felt he needed it.

At the end of the month he called her and invited her to come over for dinner. It was perhaps provocative to invite her to his house, but he could not say what he needed to say in a public place. He needed to be completely alone with her, not to try to win her back, not to try to manipulate her with memories of the happy times they had spent there, but in order to let her go, if he had to. (Did he have to?)

He was surprised by her response. She sounded happy to hear from him. In fact she sounded like her old self, and he did not know what to make of this, except that it made him happy and perhaps a little emotional. She accepted his invitation without any hesitation, which was even more surprising. It seemed she had something she needed to share, something she had wanted to tell him for a long time.

Douglas had to smile when he hung up the phone. He already knew what she had to tell him. But what did it mean, this newfound willingness to talk about it? Did it by any chance mean she had found some way to get past it? That she loved him in spite of himself and was willing to marry him, by whatever means? The thought was sweet, or bittersweet, but he did not allow himself to believe it. He did not trust the tantalizing opening to happiness that this thought was trying to introduce into his thinking.

Trish came over on the last Saturday of February. The sun was going down as she arrived and there was a spectacular sunset in the ice-laden sky, at which they both marveled. He hoped it was a good omen. It reminded him of how much they loved the same things and how important this kinship was to him. He had a stuffed chicken in the oven and red potatoes boiling on the stove. He had been nervous about seeing her, but now that she was there he started to feel better again.

She came in and took off her coat and it took every ounce of strength in his being to resist the temptation to embrace her. He had almost forgotten how wonderful she looked. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold. She looked at him with those smiling eyes, and it made him feel good to see her smiling again. It was the first time since the dreadful night of the proposal.

What was different? What had changed? He assumed it was relief on her part. She had been carrying a terrible burden, but she

would not have to carry it much longer. He couldn't wait to tell her he already knew. He couldn't wait to see her reaction. It felt so good to be with her again, to have her in his house, no matter what the outcome of the evening might be.

She wanted some hot chocolate, which he knew she loved and had already prepared. He ladled them both a cup and sprayed some whipped cream on top and sprinkled on some cinnamon for festivity and they sat down at the breakfast table with the cheese and crackers and grapes he had put out. There was almost no small talk. His heart was too full. He dove right in.

"I need to talk to you."

"You do?"

"I do. I know what the problem is. I know why you say you can't marry me, or whatever it is you've been saying. Sorry—I didn't understand before."

She sat there looking at him for a moment as the smile left her face. "What didn't you understand?"

"It's because I'm divorced. I know all about it."

"Oh, Douglas," she said, putting her hand over her mouth.

"No, no. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not arguing with it. Actually I have a lot of respect for that particular position. I didn't drag you out here to try to convince you. I just wanted you to know that I knew."

"Okay, tell me what it is you think you know."

"The church won't let you marry a divorced person. And I agree with that. I'm not being critical. Believe me, nobody hates divorce more than I do, especially after what I've been through."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, but what you're saying isn't really true—or it's only half true."

"Oh, I know! If you make a donation, sometimes they can waive that."

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I don't know where you got that from. Sometimes there are fees. But the church does allow divorced people to marry if the marriage was never a real marriage in the first place. It's called an annulment. So for instance if someone married someone and had no intention of staying with him, like in your case, then as far as the church is concerned they were never really married."

"I didn't know that. Are you saying there's a possibility we could get married even if I'm divorced?"

"No, unfortunately that's not what I'm saying. Don't make this any harder for me than it already is. I came here determined to tell you something. Please just let me do it."

"Tell me what?" he said as the world crowded in.

She sighed. "I had an abortion."

Douglas blinked. "Okay."

"I was just a teenager, my first year in college. I thought I was in love with him, but as soon as he found out I was pregnant he didn't want to have anything to do with me. He offered to pay for it and I didn't see any way out. I was too far away from home and didn't know what else to do."

She was looking down. Douglas wracked his brain for something to say. "I don't understand why you were afraid to tell me this. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"You should see the look on your face right now. It does make a difference. It makes a big one."

"That's not true! It doesn't change anything between us. Why would it? I still love you. I still want to marry you, if you would have me. If you *could* have me," he said, correcting himself.

Trish shook her head. "Don't take this the wrong way, but what I really need to do right now is go home and let you think about what I just told you."

"Why? I don't have to think about it. I know how I feel."

"No, you don't. I need to go home and I need to leave you alone."

"But what are you saying? Can I still see you?"

"That's for you to decide. You need to spend a few days thinking about it and not just reacting and trying to make me feel good. I know you and I know what you're like. But you need to be honest with yourself. You need to ask yourself if you still feel the same way about me. Then we can talk. And right now I need to go home and I need to be alone. This was very hard for me. I can't even tell you."

"But I have a nice chicken in the oven. What am I going to do with that?"

"You'll think of something. Chicken salad tomorrow."

"I told you it won't make any difference. I don't know why you even think it would."

"Maybe you're right. But I do need you to think about it. I need you to give me a completely honest answer. And you can't do that

with me sitting here looking at you.”

She got up to go. He did not try to stop her. She told him what she wanted him to do; now it was up to him to act like an adult and do it. He could not imagine that this new information would have any impact on his feelings for her or about her. He certainly didn't feel like he loved her any less, although he was a little stunned by it. This time as she was leaving he did not restrain himself—he gave her a hug. She hugged him back.

