

Dark Star

(Tales of Westgate #3)

by

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One

I know a few people who claim they "found themselves" on "Hippie Hamilton Street" in downtown Westgate; if you look at it the right way, I suppose I could be one of them. I do remember the particular day – a Saturday in early May – when the universe seemed to be placing brand new people along my path on Hamilton, opening brand new doors.

As always happened on a warm sunny Saturday afternoon back then, Hamilton Street was crowded with people in their late teens, early twenties. Clustered around the coffeehouses, or wandering by the storefronts. No one hurried. Clouds of grass drifted down the busy sidewalks. There were a few cars of "tourists" going by, curious to see the Real Live Counterculture Creatures in their native habitat – but not nearly as many cars as I hear used to swarm Yorkville Avenue in Toronto a few years back. Some of our resident hippies, I knew, were in fact refugees from Yorkville's decline. I hoped they felt at home here with us small-townies emulating them.

I was just about to go into Gentle Earth to buy some rice (I'd volunteered to make dinner tonight), when I was stopped by the sound of an acoustic guitar and a man's voice coming from across the street. I looked over and saw a large unfamiliar man seated on the sidewalk, under an awning, playing and singing while other folks passed him by. Thinking I recognized the soothing song, I felt drawn to it, and to him.

Once I was a mere couple of steps away from him, I could clearly make out the words he sang:

*Ripple in still water
When there is no pebble tossed
Nor wind to blow*

and I couldn't help but smile. The Dead had only released this song very late last year, so I was impressed with someone who would bother to learn it already. And it was my own favourite from their latest album, so I also had to approve of this gentleman's taste.

And he did seem gentle. There was a warm light in his rich brown eyes and the

hint of his smile. His presence was quiet yet huge. His large hands managed to move delicately over the guitar. Even seeing him sprawled across the sidewalk, I could tell that he would tower over my 5'4" if he stood. His chest and shoulders were broad, but everything else about him was taut and lean. He wore a brown, fringed suede jacket much like mine, but his was decorated with beautiful native beadwork. He didn't seem to care for the flared look: his jeans were tight and well-worn, and his big scuffed boots looked like they had walked many miles and could tell many stories. His strong but fine features were framed by a thick chocolate-coloured beard and wavy hair that fell from a centre part down past his massive shoulders. And oh, his aura – I had never seen one so wide and bright.

If you get the impression that my first sight of him dazzled me immediately, then I have done my job. He had the feral majesty of a great bear and the glowing serenity of an ancient mystic all at once. All I could do in that moment was stand, and breathe, and let him finish his song.

When he was done, he leaned the guitar on the brick wall at his back. Then he noticed that I was the only person on the street not simply walking past him, and he looked up into my eyes.

I couldn't help but smile, and blush, which I knew would make my freckles show up even more. Then I nervously smoothed down my maxi-skirt, nodded, and just said, " 'Ripple'. Far out."

He smiled with his mouth and his eyes. " 'Ripple'," he said back.

He looked only a few years older than me, perhaps, but somehow he made me feel little and childlike. Feeling like I needed to justify my still being there, I said, "I've always loved that part about the ripples with no stone or wind. It feels spiritual to me."

He nodded. "Like the sound of one hand clapping."

"Oh, are you into Zen?"

He gave an easy shrug. "I've picked up a few truths from it. I'm a bit of a seeker, you could say."

"Oh, me too!" And I immediately hoped that I didn't sound like I was in junior

high.

"Far out. We could have things to talk about. That's good."

"Are you new in town?" I asked. "I don't think I've seen you around before."

"A couple days. My name's Noar."

" 'Nor'?"

"Like 'roar' with an N."

"I, uh, never heard of that name before." I could feel the toe of my sandal twisting on the sidewalk.

"It was given to me in a vision."

"Oh, wow." I wanted to hear more about these visions, but wasn't sure if this was the time and place to go that deep. "Oh, um, I'm Grace – but some of my friends call me Slick."

For a while he just looked up at me intently. And I found myself wondering what he thought of my round face and glasses and copper hair. And also found myself hoping that he liked them. I felt my pulse in my neck.

He smiled a bit more and gave his head a gentle shake. "No, not Slick. There's something too, uh, superficial about that for you. But Grace? Yeah, I can see you being a Grace. The cosmos has brought some grace into my life today."

I blushed harder, backed away and bumped into an iron railing along some front steps. "I, uh, I have to go, but... but I'm glad I got to hear you. And I hope you like it here."

"Right now I'm liking it just fine. I'll see you again, Grace. Peace."

"Peace." And, heart racing, I stumbled away into the crowds to go buy my rice, embarrassed that he had ever seen me, already yearning to see him again.

The familiar wooden beams and tables and shelves, the varied sights and scents of spices inside Gentle Earth Foods helped me get my feet back on the ground and regain my bearings; I felt a bit more myself again. It was busy in here, as usual on a Saturday, and I had to squeeze past people in kaftans or army surplus jackets to make my way back to the rice bins. I scooped about two heads of rice into a thick brown paper bag, then took it to the line-up at the till.

While I waited, I looked over at the far front corner of the store and realized that the fuss and renovation of the last few weeks was completed over there – a new section of the place was now open for business. From here I could make out that someone had scavenged old picnic tables and industrial wire spools and turned them into displays, but I couldn't clearly see what was piled on them. On the side wall behind the tables, someone had stuck up a banner of newsprint from a large roll. The banner looked hand-painted and amateur. (All signage on Hamilton Street in those days was hand-painted and amateur – proudly so.) This particular sign read: **UnWyse**.

After I paid Rose for my rice, I took a moment for a closer look at these new tables. Most of them displayed a scattering of modest stacks of books, both hard and softcover. A cursory look told me that they mostly appeared to be non-fiction; several had the word Women in the titles. The only one I recognized, though, was Friedan's **Feminine Mystique** – I wasn't well-read in this area yet. I also saw what appeared to be pamphlets, and bookmarks with a hand-drawn UnWyse logo.

"Hello," said a soft voice. I looked up to see a serious-looking girl in a pale green cape dress walking quietly toward me. Early twenties, Oriental features, her hair a breathtaking curtain of shiny black held by a wide beaded headband. She looked familiar, but at that moment I couldn't place where I might have seen her. "Please let me know if I can help you find anything."

"Oh, I'm just curious," I said. "I've been watching this section getting ready and never knew for what."

She seemed to relax a little. "We are a women's bookstore, information and resource centre." She made a small but deliberate gesture around her. "All the books here are by or for women. We're looking to fill a need for the community."

"I think that sounds like a great idea." In fact, I found it an exciting one. I'd heard of such places beginning to spring up in America, and had wondered how long

I'd have to wait to see some sort of progress in my neck of Ontario. "When I have more time and money, I'll be back to browse around – I'm something of a bookworm."

Now she grinned. "Exactly what we like to hear."

I eased myself back toward the door. "See you again. Peace and good luck." As I left, I flashed her a finger-V peace sign.

She returned my sign, a little self-consciously, and said, "Thank you. Tell your friends."

Once I was back out on the street, in the crowds and clouds, I of course glanced over to see if I could get another look at this Noar fellow. No sign of him. His place under the awning was now occupied by a smaller, less imposing troubadour with a shinier guitar, attempting to tackle "Blowing in the Wind". Sorry, Bob, but Noar's repertoire impressed me more. No hard feelings.

And, as it turned out, the universe wasn't finished bringing new souls into my life that day.

Two

The black iron gate made its familiar squeak as I went in to the front walk of the magnificent Victorian house on Newman Street. I was renting a room here from Mr. McPhail – had been for several months now – and had no pressing urge to move onward just yet. As landlords go, and housemates, he was quite easygoing. Surprisingly so, given that he was old enough to be my grandfather... but there was much about him that was surprising.

Just as I brought the rice in the front door, I heard his voice, clear, resonant, coming from the top of the stairs. I looked up to see his familiar dark slacks and moccasins, but there was a pair of baggy jeans and sandals coming down the stairs beside him. I waited and saw he was accompanying an indigenous girl about my age, red plaid flannel shirt, her black hair pulled back tight, down to the front parlour. This morning he had mentioned that he had found a new boarder for the other room now that Bev had moved on – I assumed that this was her.

"Ah, Grace!" Mr. McPhail said. "Come meet your new neighbour." I stepped over to meet them at the bottom of the stairs. "Grace Hemphill, Heather Montour." We gave each other small nods. "I was just giving Heather the grand tour and threatening her with my draconian house rules." Heather and I both laughed at that – clearly she had already learned within only a few minutes that Mr. McPhail ran a very friendly and relaxed home.

I took a brief read of Heather, her dark eyes, her wide face with a smile hidden deep within, her calm aura, then said, "I'm just about to make rice and chick peas for dinner – would you like me to put on enough for you?"

She made one gentle nod and said, "That would be nice, thank you. Is there any of it I can help with?"

"Maybe a little. It'll be a good chance for us to get you settled in, make sure you've heard all the threats."

Her smile reached the surface. "Wouldn't want to miss any of those. Let me go wash up and I'll meet you in the kitchen?"

I nodded and she trotted back upstairs. Then I looked over and up at Mr. McPhail. He was watching me with his smile full of lines, his eyes swimming like

silver-blue fish behind his thick lenses. "Another keeper?" he said.

I paused a second, then said, "I think so."

He nodded. "I've already learned to trust your judgment in these things, Grace. How long til we eat?"

"About an hour."

"Ah, good. Time enough to read, then." He headed toward his big wing chair in front of the fireplace. "I'll leave you to it – and thank you for taking that responsibility off my hands tonight."

"I know you're a better cook than I am, Mr. McPhail. So I don't know if you should be thanking me just yet."

He just laughed.

I didn't need a lot of help from Heather with the rice, to be honest. I think once or twice I asked her to spell me in the stirring – my mother taught me to watch a pot of rice every second or else it would, as she put it, "stick like sin". Pretty sure that mother would also call it a sin for me to add curry and garlic to it the way I had. Mostly Heather just sat splayed on one of the wooden chairs reversed, her elbows on its back, her waist-length braid of hair dangling beside her, and we tried to settle in with each other.

"So how many of the rules have you heard? Pop quiz," I said, glancing aside at her.

She looked at the ceiling. "Ummm... *'Rent is due Friday night – if you have trouble, talk to me. Your food is yours and my food is mine. Same with dirty dishes. Your mess, you clean it.'* Uhhh... *'no phone calls after 9 pm unless it's an emergency. No using the bathroom between 5:30 and 5:45 am unless it's an emergency.'*" (That one always made me giggle.) "Oh yeah – *'if you use the stereo after 9 pm, keep it down – I'm an old man and I need my sleep.'* I think that's as far as we got. I'm assuming this means he likes to crash at nine?"

"Pretty much," I said. "And there's not many more. *'Evening and overnight*

guests stay in your room so I can't hear them – remember, I'm an old man and I need my sleep. And no one sleeps on my sofa but me. My bedroom and my study are absolutely off limits. No smoking anywhere upstairs – downstairs you can smoke whatever you like as long as no one can smell it from the street. And complaints about my pipe will be pointedly ignored.' Basically, he just wants you to show him the same respect he'll show you – it's not a bad deal, I think."

Heather's eyes got wide. "So, like, he really doesn't mind if you have a guy in your room overnight?"

I shrugged. "The rule specifically says nothing about the gender of guests. As long as it doesn't disturb him, he figures it's none of his business, I suppose."

Heather made a thin smile and her eyes glinted. "Did you ever?"

"No!" I could feel myself blush. "At least, not here, not yet." There were hidden depths behind that placid demeanour of hers. In a way, she was kind of refreshing. Partly trying to change the subject, I asked, "So where are you from? I mean, where were you staying before?"

"Oh, I was staying with someone from work, she had a room in her basement. But now she's getting married so I needed someplace else."

"Where do you work?"

"At Human – at the Institute for Paranormal Studies. I'm one of the cleaners there."

My turn for wide eyes. "Oh wow really? I have wondered about that place for ages! What's it like?"

Her mouth made a little twist. "Just a place I clean – I never see nuthin special about it. Pays okay. And it's not that far of a walk from here, so this place is real handy for me."

"They just changed the name, right? What did it used to be? 'Human,' you said – 'Human and' something?"

" 'Human and Beyond', yeah."

I gave the pot a careful stir – smelled great. "Why did they change it? The old name was more fun."

"Maybe they wanted to be less fun?" She giggled. "What got you so interested in them?"

"Well..." It took me a moment to decide whether I wanted to tell her. "I always heard they were studying psychic things there, E.S.P. and things along those lines, right?" Heather nodded. "And I, uhh... I can see auras."

She just nodded again and said, "Okay."

Her matter-of-fact response caught me by surprise. "Can *you*?"

"No, but I know people back home who can. It's kinda trippy, I guess."

"So.... so I suppose I wondered if anyone there could tell me something about them, like why I see them, or what they mean, or if they even mean anything."

"So you should go ask them."

"I never did. But I should, yes."

"When you go," said Heather, declaring the matter decided, "ask for Professor Bloomfield. I mean, I don't know him, but it sounds like the sort of stuff he's into."

"Thanks, Heather," I said. "I'm definitely going to look him up."

She flashed me a peace sign and said, "You owe me one."

I gestured toward the pot. "I'm making your dinner."

She grinned. "Wow, that was quick."

Heather chose to spend her first evening up in her own room; I figured I'd eventually learn what she liked to do there. Me, I felt like reading in the front parlour with Mr. McPhail – our shared addiction to the library was one of the things that helped us bond. He stretched his legs out on the ottoman in front of

his wing chair with a thick hardcover about the American space program up to the first moon landing. I curled up on the sofa with a thicker volume on comparative Eastern religions. If we weren't careful, the neighbours might call the police on this party of ours.

The air was rich with the scents of the small fire on the hearth and the smoke from Mr. McPhail's customary after-dinner pipe – which, to be honest, was not at all unpleasant. Also customary after dinner was the radio tuned to CBC. His stereo looked like a long low chest of reddish wood, the only new item of furniture in the room. It also included a turntable, which we were allowed to use, but I never once knew him to play any records on it – in fact, I never saw that he owned any. But his devotion to the radio dated back to his teens, when stations first began broadcasting in this area. He saw it as the major indulgence he allowed himself.

During a news break, the announcer mentioned the Mayday protests in Washington D.C. a few days ago, saying that the estimated number of arrests had climbed from seven thousand to over twelve thousand. I put my bookmark in, closed the book on my lap, and rubbed my eyes for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry if the news is upsetting you," said Mr. McPhail. But he didn't offer to turn it off – I knew that he would consider that to be patronizing me.