When Trish got home she went into the main house and found her mother and brought her out to the apartment.

“I told him.”

“Thank God! I'm so proud of you. How did he react?”

“The way Douglas always reacts. He was very kind.”

“I'm sure he was. Douglas is probably the sweetest person I know. So can you get married now?”

“That's up to him. I told him to think it over. I want to make sure he really wants to.”

“I hope you're not making a mistake. Men tend to need a friendly little push when it comes to these things.”

“If I am, then it wasn't meant to be. The main thing is I told him. I finally managed to do it. It was hard. Even harder than I thought it would be.”

“Why? You know he adores you.”

“I don't know why. I guess I still haven't gotten over it. Sometimes I think I have, but then it catches up to me again.”

“You went to confession. You asked for forgiveness. Don't you think God can forgive you?”

“Maybe it's that I can't forgive myself. That Catholic guilt I was brought up with. But just sitting there with him, telling him—I don't know. I don't see how he can love me after that, knowing him and his feelings about things.”

“Let me ask you something. Are you in love with Douglas?”

“You know I am! I love him more than anything.”

“Okay. I don't try to give you advice very often, but here's one thing I do know. You have to trust the people you love. You have to give up all these misgivings of yours and not sabotage yourself. I know how much you love to hold onto things; you always did. But you have to learn how to *accept* his love. Otherwise you are going to wind up being very unhappy in this life.”

“But what if I don't feel worthy of him?”

TRISH'S SECRET

“Shhh! You’re not listening. That isn’t what love is. We’re all human. We all have flaws. We’ve all done things we wish we hadn’t done. Every one of us. Now you have this little voice inside you telling you you’re not worthy, you’ve done something wrong. But you cannot let that little voice ruin your life. Do you understand me? That’s not God talking to you; that’s the Devil.”

“I guess it’s hard for me to accept forgiveness.”

“I know it’s hard. But if it’s offered, who are we to refuse?”

## XXXVI

*Trish tries to understand herself  
Douglas thinks about what she told him  
A meeting of the minds*

**T**RISH THOUGHT ABOUT what her mother said. She thought about little else. The forgiveness thing was a thorny issue for her. She did accept forgiveness in the intellectual sense. She did believe God had forgiven her. She believed her parents had, too. The emotional pain had diminished over the years to the point where she was not always thinking about it, as she did in the beginning. Often it went completely out of her mind.

But forgiveness became a problem when it came into conflict with her need to be truthful. She did not feel she could marry Douglas without telling him. Obviously. She could not hide such an important fact about herself from him. She did not *want* to hide it. She hated concealment of any kind and did not want to carry such a burden into marriage. It was dishonest. It was unfair.

It was hard to tell him. But her mother's little pep talk made her realize something. She did not trust Douglas to forgive because she could not forgive herself. The fear of condemnation that prevented her from being open with him about her past was the product of self-condemnation.

What made things worse was that awful conversation in the pool house. She heard what he said about Marissa and her willingness to have Mark's baby. She heard the compassion in his voice. She too rejected Roger's callousness. But then what would he think if he knew about *her*?

She had been able to put this gnawing apprehension out of her mind during the fall, or mostly. She was so happy to have finally gotten together with Douglas and they were having such a wonderful time that it was as if she divided herself into two persons. The part of her that was with Douglas was not thinking about the inevitable outcome of so much companionship. It was

detached from reality.

She did all the things with him that people do when they have every intention of getting married. She did not hold back her feelings; she told him how much she loved him. She brought him home and introduced him to her parents and was delighted when they adopted him as if he were one of their own children. The detached part of her was pretending everything was normal.

On the outside it *was* normal. It was only on the inside that she knew there would be a reckoning. She knew very well what was coming. After all, she was the runaway bride. She had not been able to tell Eric, either. She went to her wedding with a heavy heart and everything blew up. She remembered the horror of trying to explain it without really explaining it. Her parents understood because they knew her secret. Eric was devastated.

Trish was done with love after that disaster. It wasn't just the financial hole she had put everyone in, the hole she was determined to help them dig out of with her new job at the pharmacy; it was the pain she had inadvertently caused. Funny, she had never thought about this pain until it was too late. It never occurred to her that she would not be able to go through with the wedding. It was not until she was sitting with the bridesmaids and feeling perfectly miserable that she understood what she needed to do.

Then she met Douglas. She was not planning on falling in love, but she did. She told herself it would be different this time. Nine long years had gone by since the incident that ruined her freshman year in college. She no longer obsessed over it. Even the pain of her broken wedding had begun to fade. She was still upset with herself, still could not believe how stupid she had been to think she could marry Eric without telling him.

But this time it was going to be different. She was going to tell Douglas. After all, she felt she *could* tell him. The love she had for him was deeper and more mature than anything she had ever experienced before. She truly felt like he was her best friend, and therefore she could tell him just as she had told Penny, her best friend at school. This time her love was too strong to be afraid.

She was perhaps deceiving herself, however. As the fall went on she thought less and less about telling him because she knew how hard it would be. The more she loved him—and the more he loved her—the harder it became to be honest. Douglas was so dear to her. She could not bear the thought of possibly driving him away.

When she saw the beautiful ring he bought she panicked. There was no other way to describe it. The happy alter-ego that had been going along pretending everything was normal and everything was fine was completely annihilated. She saw the stark reality face to face. It could not be put off any longer. The time had come; he was proposing. She either had to tell him—or decline.