I blinked, and sighed, and was surprised to hear and feel how shaky that sigh was. I looked over and saw him regarding me seriously. "It's just.... it's barely a year since Kent State, and you know how much that upsets me. To this day." He nodded. "And this now makes me feel like no one is learning anything. Nothing gets any better."

"From what I understand," he said, "at least no one died at this one now."

"Is that what we're supposed to be thankful for now? That they aren't killing us?"

"I admit, in times like these, silver linings are hard to find."

"Washington now is just one more 'men with guns' event. They send in men with guns and arrest people for not 'looking right'. It's like the FLQ last fall – Prime Minister Trudeau calls the War Measures Act, sends in men with guns, and I don't even know how they decided who to arrest there. Have you ever read the War Measures Act, Mr. McPhail?"

He took a thoughtful puff. "I've read a little about it."

"It suspends all our rights in case of war or insurrection. But not if there *is* a war or insurrection – if the government says there is! They don't need any proof – the Act itself says that, the fact that the government has declared there is this emergency, will be taken as proof that the emergency exists! That's insane!"

He blinked at me. "I can appreciate why you might feel that way, yes."

"And I still remember when the Prime Minister dismissed us, anyone talking about people's rights being violated, he called us 'bleeding hearts'. He was supposed to be one of them! One of us! Back when he got elected he was the coolest politician in the world, he stood for everything we believe in even though we couldn't vote for him yet... and then he goes and does something like this." I looked down and shook my head. "People tell me to forget it, it was last year, it's over.... I don't see how I can."

"I'm not saying you should," he said. "I don't think there's anything wrong with paying attention to what's really happening around you."

I sighed again. "I... sometimes I feel like all I see is men with guns doing whatever they want. And they expect all the rest of us to just sit there and take it. Is, is that really the kind of world we're supposed to build?"

He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it for a second, then put it back in his teeth. Then he looked at me with a soft, kind face. "You have a good heart, Grace Hemphill. And a good head on your shoulders. Keep it level. And don't stop trying to find your peace."

I gave him a tiny smile, but said nothing. At that moment, peace seemed like little more than a wish, and a distant one at that.

Three

Monday morning found me, perhaps not bright and early but at least early, behind the till at King's Hardware. As Heather had mentioned, I too found McPhail Manor to be extremely convenient in terms of how close it was to my workplace. Just a few blocks east up Newman Street til you reached downtown, past The Wien restaurant, cross Hamilton, a few more doors and there was King's.

I was told that the business had been passed down from one generation of Kings to the next for perhaps a hundred years or more. The stone walls and dark heavy rafters, the warm dusty smells in the small store always gave me a feeling of going back in time, when I remembered to look around and pay attention to them. At the moment, my attention was focused on the store's ledgers – I helped Mr. King with the bookkeeping when I didn't have sales clerk duties to perform. And by 8:30 the usual Monday-morning rush of eager beavers was already cleared out.

When I heard the door's bell jingle, I bookmarked the ledger, closed it, and looked up. Officers Street and Ianuzzi, our neighbourhood beat cops – unlikely to mean a sale, then. Although once in a while Officer Street would need to pick up something small, so I stayed on the alert.

Officer Street called over to Mr. King, who had a poker stirring in the black iron stove in the middle of the store. "Gord, ya rascal!"

Mr. King looked over and laughed his ready and familiar huh-ha. "Wilf! So y'actually got outa bed today, eh!" Mr. King and Officer Street – and my father, as it happened – were all buddies in the forces, back in the war. Or what they called the war. Funny how the phrase automatically meant different things to the different generations that said it. Officer Street walked over to the stove with his subtle limp, somehow managing to look ruffled even though his uniform was neatly pressed. He and Mr. King engaged in some quieter, casual chat.

His younger partner, Officer Ianuzzi, came over to the counter, his footsteps crisp. He was about thirty, I'd guess, and looked like a shirt ad in an old magazine. His black hair was as ruthlessly short as his partner's, but he wore his squareness with complete comfort and confidence. "Good morning, Slick, how's business?"

"Oh, it's booming, officer – you'll need to take a number, I'm sorry." That got a soft laugh out of him. He'd never be hip, but I appreciated his efforts to relate to the younger adults on his beat. Actually, both of them were very understanding and circumspect, perhaps enough to be surprising. When they walked their beat around downtown, they very rarely saw any need to go down Hamilton where most of the hippies congregated. And when they did happen to, it was as if they never saw any problems there – except for those things that the younger folks thought were problems as well, and then they were on the case at once. Any newcomers who tried to call our two patrolmen "pigs" were quickly corrected.

Officer Street came by and clapped his partner on the triceps. "Hop to, Johnny!" Officer Ianuzzi touched the visor of his hat by way of salute to me as he turned away toward the door. Officer Street called back to me, "Tell yer father I said hi, Gracie!"

I wanted to say, "I'm sure you'll see him sooner than I will," but instead just said, "Yes, sir."

As the door shut behind the policemen, Mr. King joined me behind the counter. His cheerful ruddy face and thick neck, his threadbare blue shirt a match for his watery eyes, were all so familiar by now that I found them almost comforting. He looked down at me and his brow wrinkled. Quietly he asked, "What's wrong, Grace?"

I blinked and nudged my glasses back up. "Wrong?" I tried to grin. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Who said anything was wrong?"

"Huh-ha!" He shook his head. "Ya can't fool me, missy, I know yer moods by now, eh? I bet you been listenin' t' th' nooz again, ain'tcha?"

I answered him with a meek little "Maybe?"

He sighed. "Will ya be told, girlie? Ya gotta leave that stuff alone – I mean, a bit is okay, eh? But tryin' t' keep up on all the mess goin' on out there, it'll make ya mental."

"I just... I need to know what's really happening – I need to know the truth. It's important to me."

"Yeah, well... the thing is, I see how all the mess gets to you, Grace. It eats at

ya. But the trouble is, it's always there. There's always sumthin. Back in my day it was the war, and you should thank the Lord that you kids got nuthin like that t' deal with. I mean, at least we're not directly in this one today, eh? Back in my day, you were right in it, like it or not."

I gave a small grimace. "The way we keep hearing about it, we might as well be in it."

He shook his head. "You might think so, but no, this is nuthin the same, trust me. But I can see how it might be tougher fer you, in some ways. The war was big, and it was brutal... but it was kinda simple. It was pretty easy to see whose side t' be on. Nowadays I get the idea that that stuff is harder t' figure out, eh?"

"Some days nothing seems simple, Mr. King."

"Yeah, everythin's got so complicated these days, it makes ya mental." He picked up a little pile of flattened paper bags on the counter and made it neat. "Here's the thing: if ya wanna go lookin' fer the truth that hard, then I think ya gotta be sure yer strong enough ta handle it when ya find it. Me, I'm pretty sure I ain't – huh-ha! That's why I don't spend too much time thinkin' about stuff – I admit it. I... just go easy on yerself, eh?" And the way he looked at me then made me feel like it really mattered to him that I did just that.

I smiled, then saluted and said, "I will try my best, boss." Which got another huh-ha out of him.

My lunch was packed in a brown paper bag, as it almost always was, but today I decided I was going to eat it outdoors, at The Square. We were in that time of year when the nights and early mornings could be chilly, but middays were almost summer-warm. Today was one of those days and I wanted to take advantage.

The Square was a full city block of trees and grass and scattered benches, with an old fountain in the centre, and the only building on it the Town Hall down at the south edge. King's was less than a block from The Square, so the chance to relax in some peaceful green for a while was almost impossible to resist. The bell on the door hailed me on my way out into the soothing sun.