She did not do either. If she could not bring herself to tell him, then what she should have done was simply to say “no” and walk out of his life. But she could not bring herself to do this, either. She semi-walked out of his life. She said “no” without really saying no. For heaven’s sake, she sat by the cell phone waiting for him to call, even after pretty much telling him not to. She wanted him to overcome her misgivings.

This was foolishness, and she knew it. The only possible path to resolution was to *tell him*. The conversation with her mother woke her up out of her dream—her recurring nightmare—and filled her with resolve. She girded herself up with truth, if not righteousness, and went to him to explain herself and her very strange behavior. He hugged her. She had to force herself to let him go.

Meanwhile it seemed to Douglas that she was right to want to leave him alone. She wanted him to think about it because she took marriage seriously. The same true heart and strong affections that he loved so much were also in play in her desire to leave. She did not want him to rush into marriage. She wanted him to think about what she said and come to a conscious, well-informed decision about how he felt and what he wanted to do.

He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to marry her. There was no doubt in his mind. He was not fazed by the news she had given him, or so he told himself. It certainly did not make him love her any less. She was just as much a victim of predatory behavior as he was. He could not believe she had done anything wrong. Things happen and people make mistakes and that was all there was to it, as far as he was concerned.

But in the days that followed he began to feel the weight of her seriousness. It crept up on him, surprised him. He stopped being dismissive and stopped looking at her hesitation as a joke as he came to terms with his own emotions and with feelings that he was apparently trying to conceal from himself. In short, he realized this new information did make a difference in how he saw Trish.

He had put her on such a pedestal that it was impossible for her



not to come back down to earth to some degree. The news she had for him was completely unexpected, and perhaps for that reason it affected him more strongly than he thought it would. Everything had seemed so simple before. He was divorced and therefore she could not marry him. But now everything seemed much more—well, messy, for lack of a better word.

She was right; his view of her changed. In fact it had to change. He did not stop loving her. That is not what happened. But perhaps he stopped idealizing her. He entered into her pain. What had seemed so pure now seemed much more human. She was not perfect; it seemed she was broken in much the same way he was broken. He had not realized this before—had no idea—and she was right. It was impossible for it not to have an impact on him.

Apparently she did not feel worthy of marriage because of what had happened to her. This was why she was the “runaway bride,” the *real* reason. This was why she began talking in riddles after the proposal and why her behavior seemed so strange. But then he had a startling thought. He too did not feel worthy of marriage. He did not feel worthy of Trish because of his divorce—and for lots of reasons. Weren't they both struggling with the same kinds of misgivings? Weren't they, in some sense, just the same?

We would be lying if we said he heroically worked through all of this in an hour. He started out with no doubt in his mind about marrying Trish, and then as her information sank in he began to develop doubts or quavers that he himself did not want to have, and then as he recognized the commonality he returned to his determination and long-held desire. It did not happen in a day; perhaps it took a week to work through it completely. But now he knew more than ever that he wanted to marry Trish.

Some may quibble with the delay, but after all Trish requested it; and to his credit we must say that when he finally did make up his mind he was not in any sense deluding himself about her. He did not shirk or trivialize the task she had given him. His eyes were wide open. This was different and important, since weddings are so often made up of stupid illusions, as he knew only too well. And in the end Trish's request that he think seriously about what she told him made him appreciate her even more. She did not want love based on illusions. She wanted the real thing.

He remembered what she said about divorce. He looked it up on the Internet and realized she was right. Jeff had not told him the

whole story. They *could* get married in the church under certain conditions. And it seemed to him that the situation with Vanessa might just fulfill those conditions. She never had any intention of staying with him. She abandoned him the first chance she got.

Getting married was not going to be easy, perhaps—but neither did it seem completely impossible. Now all he had to do was convince *her*. He had to make her believe he still loved her and wanted to marry her in spite of her misgivings. He had to convince her he was capable of a deep love not built on dreams or illusions but on who she actually was. No, he was not “fooling himself”; he knew exactly what he was doing. He knew the truth about her, and he still wanted to make the commitment. He wanted it more than anything in the world.

Romantic love—to the extent that it is merely romantic—is not deep and neither is it very real. It is more like a dream. In romantic love the lover sees himself as in a mirror. There is nothing he loves more than to see his reflection in the eyes of his beloved because it is not the beloved that he sees but himself, like Narcissus. And yet even in romantic love there is the image of divine love. There is the hazy memory of paradise mixed up with the illusions and craziness of this fallen world.

He felt that the way he loved Trish now was deeper than romantic love. He did not want to be committed to his own imagination; he wanted to be committed to her as she actually was. Douglas saw all this sitting in his little house as the February snows melted and spring began plotting her eternal return. Trish was wrong. It was not the illusion that he wanted to cling to. He wanted to cling to her. He loved her so much.

But could he convince her? He called her and invited her to meet him at the Inn. This time he did not invite her to his house because it was too much. He also did not offer to pick her up, not because he didn't want to—he very much did—but because he wanted to show respect. They were going to meet on equal terms. In his mind this meant driving their own cars.

“I thought about what you said,” he told her in a dark little booth in the back. “You asked me to think about it, and I did.”

“You must think I'm very annoying.”

“Not at all. That's the last thing I would ever think about you. Here's how I see it. You have the idea I can't marry you because of your secret. Meanwhile I have the idea you can't marry me because

I'm divorced. See? We're exactly the same. We're both in the same boat. So I guess I don't see where the problem is."

"I wish it were that simple. What I did was far worse than what happened to you."

"Not as far as your church is concerned. I read up on this. Divorce is considered a very serious sin."

"That's just silly. You can't compare the two. One of them is about rules for marriage and what marriage is supposed to be. The other one is something completely different."

"You don't understand what I'm saying. It's my fault—I'm not making myself very clear. I had it all so clear in my head before I came down here, but now with you sitting across from me I feel all mixed up. Anyway, here's what I'm trying to say. I *am* divorced. That is a fact. I have a stain on me that will never go away. But if you can forgive me for that—and it certainly seems like you have—then why won't you let me forgive *you*? If you really love me, then why do you doubt my ability to forgive? Not that I have anything to forgive you for. I don't. I'm simply making a point. You were completely honest with me, and what I'm trying to tell you is it doesn't matter. I still love you. I love you more than ever."

Trish stared at him. What he said cut her to her heart. She was not letting him forgive! He was right—she was allowing herself to be gracious but not crediting him with the same capacity. And then she thought about the conversation with her mother. It wasn't just that she was not allowing *him* to forgive; she was not accepting forgiveness at all. She was holding onto something and it was time to let go. She had to stop hating herself and choose love. It was her choice to make. Should she be brave and make it?

"I accept."

"Accept what?" he said laughing.

"Your proposal. I'm sorry I made you wait so long."

"It was worth it. I believe we are going to be very happy. I can't imagine trying to live without you. And by a strange coincidence I just happen to have something with me." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the ring. "Should I get down on my knees?"

"Please don't do that."

"But will you marry me?"

"Of course I will. Don't be silly."

She allowed him to put the shiny thing on her finger.

"Looks nice on you."

“It does. It’s a beautiful ring.”

“Does it fit? Your mother told me the size.”

“It fits perfectly.”

“Don’t you want to go on Facebook or something and tell all your friends?”

“Someone has a high opinion of himself,” she teased. “Right now I just want to be here with you.”

“It seems like such a long time. I mean, we did see each other a couple of times—”

“Oh! Don’t remind me. It’s all my fault. It was just my foolish pride. The scary thing is how close we came.”

“I suppose I should thank Jeff for being so communicative after we had our little talk, no matter how much I may have wanted to strangle him at the time.”

She laughed. “He got me riled up. Maybe he did it on purpose.”

“I don’t think so. But I can’t even tell you how I felt when I got that text from you. At that point I was really beginning to wonder if I would ever hear from you again.”

“I was pretty angry when I sent it. Irish temper. Be warned.”

“No, it was good. It made me think you really did have feelings for me, if you were mad at me. It was so hard to know exactly what to think. You were telling me to go away but I couldn’t help feeling you didn’t really want me to.”

“Of course I didn’t. It was horrible. There was a lot of crying at night by myself in my apartment.”

“Jeff was also the one who told me about the divorce thing, by the way. It really didn’t occur to me until then.”

“And was he the one who told you to bribe somebody?” she said shaking her head. “People should think before they say things like that. Anyway, my mother already talked to the Monsignor. He didn’t seem to think there would be a problem in your situation. Especially with the new rules.”

“Really? Wow.”

“My mother can be very persuasive when she wants to be. And in this case she wants to be. She worships the ground you walk on.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, seriously—she does. She was the one who insisted on me talking to you. She was the one who told me I had to—” she looked down.

“What?”

“Learn how to trust people.”

“That’s funny,” he said. “I had to learn exactly the same thing.”

“You did? What do you mean?”

“Well, first of all I had to learn to trust women again. I know that’s a terrible thing to say, but I was very hurt by what happened to me, being blindsided and all.”

“You didn’t trust me because I’m the runaway bride.”

“It wasn’t you I didn’t trust. It was women in general. You are the one who restored my trust. I always trusted you completely, from the first time I saw you. I know that sounds strange, but it’s true. I don’t know why, but it is. But how can I put this?—I didn’t trust *myself*. I didn’t feel like I could measure up, after what happened to me. After all, it was the same message I was given my entire life.”

“I’m sure your father never gave you that message.”

“No, but I heard enough of it from other quarters. It has been very hard for me to get to the place where I am now, sitting here with you. I just couldn’t make myself believe I was worthy of you. It was the main reason I stayed away.”

“Of course you’re worthy of me! Who are you kidding? I’m the one who’s not worthy.”

“If we keep going like this we’ll have to break up again and you’ll have to give me back that ring.”

“Never. I’m never giving this back. But I don’t understand why you would think you were unworthy.”

“I didn’t think any woman could really want me, not after what happened. I didn’t think I could be a good enough provider, to be blunt. I can’t believe I said that. But I know some people were of that opinion. Specifically, my former wife.”

“Now you’re making me mad again. No, not at you. How could anyone think you’re not a good enough ‘provider?’”

“You see the way my parents live. There’s no way I can ever compete with that.”

“I’m not asking you to. I hope you know me better than that. You are a very hard-working, very responsible person with a good job. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you. I’m just saying I don’t quite believe how lucky I am.”

“I’m the one who’s lucky. There aren’t too many guys out there

like you. If any.”

Douglas did not know how to respond to this. It surprised him. “So it sounds like your parents already know,” he said at last.

“Kind of. They will know more when I get home.”