Ringling The Square on the other sides of its surrounding streets were major town buildings such as the library and the bus terminal and the banks. Monday lunch hour was about the busiest time of the week for the banks, the first chance for all those workers who got paid on Friday night to deposit some of their pay packets. I just steered clear of the crowds at the banks' doors and crossed George Street to the relative calm of the park.

Not that the park was deserted – there were plenty of other lunch-hour picnickers besides myself, along with mothers with strollers, high-school couples who looked like they had the whole block to themselves, a generous spill-over of hippies. However, here in what passed for the business district, the only grass I could smell was what I was walking on. Westgate was unusually receptive to the counterculture but it wasn't a free-for-all. All told, The Square was a popular locale in the warm weather, and I was quite prepared to find no benches free and just sit under one of the majestic trees with my sandwich.

As I looked around for an appealing spot, I caught sight of something I thought I recognized. It was hard to miss, actually: long thick brown hair and beard, head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd – I was sure that was Noar.

I didn't call to him: I didn't think he would hear or recognize my voice, and I felt far too conspicuous as it was. But he was moving slow, so even with the crowd I caught up to him without too much difficulty. Then I fell in step beside him as if I had just happened to be nearby all along, and said, "Oh, hi."

He looked down to me, his eyebrows lifted a little, and he smiled. "Grace. Far out."

"Where you headed?"

He looked above me, then around. "Wherever there's a good place to sit."

I pointed over toward a thick maple not far from us. "That tree's pretty cool."

"Right on." He headed toward it with slow, deliberate steps, not looking to see if I was joining him or not. Passersby seemed to part before him without even realizing it. I followed in his wake, watching the guitar slung on his back rock with his easy strides.

He gently leaned the guitar against the tree's trunk, then eased his back against

it and splayed his legs out. I sat on my heels beside him, figuring that more grass stains on my jeans would just go unnoticed. He gazed off into the distance and said nothing.

My lunch bag rattled as I pulled my sandwich out and unwrapped its waxed paper. Then I held a half out to him. "Want some?" He turned to look at me, gave me a small smile, and reached out to take it. Then he bit into it and chewed very slowly, not even asking or looking to see what was in it.

"I hope peanut butter and banana is cool," I finally said.

He turned and looked at me again and smiled, his teeth bright in the darkness of his beard. "It's good," he said. Then he looked straight ahead and said, "It's all good."

For a moment I ate silently and just watched him do the same. I caught another look at his aura and couldn't explain the power I could feel in it. I'd never seen anyone like him. There was something intangible about him, as if he existed on a different plane from the rest of us, as if he wasn't quite here. And yet at the same time he was so powerfully here, so physically present, massive and beautiful. There was a hint of an earthy scent about him when he was close, something so subtle yet which made my breath catch.

I finished my half of the sandwich, then took out my apple... and the first thing I did was hand it to him. He took it, looked carefully at it, then took a slow bite from it, all in his deep silence. He handed it back to me and I couldn't help looking at the shine of the apple's juices on his lips, thinking of the sweetness. Still watching him, I bit into it myself, and for some reason it felt important to me that I was placing my mouth where his had just been.

I felt less comfortable with the silence than he seemed to be, and I wanted him to think that I had some sort of spiritual depth, too. So I looked for something to say that might engage him. "I was just talking with someone about the, the search for truth. I was saying it's really important to me. Do, do you ever think about things like that?" I shrivelled a little inside to hear myself, but I was so eager to find a way to connect with this man.

Noar glanced over at me and I was sure his eye twinkled. His voice slurred around the mouthful of apple. "Your idea of small talk is kinda heavy, Grace."

I blinked fast and looked down. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, I dig it. It's cool. You really wanna hear?" I looked up at him again and nodded. "When I think about it, I think the only truth is that the cosmos is what it is. That's it."

"Oh." Somehow I expected more – perhaps I wasn't quite understanding.

He bent one leg and hooked his hand around his knee. "The way I see it, all of us running around, looking for the big answers to the big questions... it just tells me that we don't really dig what this is, where we are. There are no answers. In fact, there are no questions." He ran his other hand back through his thick hair. "For us to even ask the questions is, it's our attempting to impose our limited understanding of what we call 'order' onto the wild infinity of What Is. The cosmos doesn't need to mean anything, it just has to Be. When we look for truth or meaning, we're trying to shrink the reality of existence into a box small enough for us to hold or comprehend. Can't be done. And doesn't need to be. We each already hold a reflection of the All inside us, because everyone, everything, is a facet of the Oneness That Is. We don't need to understand, we just need to accept."

For a while I stared and chewed and swallowed and stared. Finally I thought to say, "Oh, wow."

He let himself grin. "So yeah, I do think about things like that."

I felt a flush of warmth. "Yes, I can see that." Then I suddenly thought of the time – no excuse for losing track of it, with the Town Hall clock staring at everyone in the park. I stood up quickly and brushed myself off. "Uh-oh, I gotta get back to work, sorry."

Noar shook his head and tisked. "Slavin' for The Man."

I looked down at him with a half-smile. "No, my 'Man' is all right, really. He makes it feel more like 'lending a brother a hand' rather than 'slaving', somehow."

"If you say."

"I do. And I hope you're in town long enough to see you again sometime."

"No plans to rush away as yet. So don't worry – I feel like our paths are fated to cross." He flashed me a peace sign, I returned it, and then I turned and threaded my way across the park and back to King's, feeling more uplifted than I had in days.

After work that evening, I had a couple of stops on Hamilton I felt like making. Mr. King closed up shop at five, but many of the places on "Hippie Street" stayed open later, catering to a more nocturnal clientele. My first stop was our beloved little head shop, Moonwalk. It stood across the street from Gentle Earth Foods, and right beside the spot where I met Noar.

The shop's narrow old door rattled alarmingly when I opened it, as I expected. Moon insisted that the rickety nature of his store was a major part of its charm. As always, my every step brought a creak from the floorboards, and penetrating incense hung heavy in the air. I had to weave past bins of LPs and racks of rolled-up posters and batik scarves to reach the counter. Moon was behind it with his back to me, busy changing albums on the store stereo. His long, limp black hair – even longer than Noar's – brushed the back of his army surplus vest and the shoulders of his dingy long-sleeved tee. "Hey, Moon!" I called to him.

"Ah-ahhh, just a second, maaaaan." I heard the dull thump of needle coming to rest on vinyl, then a sitar began to play. Moon turned to me then, and when he saw me his eyes crinkled behind his little Lennon glasses, and his small teeth showed in a grin beneath his astonishing walrus mustache. "Slick! Hiiiiii! What's the buzz, baby?"

I grinned back. "I dunno, I was hoping you could tell me."

"Riiiiight, I bet I could, sweetie. Well, I just got some papers in?"

My nose wrinkled. "I don't really use those so much, remember?"

He made a short little shriek of a laugh. "Newspapers, silly! You're one of my best customers for those." In this case, I knew he was talking about the few underground papers coming out of Toronto, with the occasional issue of the bigger American undergrounds when they managed to make it through customs. Now and then I found one that made interesting reading. "As a matter of

faaaact, there's one here that I pulled aside just for you – tell me that I'm wrong!" He reached under the counter, then took out a tabloid-sized newspaper and handed it to me.

It still had an inky smell, and the cover logo and drawing looked quite amateur – which made it oddly exciting for me, almost subversive. I read the name aloud: "*Open the Gate*?" Never heard of this one."