“And apparently they also know I’m divorced.”

“Of course. They knew that a long time ago.”

“So what should I do now? Should I go to your father and talk to him?”

“Please don’t. You would just embarrass him. I’m not exactly a debutante. Plus he raised us to make up our own minds. But what about *your* parents? How are you going to tell them?”

“Hmmm...good question. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“You better save your energy,” she said laughing. “My father will survive without the groveling.”

## XXXVII

*Douglas shares the good news with his parents  
Bill has some concerns*

**T**ELLING HIS PARENTS was just the opposite of what Douglas thought it would be. His mother was relatively easy. She had formed a positive opinion of Trish from seeing her in her kitchen, and once she formed opinions about people they could not be changed. She didn't pay too much attention to the business about the "runaway bride." As far as she was concerned, all brides should run away, if they knew what was good for them.

His father was little tougher sell. Bill's fondest hope at that point in his life was for Douglas to find someone he could really love and who really loved him. He worried about him because he knew Douglas was not outgoing. He believed there were many fine young women who would have jumped at the chance to attach themselves to someone like him if they could only get to know him, if they realized what a great guy he was.

But the runaway bride? Really? It was disturbing. Douglas had already suffered enough pain at the hands of one runaway bride; was it absolutely necessary to put himself in jeopardy with another? He did not say a word when he came to tell them—he did not want to complicate things—but his wife's unreservedly positive response almost forced him to take the opposite position after Douglas left.

"Don't you think it's a little dangerous? Him getting mixed up with the runaway bride?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake—that again? That was just the boys talking. My impression of her is she's a very solid young woman. She has a doctorate from a good school, a good job, she's well-grounded and knows how to behave around adults. She's just what

Douglas needs. Someone to keep him grounded.”

This remark irritated Bill, but he managed not to get distracted. “But she did walk away from her wedding. That’s not some urban legend. That’s an actual fact, as I understand it. I would hate to see him abandoned at the altar. He would never get over it.”

“We don’t know anything about it. All we know is what people say. Besides, she may have had a very good reason for not going through with it. Young people should take the time to think about what they’re doing when they get married. Maybe then we wouldn’t have all these divorces.”

The response that came instantly to mind was also instantly suppressed. “I just hope he’s thought about what he’s doing. She’s very pretty, and that can affect the way men think. The last one played him for a fool. I would hate to see it happen again.”

“There was nothing wrong with ‘the last one,’ as far as I could see. Maybe it was Douglas’s fault that the marriage didn’t work out. We never did get the whole story. But there is one difference with this one, and you can see it in her eyes. She is very much in love with him, which Vanessa never was.”

He did not remember seeing the look in question when Douglas brought Trish home for dinner. Nor did he bother asking his wife why she had not attempted to warn Douglas about Vanessa if she knew or suspected she didn’t love him. This was one of those little mysteries that would have to go unsolved for the time being. But his opinion of Trish improved somewhat after this conversation. Anyone who really loved Douglas received high marks in his book.

He still had his doubts, however. The next day he drove over to his son’s house with a couple of new flies he had tied. Douglas was surprised to see his father standing at his door. He made some coffee and they went into the living room and sat down.

“So tell me about Trish—always liked that name, by the way. ‘Trish.’ Makes you think of Christmas lights, eggnog.”

“If you say so. What would you like to know?”

“Well—for instance, what does she do?”

“You know very well what she does. You talked to her about it at the dinner party.”

“Oh, that’s right. She’s a pharmacist. How could I forget? Very sensible profession, by the way. People always need drugs, more and more these days as they’re getting older.”

“Did you have something you wanted to ask me? You can come



right out and say it.”

“No, no; just thought I’d stop by for a chat.”

“A chat about Trish.”

“I guess I am somewhat transparent. That would make me a cross parent, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“You want to know why I’m marrying the runaway bride?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it exactly like that.”

“Wouldn’t you? I noticed how quiet you were yesterday.”

“You were having such a good time talking to your mother, I didn’t want to spoil your fun. All right—I guess I am a little curious. I mean, not that she has to live up to her reputation, but she does seem to have one.”

“She’s not exactly what Roger and his friends make her out to be, if that’s what you’re worried about. She doesn’t hate marriage. There were reasons for certain things that happened. Believe me, we’ve talked about it.”

“I’m so glad to hear it. You went through such a terrible time with the other one.”

“Don’t even go there. She’s nothing like Vanessa. It’s just the opposite of what it looks like. She couldn’t go through with the wedding because she has a warm heart. I can’t tell you how I know this, but I do. You’re just going to have to take my word for it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get you riled up. I can see you feel strongly about her. That’s good. It’s just that—well, I guess I don’t need to tell you that what you do right now will set the course for your entire life. There’s nothing worse than a loveless marriage.”

Douglas looked at him for a moment. Of course he knew what this was about and instantly forgave his father. “I understand why you’re worried. But she is nothing like her reputation. People don’t know her. She is the kindest person you could ever meet. She also has a very good sense of humor, like you.”

“Well, that’s something that never came up with Vanessa.”

“You do need to get this idea out of your head that she’s anything like Vanessa. She isn’t. I can’t wait for you to get to know her. You are going to love her. And by the way, she *loves* you. She thinks you are one of the most remarkable men she’s ever met. And of course I agree.”

This little morsel, which happened to be completely true, had its desired effect. His father stopped talking about the interesting subject of Trish and they went on to other things, specifically the

new flies. It was a strange visit. Douglas loved his father but knew he was wrong about Trish. He conflated her with Vanessa. This was frustrating on two levels. First, even as a casual acquaintance there was no similarity between them. His father, who was usually so incisive about people, was allowing his prejudice to blind him.

Douglas very much wanted him to appreciate Trish and her many good qualities. It meant everything to him to have his father's approval. There was no one whose good opinion he coveted more. He understood why it was hard for him, but there was an uncomfortable irony in the fact that his mother, who never forgave anyone for anything, seemed more willing to set aside Trish's storied past than his father.

Then again, he knew his father was thinking about his own marriage. He wanted Douglas to be happy and a good marriage is perhaps the most important ingredient in happiness. Plus Douglas could not really blame him for not knowing her. He had brought her home only once. He was uncomfortable bringing her home. His family embarrassed him, in spite of its grand surroundings.

He thought of the warm reception he had received from Trish's family. Her mother loved him and made no attempt to hide it. Her father was a little gruff at first but seemed content to have Douglas around, as long as he was not under foot, which Douglas took great care not to be. It pained him to think that Trish might not receive a similar reception from his own family.

He could not change his family, however. He believed his father would come around in time and learn to love Trish, because he believed in Trish. He was not his mother's favorite, but she seemed inclined to welcome Trish into the brood as someone who knew what she was doing in the kitchen. It was not much, but it was better than nothing, which is what he expected from his mother.

Meanwhile Roger heard the news from Jeff, unfortunately at the bar with lots of people standing around.

"He's marrying Trish? Doesn't he know about her?"

"Well, according to him there's a little misunderstanding there. It wasn't what it appeared to be."

"You mean she didn't walk away from the guy at the altar? What was it, a hologram?"

"Apparently there were extenuating circumstances. He didn't go into it, but he did say they talked about it."

"Extenuating circumstances!" he bellowed. "He wanted to get

married and she didn't. At least not to him. It's going to happen again. You can bank on it. After all, why would anybody want to marry Douglas?"

No one tried to answer this purely rhetorical question, including Jeff, for whom loyalty had its limits. Wagers were made, with much laughter and carrying on. According to the book, the wedding had a 30/70 chance of coming off as planned. Roger felt this was generous.

## XXXVIII

*Sweet negotiations*  
*Wedding day revelations*

**F**ORTUNATELY TRISH AND DOUGLAS were oblivious to the comment being raised in bars and taverns by their prospective marriage. They fell right back into each other's arms. Not only were they together every day but they were much more intentional about it now. They made *sure* they were together. Of course they had to go their separate ways to work, but they ate dinner together every night, often at Douglas's house, sometimes out, sometimes at her house. It was as close to cohabitation as you could come without actually cohabitating.

Speaking of which—Douglas still wanted to save certain things for marriage. Admittedly this was a bizarre quirk of his. It seems when he was a teenager he heard a speaker at a youth group retreat say that true love was shown by the marriage vows and by gallantry. This notion stuck with him. He liked the idea of sacrificing for the sake of the beloved. Trish admired him for his distinctive views on love and commitment and was grateful in the sense that it made her life less complicated—and frankly for other reasons. But four months of courtship and then three months of separation was a very long time to wait. Things were getting downright dangerous when they were alone together in his house or in her apartment. There is just so much gallantry the human spirit can bear.

Douglas was determined to stay true to the course he had chosen, however, and Trish had no desire to try to talk him out of it. But they both wanted to get married sooner than later. Perhaps it was this sense of haste that made their wedding negotiations so very agreeable. A small taste—:

—When should we have the wedding?

—How about June?

—I guess we have to wait. Who should we invite?

## TRISH'S SECRET

- How about nobody? Just kidding. The usual suspects.
- Where should we have the reception?
- My parents' back yard. It's too late to reserve a place anyway.
- Great idea! Besides, there's a pool.
- How many attendants should we have?
- I can only think of about three.
- Uh-oh. I have three sisters. And my friends.
- Do we have to have the same number?
- It doesn't really matter to me.
- Where should we go for a honeymoon?
- Bermuda. We could wear shorts.
- How about the mountains?
- We don't ski.

Etc., etc. Neither one of them was very much concerned about *how* they were married as long they *were* married. Actually they wanted to elope and save everyone the trouble, having both been through it all before, without being impressed, but Trish's mom would not hear of it. As it was they practically had to lay siege to her to get her to agree to let them have the reception at the Lendell estate. She wanted to do what bride's mothers do.

Douglas asked his father to be his best man and Jeff and Roger to be his groomsmen. Trish did not want him to include Roger—she could not forgive him for the way he treated Douglas—but Douglas felt funny about leaving him out, especially when Trish's sisters had all been included. Anyway, he saw it as a gesture of peace and family unity. Douglas wanted to heal old wounds. He knew it would make his mother happy, and he knew it would please his father as well. Therefore it pleased him.

The only person it did not please was Roger. Did he really have to deal with all the folderol of being a groomsman?—especially for a wedding he was convinced would never take place? He was busy at work and didn't have the time. He did not want to wear one of those stupid tuxes. Then he found out Douglas and Trish were asking the men to wear suits of their own choosing, which calmed him down a bit. He calmed down even more when he realized he was processing with Trish's sister Catherine, who he thought was one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen.