Moon nodded. "Brand new – and *local*."

My eyes widened. "Oh wow! Someone in a tiny place like Westgate is printing an underground?"

He was grinning like a Cheshire cat now. "You *gotta* check *that* out, riiiiight?"

I had to smile back. "You got me there, man."

"Mmm-we'll have to see how long it can hang in there. Local boys make good." While I searched my pocket for thirty-five cents, he went on. "Soooo! I noticed you getting acquainted with our new gentle giant Noar on Saturday, hmmm?"

I blushed. "You what? Spying on me, Moonie?"

He tried to look diffident. "I just happenned to be looking out front in that particular direction at that particular moment."

I tisked and set my coins down on the counter. "Little old biddy. Lifting the curtain and peeking at the neighbours like Mrs. Kravitz."

He gave me a wry little smile. "Well if you must know, I was more keeping an eye on him than on you, dearie. I *mean!* Isn't he faaabulous? I've even got him crashing at my pad since he got to town – not that he's there so very much."

"Oh wow, where do you know him from?"

Moon shrugged. "An old friend up in Fort William – I mean, Thunder Bay, tsk. He bumped into Noar coming into Canada up that way. Gave him my name, told him I am The Hippest of The Hip – cuz I aaaam – and said to look me up if he was ever in Westgate God knows why."

So: sounded like Noar was an American? I wanted to know more, but not from Moon – he was already too interested in my interest. "Well, it's true," I said, "you are The Grooviest of The Groovy."

He sputtered. "Oh, pleeeeeease."

I left Moonwalk, passed a small cluster of young people with face paint hanging by Moon's front window and lighting up, waited for a couple of cars to pass, then crossed the street to Gentle Earth. Not looking to buy any food this time – I just wanted to have another browse around this new bookstore.

Inside, I saw one top corner of the UnWyse newsprint banner on the wall was loose and flopping down, but the sign still did its duty. Today as I wandered around the humble tables, I noticed at least one more title which I recognized: Greer's ***Female Eunuch***, a current hot topic of discussion. I knew I wanted to see for myself what the fuss was about, but when I picked it up and saw the price, I had to put it back. Another title to wait and hope the library would pick up someday. I made a soft sigh.

A voice behind me said, "Hello again." I turned around and saw the quiet Oriental girl walking toward me, today wearing a light blue, floor-length seersucker dress and a tentative smile. "Thank you for coming back."

I smiled back. "Hello, I, uh... today you *can* help me find something, I think."

"Yes?"

I thought for a second. "Do you have any books on women and political power, or, or social power, or something like that? Not sure exactly what to call it, sorry."

She looked down and idly toyed with a strand of her hair. "HmMMM." Then she turned, looked around, and walked a couple of tables over. "This one is about theories of matriarchy. Does that help?" I walked over and she handed it to me to look at. "I've read it – I thought it was interesting."

It did sound interesting, but the price was not. I handed it back and said, "Thank you, but I'll need to save up a while for that one."

"I understand," she said as she laid the book down. Then her smile got brighter. "And besides, the theory is all well and good, but the reality is something else again, I would say."

I cocked my head, trying to be sure I understood correctly what I just heard. "I'm sorry, how do you mean?"

"What people might call a matriarchy. There's a women's collective that owns and runs a farm a few miles north of town. That's where I live."

I blinked. "Oh wow, you mean like a commune?"

"Intentional community, is what we call it. A couple of us volunteer to help the board of UnWyse, as well."

"That... that sounds fascinating! Would you mind if I asked you a million questions about it?"

She laughed gently. "You mean right now?"

"No, I – just sometime – seriously, I would love it if we could get together and talk about this someday. Do you think you might want to?"

She looked at me for a second, perhaps trying to get a sense of my sincerity. Her own aura felt very clear. "I think that could be fun," she finally said. "You do seem like you really want to learn. And I respect that."

"Well then, that sounds like you're a good fit to work in a bookstore, no?"

She gave me a relaxed smile. "I suppose that's true."

I knew better than to even bother checking my pockets before asking, "Do you have anything to write on, so I can give you my number?"

"Well, we don't have a phone at the farm, so maybe that doesn't matter so much."

"Ah, well."

"Just come by the store when you think of something. If you need to ask for me,

my name's Harriet."

"All right. Harriet. And I'm Grace."

She made a gentle nod. "Grace. Glad to meet you."

My stomach growled, and I took a step back. "I guess I should be getting home to eat, so I'll go now. But thank you for your help, and I will definitely be back."

"I look forward to it," she said. "Peace."

"Peace," I replied, then turned and went out into the street again. And as I headed for Newman Street and home, I realized that I believed her when she said she looked forward to it. And that felt nice.

Four

A couple of nights later, Mr. McPhail and I were back in the parlour with our books after dinner. The CBC was playing a lulling symphonic movement and everything felt very cultured – I debated calling for Jeeves to ask him to bring us a couple of snifters of brandy and a pair of ascots. Such a pity he had the night off.

Heather called down the stairs: "Magnus?"

Mr. McPhail marked his place in his book with a finger and called back up: "Yes?"

"Is it too late for me to be using the laundry machines?"

"They're down too far for me to hear them, so don't worry: go ahead and use them any time."

"Thank youuu!"

I looked over at him from the sofa. "I'm glad she's settling in so comfortably. That's good."

Mr. McPhail chuckled. "I told her she was welcome to address me by my first name the day she arrived here. You may recall that I extended exactly the same offer to you, months ago. And, by the way, I'm sure I'd be shocked in disbelief if I thought back to exactly how many months it's been."

I looked down. "Oh, I remember you saying to me, yes. But I dunno, I... I'm not saying anything against Heather, but for me it feels awkward. At least so far. It almost seems disrespectful."

He rested one hand over the knuckles of the hand that was serving as his temporary bookmark. "Well, if you intend it as a way of showing respect, then that's how I'll take it, and thank you. But I'm comfortable with whichever way either of you chooses. It's all good."

When he used the same expression Noar had said in the park, that reminded of me of something I wanted to ask him. "I... I was talking with someone the other day about something, and now I happen to be reading something similar here." I

raised my library book about half an inch then rested it on my lap again. "I was just wondering, have you... have you ever heard anything about this concept that the universe is all one connected whole? You ever wonder if there's anything to that idea?"

When I heard footsteps on the stairs, I glanced over. Heather was dressed in flannel pyjamas covered in teddy bears; she carried down a large canvas sack. She waved her fingers at us. "Don't mind me – go on with your heavyosity!" Then she headed for the door to the basement stairs and clumped down them.

Mr. McPhail cleared his throat and tucked an actual bookmark into his book. "As it happens, I have run across that notion in a few places – some of them surprised me. But offhand, I can think of a lot more people who would simply question why any of it would matter or why anyone should care. I try to avoid those people if I can." And he gave me a casual wink.

I tapped my book with a fingertip. "There were ancient Hindus who said that the universe was nothing but a field of vibrations. And everything we perceive is just how our consciousness interprets those vibrations."

"I gather that a lot of you young folks are interested in 'vibes' nowadays, so I expect that should ring true with you."

"For some, I'm sure. There was also a teaching back then, that the universe is like a, a network of perfect mirror beads – like a string of pearls, only an infinite web of them. Each one connected to all the others somehow, and you can see the reflections of all the other beads inside each one."

"To see reflections that tiny, you'd need eyes a lot better than mine." He smiled and adjusted his thick glasses.