The day of the event came and everyone was in a festive mood. The ceremony was held at the Catholic church in town. Helen balked at this when she first heard it, still clinging to the old

prejudice, but Bill talked her out of it. What did it matter what kind of church they were married in? A church was a church.

The procession was not as awkward as they feared. So what if there were six for Trish and only three for Douglas? Two of the bridesmaids paired up and the maid of honor went solo, and no one said a word. No one even noticed! All they saw was Trish. She was not only beautiful in her simple gown but radiant. No one could take their eyes off her. Her mother was crying. Even her father looked dewy-eyed as he lifted the veil and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

Douglas also wept, during his wedding vows. Trish did not cry but she looked at him and loved him and his tender heart. She could not believe they were getting married; it really was happening. The brass band played a couple of Gabrieli pieces out of respect for their star trombonist who loved Gabrieli. They sounded spectacular in the stone building. There was a ton of flowers because Trish loved flowers and Douglas did too. Well, maybe not a ton, but you get the drift. Of flowers, that is.

Douglas loved the reading about “two becoming one body,” which perfectly reflected his high conception of marriage. For the New Testament reading they decided to stay away from the obvious and went with “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right...” They both had done a great deal of thinking about this marriage, much more than most couples entering into the bonds, and the passage seemed to reflect their seriousness. Douglas took communion, which technically he was not supposed to do, but he did not tell his mother that he had already made a commitment to join the church.

Then it was off to the reception. Speaking of Helen, she looked better than she had in over a year as she welcomed the guests to her home, or rather her yard. Her blood counts had been normal for months, her color was normal, her hair had mostly grown back, and her imperious posture had returned. Naturally she had her own ideas about the reception, since it was being held at her house, but she also knew that Trish’s parents were paying; hence she kept most of her enlightened opinions to herself.

Actually she was too busy to get involved. She was back full time at work, or rather nine hours a day. Not her old twelve, but enough to wear her out. She came home from work one night and saw the large tent erected in the meadow and asked Bill when it

was coming down. "Monday." She was satisfied. The Duggans were full of thanks for her hospitality. They promised they would take care of everything. They were perfectly acceptable as in-laws. Bob Duggan seemed like a very solid man.

It was Douglas's wedding, after all. She wanted it to go well but was not overly concerned if it didn't. If the worn-looking tent was good enough for the newlyweds, then it was good enough for her. Douglas and Trish took care of all the arrangements for the hotels and the guest transportation. No one would be driving. She did not have to worry about drinking and liability. She did not have to worry about a thing. At this stage in her life, she was content to look the other way.

Helen was happy to see Ralph and his wife, whom Douglas had invited. She was no longer angry with Ralph for giving her son a job, since he had moved on to better things. She showed them some of the estate while they waited for the pictures to be taken. Ralph raved about Douglas and what he had done for the firm. He got a little emotional when he said how beautiful the wedding was. Mary seemed awed by the surroundings and by Helen and let her husband do all the talking.

Douglas was happy to see Ralph. He went straight to him and had a long chat. It sounded like things were getting better at Callahan's. Ralph's worst fears had not come to pass. There were some close calls, there were times when he wondered if they were going to have to shut their doors, but they came out all right in the end. Marissa had her baby and was living at home and going to community college. Ralph tried to look cheerful when he delivered this news but perhaps did not quite succeed.

The reception did not include the usual protocols. Neither Trish nor Douglas had much interest in flashy introductions or garter-tossing. They did agree to the spouses dancing with their new in-laws, however. Douglas was happy to dance with Mrs. Duggan, whom he loved. His eyes welled up again when he watched Trish dance with his father. He wanted so much for them to be friends.

There were the toasts. Michelle did hers, and it was perfect. Then came Bill. He stood up without notes and spoke in his usual calm and elegant way.

"Welcome, everyone. I am so glad to see you and so happy to have you here at my home. I hope you are enjoying yourselves, and if you aren't, please see the Duggans, since this is their affair. Oh—

by the way, a shout-out to my new in-laws. I could not imagine more agreeable ones. You've already seen the incredible appetizers; you are going to love the main courses they've chosen for you.

"Weddings are always a special time, but this one is an especially special time for me. Good thing I didn't have that beer someone offered me or I wouldn't have been able to say that. Tongue-twister. Anyway, this one is special for me because of that young man sitting right there. Now I admit I am somewhat biased, but you could not find a finer young man anywhere, in my opinion. And notice I used the comparative case, because I do have another son, and I assure all available young maidens out there that he is very fine as well.

"Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. We were talking about Douglas. You see that he is wearing a simple suit. And his grooms-team is also wearing simple suits. This is a symbol to me of what Douglas is all about and what kind of values he has. You see, I can read his mind. I know he's thinking to himself, 'I could torture my poor father and brother and friend Jeff and force them to wear matching monstrosities I found at the mall—or worse, on-line—but instead I will let them wear what they want to wear.'

"Douglas thinks this way for two reasons. First, he was not ruined by being part of his family or living here under these highly unnatural conditions. He did not get any strange notions about what true happiness is or what is likely to produce it. How he escaped the family curse and wound up being so normal and so well-grounded I have no idea. It had nothing to do with me. A simple suit for his grooms-people is good enough for him because he knows it's not the important thing. Being well-married, not well-dressed, is what's really important.

"And Douglas also thinks this way because frankly he is considerate. He lets us wear what we want because he's thinking about us and how *we* feel instead of himself and what he thinks he wants, that ever-shifting target. In fact I can tell you exactly what he's thinking. 'If they don't want to buy a new suit, fine; I'm sure they will look good. If they do buy a new suit, so be it. At least it won't be wasted on a single occasion.'

"Now I know it's unfortunate to use such a humble example to explain why I think highly of this young man, but I am a teacher, after all, and at least it's an example you can see with your own two eyes. What I can say about Douglas is that he is thoughtful,



intelligent, considerate, and kind. He is hard-working and he will be a good provider. He loves this Trish girl with all his heart. I don't know if you've met her. She's that pretty gal over there in white. Okay, enough with the corny jokes. I see my wife looking at me.

"Anyway, to sum up this long and tedious oration, I do not know if I have ever been happier in my life than I am right now. I am very honored to be Douglas's best man. I can tell you with no hesitation that I consider him to be the best friend any father could ever hope to have. Douglas, I congratulate you. You have married a wonderful young woman. I know you will cherish her with all your heart. And Trish—well, welcome to the family. Such as it is."

Douglas had every intention of cherishing her. He felt that he was an extremely lucky fellow. What he wanted more than anything was just to be alone with her. It was what he loved most of all. They mingled and talked with the guests, every guest, and joined in their share of dances; and then it was seven, and things were winding down, but they did not go to the airport or straight to Bermuda. No, they went to their new house. They opened a bottle of champagne and had a glass, or a part of a glass, and then they were in each other's arms. It was a beautiful spring-summer night and some amorous birds were singing outside and they were very much alone after a long day. They made love for the first time.

They did go to Bermuda the next day, as planned, and had a very nice time, but to be honest they would have been just as happy to stay home in each other's arms.

## XXXIX

### *Final matters*

**T**HIS IS A STORY about two damaged people who had a second chance at happiness and the good fortune and good sense (eventually) to make the most of it.

Of course, there are all kinds of second chances in life. Helen Lendell had a second chance, and we are happy to say she did not squander it, on the whole. Her outlook changed, her priorities changed, and the people in her world were better off for it. Fortunately she was close enough to retirement to avoid being endangered by this softening. She cruised to sixty-two, and by then she'd had enough of the nonsense anyway and retired in glory, feted as a woman pioneer. She softened towards Bill as well, somewhat. She gradually relinquished her old prejudice. Her illness made her realize it was a waste of time.

Speaking of Bill, he had a second chance at life too. He was glad he hadn't filed for divorce when they were separated, although he had seriously considered it at the time, and probably would have done it if she had not become ill. Philosophy told him he was better off sticking with what he had and seeking happiness there than running off to potential unhappiness and disappointment elsewhere, especially at his age.

He mellowed. He gave up his silent, long-held resistance to Helen and reconciled himself to being, as well as he could. He allowed himself to enjoy the gifts of life and was not afraid to share them with his wife, now that she was more amenable to sharing. When grandchildren came, which was soon, he absolutely doted on them and gave up teaching so he could spend more time with them. Or so he said. Actually the student papers did him in. He realized one day that if he had to grade one more he would go mad.

Ralph Callahan received a second chance after Mark moved on and managed to right the course of his little ship, once he realized just how bad things really were. It took him some time to restore the solid serenity he had so carefully cultivated in the past, reassuring his old clients while placating or saying goodbye to some of the high-rollers Mark had brought in. He did it without complaining, however, fully cognizant that he had only himself to blame for his troubles.

His daughter Marissa had a second chance. She dropped out of Boston College to have the baby and enrolled in a local community college, where she met a nice Catholic boy who had worked for several years after high school and was therefore considerably more mature than her other classmates. He fell madly in love with her. He did not sweep her off her feet and was unlikely to sweep the world off its feet. They were not going to live in a mansion or drive the kinds of cars she dreamed of. But he was a good and honorable person who worked hard and never complained. And to her credit, she had enough good sense to appreciate him.

It would be hard to say Barbara had a second chance, but we suppose she did, in a way. Post Douglas, she turned in desperation to an online dating service, now on the sunset side of thirty-five, and managed to find someone with whom she felt reasonably compatible. In fact she surprised herself by pretty much falling in love with this person. Certain unfortunate experiences had disillusioned her about love. Now, quite without expecting it, her faith was renewed. And that was a kind of second chance, wasn't it? Perhaps even a miracle of the modern technological age.

As for Roger, he did not need a second chance. He kept barreling right along the path he was on and became a vice-president at thirty-four, the youngest in the history of his company. He married a blonde bombshell ten years his junior and bought a nice place in Westport, where he kept her reasonably comfortable in BMWs and jewels. His favorite thing at holiday parties was to tease his sister-in-law, especially after he'd had a few. "So how's the runaway bride?" etc. All very droll.

Where Trish and Douglas finally settled when they outgrew their little starter house, whether it was four children or the trendier two, how Douglas fared in his new job as the years went by and the seasons changed, whether Trish took a hiatus from hers when the children came to take care of them and their home—we must draw

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the curtain on these interesting topics, lest our tale outstay its welcome. Suffice it to say they were happy and knew better than most the value of happiness, which we believe is a very great thing to know.

THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Trott is an author of essays and fiction who lives in sunny New Hampshire with his wife Beth. They have four children and love long walks, the ocean and the mountains, their church, and good company.