I smiled back. "I mean, I think it's a fascinating idea, but I'm still not sure I get a sense of what it would mean for us."

He paused to sip from a glass of water beside his ashtray. "That is a whole other question, to be sure. And I'm not going to kid you that I have an answer for that. But I happen to remember something that might interest you.

"Not long ago I was reading some beginner-level articles about quantum theory. It's a kind of physics I mostly don't understand – but I gather a lot of today's

scientists don't really understand it, either, so I take some solace in that. In any case, one of the ideas these gentlemen put forward is that the particles that make up the universe can be described as waves of probability, if I got that right. The place where this wave is highest is the most likely place to find the particle. And some others say that what you find there is not so much a particle as an event: a place where this wave is interacting with other waves. So there isn't really a particle there – what you have instead is a place where 'particle-ing' is happening. So, by this way of thinking, there are no objects, there are only actions. Just waves interacting with other waves. Interference patterns."

My eyes widened. "So the universe is nothing but vibrations."

"According to some math that is far beyond me. And again, perhaps I have grossly misunderstood all this, or I've been reading authors who misunderstand – but at least it made me think." He drank some more water, then added, "I do find it intriguing that groups of people, thousands of years and thousands of miles apart, using very different methods, could reach a similar conclusion about something like that."

"Yes." I nodded. "That's... rather unexpected, isn't it."

"But exciting." He finally moved his book from his lap to the table beside him. "That's something I plan to do next year, when I finally get to retire. I'm going to start at square one and teach myself about physics – I've always been interested in it. That and math."

I grinned. "They didn't make you sick of it in school?"

"School was very different back in my day. Not a lot of science in the lower grades. And I never got to finish, anyway – had to leave early to help support the family."

"Oh." That surprised me – the way Mr. McPhail spoke and presented, I had always taken him for a scholar of some sort.

"Still, I made up for it by reading everything I could get my hands on. Mama said that's how I ruined my eyes." He gripped the soft arms of his chair and leveraged himself up onto his feet with a gentle wobble. "But enough for now. It's gone nine o'clock. Time for the old man to get his sleep – the work day comes early."

I wished him good night as he walked past me to the stairs. He paused to let Heather go up ahead of him, then he followed after, leaving me with the radio and my musings.

I was a little surprised when Heather came back down, told me she was putting the kettle on for tea, and asked me if I wanted some. It was even more of a surprise when she brought our cups of tea out and then sat with hers in Mr. McPhail's wing chair. She'd spent the last couple of evenings after dinner in her room – I suppose she finally felt ready to venture farther afield.

She looked over at me with a self-satisfied little smile. "There was no rule about not sitting in his chair."

I nodded. "There wasn't one about not sitting in his lap, either."

Heather's laugh sounded sweet. "I'll wait and see if he asks. But I didn't want to crowd you."

"Oh, I'm good either way."

"But no, you were right: there aren't really so many rules here, and they aren't that hard. He seems like a good guy." Then she gestured toward the stereo, which was playing a string quartet. "Are you listening to this? I mean, do you mind if I change it?"

I had never changed the station on Mr. McPhail's radio. I'd never even thought about it. "Um, well, no, I wasn't really paying attention to it –"

"Good." She popped up out of the chair and over to the stereo. The wooden lid made a soft squeak as she opened it. "This stuff is a drag." The turning of the radio's tuning knob produced random squeals. "Ooo perfect, it's got FM – far out." She turned her head to look back at me. "There was no rule about not changing the station."

I shook my head but broke into a smile. "True."

Her voice was muffled as she spoke into the stereo. "Don't worry, I'll put it back

when I'm done. I don't wanna bum him out."

"I feel the same way."

The sound of a sinuous guitar solo came out of the speakers, surprisingly clear. Heather lowered the lid, and then lowered her backside back into the chair.

"That's more like it. Is this Quicksilver?"

I shrugged. My interest in music was fairly casual, so there weren't that many songs or bands I knew by name. Mostly I just liked to have the radio on, or keep an ear open toward the record player at friends' parties.

"I think it is," Heather decided. "Well, that's mostly what this station plays, the West Coast stuff, Airplane, the Dead, all that. But that's what I dig, eh?"

"What station is this?" I didn't know there was one in the area that specialized in psychedelic rock.

"CWGR – it's a pirate FM station somewhere downtown here."

I gaped. "Here? Westgate has a radio station?!"

She held her forefinger up to her lips. "Officially, no."

Suddenly the music sounded more interesting, somehow. "Right on."

Heather had a pocket on the left breast of her pyjamas. She reached into it, rummaged for a second, and then pulled out a joint. Then she picked up the box of matches Mr. McPhail kept near his pipe, and waved it so I could see. "Is there a rule about using his matches?"

I giggled. "Not as I recall."

She made a decisive nod and lit up. I was curious about where she got it, how much it was, if she rolled it herself... and realized that all my questions were painfully uncool. Besides, Noar would say that there are no questions anyway. So I said nothing.

Heather glanced over at me. "Not looking to get ripped, it just helps me sleep. I got work tomorrow."

"Me, too."

"Solidarity, sister," she said. "Glad they don't have me on night shift – I got lucky there, eh." Smoke curled around her head. Then she reached over and handed the joint to me. I took it with the correct thumb-forefinger pinch, took a small polite toke from it, then handed it back. I didn't smoke a lot, but had done enough that it was no longer a wild freaky novelty for me.

She dragged on it, exhaled smoke, then turned and gave me a serious look. "So can you see my aura now?"

I focused on her, for less than a second, then nodded. "Very easy."

She fidgeted in the chair for a second til she got comfortable. "What does it look like?"

"Um... not like very much, really. Not just you, I mean, everyone. The, the only way I can think to describe what I see, is like there's about an inch or two all around you where the air looks clearer than other air. Cleaner, maybe. That's all."

She licked her lips. "No colours or nuthin? Rainbows?"

I shook my head.

"I got a aunt says she can see pictures in people's auras," she went on. "Visions of their future, she says. She tells fortunes sometimes."

"Wow, I get nothing like that."

Heather giggled. "A few times she said shit that came true, and that's all anyone can talk about. I mean, I know there were *a lot* of times she said stuff that was just completely wrong, but nobody ever remembers any of those, eh?" Then she laughed.

I took a sip of my tea. "Even so, that's still a lot more impressive than what I get."

"Yeah, you get all the *boring* auras, man!" And she laughed again, but this time I

joined her. Then she handed me the joint again, and I told myself this was my last hit of the evening. I was only looking to relax a little.

There was a break in the music, where a man spoke in a low, slow mumble about revolution of the mind. He mentioned the new paper *Open the Gate*, and I wondered if the people running this pirate station might be connected to the people who put the paper out. I mean, this was Westgate! How many underground radicals could we have? I figured there would have to be some overlap.

Then he put some more music on, and I smiled to hear something I recognized: another of my favourite Grateful Dead songs, "Dark Star". "This guy has taste," I said.

Heather smiled a mellow smile. "Right on. Beats Top Forty any day."

"Roll over, Beethoven," I said, which got another giggle from her.

"You and your auras, though," she said finally. "Really, Grace, you should go to the Institute, see Professor Bloomfield. He studies shit like that – he would want to study you. You... you would be furthering the cause of science!"

"What, like, be a lab rat?" She laughed again, and I waved and shushed her. "We should keep it down," I said, then rolled my eyes meaningfully toward the ceiling where Mr. McPhail slept above us.

She whispered now. "Ohh, yeah, right, right. Oh hey, man, hold this – I think I gotta go put my stuff in the dryer." She handed me the joint and went back down to the basement. I looked at it in my fingers while the sound of guitars entwined around me. All right, just one more.

When Heather came back up and walked past the sofa to the chair, I handed the smoke to her. "So when could I go see this professor guy?" I said quietly. "I don't think I wanna take time off work for something like that."

She picked up her teacup. "Well... I'm pretty sure that they run experiments on weekends, too. So the labs are open even if the main office isn't. I guess that's why Monday morning is always such a mess there. Huh! I only just figured that out now!" She took a swallow, then added, "Phone them and find out when you can go. The office'll know better than I do."

"All right," I said. "Are they in the book?"

"Yeah, but still under the old name, I bet, so look up 'Human and Beyond'."

"Right. Hey, why did they change that name anyway? It was more fun before."

"Yeah, you said." She set her cup down and started idly toying with her long braid. "The way they tell me, they started off with that name trying to look connected to what they call 'the human potential movement'. But then, the end of last year, they made this arrangement to get affiliated with Belvedere U. The University gives them some funding, which they need bad, Belvedere's psych department gets to use the labs sometimes, and it makes our place look more I dunno legit. But part of the deal is change the name."

I swallowed a bit of my tea. "To something that sounds more academic."

"Right, a science name." She stopped for another puff. "But also, some of the girls in the office told me that they wanted to change it cuz nobody knew what the place was – there was people coming in off the street thinking we sold sports wear or some shit!" We both sputtered and snorted, trying to hold our laughter down.

Heather handed me the joint again, now very short, but this time I shook my head and waved it away. When it came right down to it, I really did know my limits, and I knew when it was time to respect them. I just wished her good night and headed up to my room. On my way up the stairs, I reminded her to tune the radio back to CBC when she was done.

She nodded, said "Roll over, Beethoven," and quietly snickered.

Five

Before I left work for my lunch hour on Thursday, I asked Mr. King if I could borrow the phone in the office. "As long as it ain't long distance, eh?" he said, with mock bluster. "I don't want no calls to Timbuktu on my bill next month! Huh-ha!"

The receiver of the ancient black phone hefted like lead in my left hand, while my right scanned the page of the phone book opened flat on the office desk. The Westgate phone book in those days was nearly as thin as a comic book, the source of endless jokes, and every time I saw it I was reminded of what a humble little place my hometown was. And yet I could never quite bring myself to be embarrassed about the place – there was too much about it I still loved.

I dialed the Institute and what sounded like a young woman's voice answered. "Huma – Institute for Paranormal Studies."

"Hello, my, my friend Heather suggested that I call and ask to meet with Professor Bloomfield?"

"Heather?"

"Heather Montour – she work–"

"Oh, *Heather!*" The woman giggled. "Oh, my, I'm sorry, I don't know where my head is today. I just fill in here over lunchtime, don't mind me."

Perhaps it was naive of me to expect a completely no-nonsense atmosphere from a place like this. "Should I call back later?"

"No no, I'm sorry, I can help you, really. Please. So Heather told you to call? Do you –" And here her voice got low, almost conspiratorial. "Do you have some kind of phenomenon to report?"

"Well, it's because I see auras, she said I –"

"Oh, auras, yes! That would be Professor Bloomfield, absolutely! Oh my, thank you for calling. Yes, he will want to see you. When are you free to come in?"

"I, um, it would have to be after five on weekdays or on weekends – I work full-

time, so I can't really –"

"Of course, I understand. Give me a second to check his schedule." She hummed tunelessly to herself and I heard the rattle of pages. "I can book him in The Blue Lab for two o'clock on this Saturday that's the 15th – will that work for you?"

"Yes, yes that will be fine, thank you –"

"You know where we are, right?"

"Yes, I've been by there quite a few time–"

"Well, that's perfect. So what you do is, on Saturday just go to the main entrance and buzz the intercom beside the door, then someone will let you in, all right? And you tell them you're looking for *The Blue Lab*. Well, this is wonderful, thanks very mu– oh wait! I didn't get your name!" She giggled again.

"It's Grace. Hemphill."

"Sorry, how is that spelled?" I spelled it for her. "Ah, thank you, got it in the book now. All right, *now* we are all set. Listen, will you please not tell anyone here about what a space cadet I was today?"

I finally felt myself grin. "I'm pretty sure the subject won't even come up." Saturday afternoon promised to be a break from my routine, if nothing else.

After the call, I once again took my lunch outside. The day was overcast, gusty with a threat of rain, and I pulled my fringed jacket a little more snugly around me as I walked. I didn't really expect to be able to sit on the grass and eat. Instead, I just ate on the move – another sandwich today, chicken loaf this time. I confess, the reason I wanted to be out today was to try and find Noar again.

The Square was much less crowded than on Monday. Mostly people crossing it on the way between places, rather than wanting to stay there and relax. I scanned the park as I walked to the middle of it, then sat on the stone edge of the fountain for a moment. I ate absently while I looked around. No sign of him: and I expected a man as large and striking as he was would be easy to spot.

After making a circuit of the park, I backtracked and made my way to Hamilton Street while I finished my sandwich and started working on a banana. The crowds were thinner here today as well, without the beckoning welcome of the sun. Only the coffeehouses looked about as busy as usual. I walked by them for about a block, listening to the music and chatter clustered in front of them, scanning the crowds as best I could. Then I came back up the other side of the street, slowing down when I approached Moonwalk to see if he was at that spot under that awning again. Still no luck.

Disappointed but not shocked, I headed back to the hardware store a little more slowly. I'd spent almost my entire lunch hour on my feet, all for the sake of some fond hope. I liked to think of myself as solid and sensible, but I was forced to recognize that there were times I simply didn't fit that pattern.

Early in the afternoon, I heard yet another ring of the bell at the store's front door; but before I could even look up, I heard Mr. King call out, "Hey there, June!"

June? I looked up fast to see my mother shuffling toward the counter. She had her face turned toward Mr. King, trying to lift the corners of her mouth a little. "Hello there, Gord," she said. Mom and Mr. King were old friends from before I was born: he was one of the deacons at her church, and she saw him there every Sunday morning. And Sunday evening. And at prayer meeting every Wednesday night. So she just saw him last night – she might not have much that needed saying to him now.

I could hear her gently huffing as she toddled over to me with heavy steps. Everything about her – her thick red curls bundled under a floral kerchief, the dark splash of freckles over her face, her mouth held tight between full cheeks, her long lightweight coat of gray which was once blue – all of it was still so deeply familiar, even though I no longer saw them every day. I just waited and blinked til she quietly said, "Hello, dear." As if she didn't want Mr. King to overhear.

My voice was flat. "What are you doing here?"

"I was at Woolworths getting some thread." She held up a little paper bag, as if

she were expecting me to demand proof. "Just stopped in to say hello on my way home."

"Ah. Then hello."

"Oh, also –" There was always an also. "– I was going to ask you to come over for dinner tomorrow night. If you can." I could see her scrutinizing me, the way she always did in the first minute or so. Looking for signs that I was On Drugs, as if she'd have any idea what to look for. As always, it rankled me. As always, I let it pass.

"What's the occasion?" I said. They usually only invited me for dinner on special occasions: Easter last month, my nineteenth birthday a couple of months before that. Which was fine with me, as special occasions were usually about the only times I could make myself feel willing to go.

Her bright blue eyes blinked rapidly, as she tried to make herself look bland, and not offended. Not in front of her friend. "Nothing. We just thought it might be nice."

"Oh, we did, huh?" I was willing to bet that my father hadn't even heard about any of this arrangement yet.

"Uh-huh. So can you?"

It was curiosity getting the better of me, more than anything else, I suppose, that got me to say, "All right. What time?"

"Say 5:30. That way you'll be able to get back home before it gets dark."

"All right, then. 5:30."

She nodded; I couldn't tell if she was pleased. "That's fine. I guess I'll be off, then. I'll tell your father you said hi." As she trudged to the door, she called over, "See you, Gord."

He called back, "See ya, June – take it easy, eh?" And the bell jingled.

A few seconds later, Mr. King was behind the counter, at my elbow. In a low, confidential voice, he said, "Hey, I'm gonna pop over to The Wien to grab a

coffee to bring back. Ya want me to get you one?" And the way that he came over, close and quiet, to ask me, rather than call over across the store, told me that he was actually checking to make sure I was all right.

I looked up at him and gave him a weak smile. "Thank you, I would love one." I didn't even need to tell him how I took mine.

Six

Shortly after five the next day, Mr. King unlocked the store door to let me out while we wished each other a nice weekend. From work I headed straight to the folks' house – it was a far enough walk that I had little time for anything else, if I was going to make it there for 5:30. Fortunately, the day was warmer and brighter than yesterday, which bolstered my spirits somewhat. I squinted a bit against the sun, and it gave enough heat that I could leave my jacket open. I was wearing one of my favourite outfits, including my two-tone cord flares – light purple front half with dark purple patch pockets, colour scheme reversed for the back half – in a further bid to cheer myself up for this evening.

The streets grew quieter as I moved farther from downtown, until by the time I reached our street, all I could hear was my own footsteps and a few birds. And then voices of kids playing ball hockey in the street, down at the other end of the block. The trees and houses along here, even the cars parked along the curbs, looked like nothing had changed since I was a preschooler.

I walked up the uneven steps of our veranda, still sporting some flakes of its fifties paint, and knocked on the wooden screen door. The inner door squeaked open and I saw my mother peering through the screen at me. Her shoulders fell a little.

"Gracie. I keep telling you, you don't need to knock, just come in – this is still your house."

I shrugged as I stepped inside. "And I keep telling you, I don't want to startle you."

While I hung up my jacket beside the door, mom shuffled, almost a waddle, across the living room's paisley linoleum flooring til she reached the door to the basement steps. Then she called down. "Ian?" Only it sounded more like "Eee-yaaaaan?" Whenever mom's voice went above a certain volume, it took on this grating bray that made everything sound like nagging. "*Eee-yan! Gracie's heere, come get danner!*"

A low rumble came up from the basement. "Yuhhh." Exactly as I knew it would.

I didn't need her to tell me where I was supposed to sit: at the side of the table, with the two of them at either end, just as it had always been since my seat was

a highchair. I slid into my chair and watched her pick up a pot from the stove. She was wearing her Comfy Dress: short-sleeved, calf-length, pale pink with white flowers, shapeless. Over that she had tied on her whitish apron with faded red roses. While she picked up a ladle from the counter, I noticed again the deep dimples of her elbows. When I was small, those fascinated me – and even today I felt a bizarre affection for them, as if they were her prettiest feature. She brought the pot and ladle over to the table and started dishing out Lipton's chicken noodle soup into the three white ceramic bowls set for us. This was a favourite meal of mine when I was little, and the aroma of it was deeply nostalgic even now.

While she was filling our bowls, my father came into the kitchen, and the smell of smoke all around the house suddenly grew stronger. He nodded at me and grunted as he passed by, then made a loud scraping with his chair before he dropped into it. I simply nodded back at him. Still wearing his only sweater, a lumpy gray cardigan with a few torn holes and more than a few cigarette burns; I could see a thin white sleeveless undershirt peeking from beneath it. The spiky mess of his short gray hair, and his sagging eyes, made him look like he'd just woken up. But that was just his look. Just like his tight, narrow aura was normal for him.

Once the soup was served, mom took the pot over to the sink, but neither of us started in eating yet. Mom came back to the table, sat down, still wearing her apron, and rested her hands on the table edge with her fingers laced together. Then she closed her eyes and lowered her head, and I did the same.

Her voice came out in a low, quick murmur: "Dear Heavenly Father we thank Thee for this opportunity to be gathered together again as a family, we thank Thee for Thy many blessings to us throughout this day and every day..." I heard my father's chair shift as he fidgeted, and I was reasonably certain that he was just watching us, with that small twist in his lip which he practised so often. I remember a time when I opened my eyes to see him – and after mom was finished praying, he tattled on me about it, knowing that she would be put out about my not praying along with her. No better than a bratty little brother. And mom completely ignored dad's similar misdeed and just scolded me about it for a while. He got a small chuckle out of that. Not giving him the satisfaction again – I just kept my eyes shut. "... in Jesus' name we pray, amen."

We all reached for our spoons and began. I stirred mine for a moment, watching the steam still coming from it, but my father dug in and began slurping

immediately, as if the heat was no bother to him. Mom was stirring her own, and I caught her looking over at me, studying me for drug abuse once again. When her eyes went up to my beaded leather headband, she made a little scowl, but said nothing.

We stirred, and blew, and then ate the first few spoonfuls in silence. Then dad said to his bowl, "I need bread, June."

Mom made a small nod toward the box of saltines on the table. "We have crackers, Ian."

Dad slurped a spoonful, then said, "I need bread, June."

Mom sighed, moved her chair back loudly, then went over to the breadbox to take out a loaf. She took down the cutting board hanging nearby, clapped it onto the counter louder than necessary, then rummaged in the silverware drawer for the breadknife – again, not quietly. I watched her back rock as she sawed at the bread, then glanced over at dad, who only had eyes for his soup. With a rattle, mom pulled out a small dish from the upper cupboard, laid the slice of bread on it, then clanked it beside dad's bowl. He picked up the bread – I noticed the nicotine gold of his fingertips. He dipped it in his soup, and then bit some off, as if nothing could be more natural than its sudden appearance at his elbow.

Finally mom decided to speak. "How are things at work, dear?"

"Fine. Just the same as before." I sipped at my spoon.

"Uh-huh. Gord is such a lovely man, a good Christian. You couldn't ask for a better boss."

"Yes, mom, I completely agree." As I had done more than once before. "I like working for him."

"M-hm." She nodded emphatically. "And I was just thinking the other day about the fuss you made about not wanting to get your C & T. That C & T is what got you that job."

"C & T" was the four-year Commerce and Trades program offered at my high school. I originally aimed to get into the five-year Academic program, with an eye to going on to university. But our guidance counsellor, Mr. Cappellani, talked

me – essentially pushed me – into switching over into the C & T in business math and secretarial. Said that Academic was "wasting my time". Never explained why. But eventually the rest of us at school compared notes and found that Capper was always pushing the girls away from Academic, but never the boys. Only a few of the girls, who had the nerve to push back, managed to stay in the Academic and go on to postsecondary. I wasn't one of those girls – at least, not at the time.

Mom went on. "This way you have something to show for yourself. We didn't want you wasting years far away from home at university, lolling around with hippies." Then she looked down at my T-shirt. "Although that ended up happening anyway, Lord help us. You know that's not how we raised you, Grace Hemphill."

I glanced down. The shirt was navy blue, with rainbow-coloured lettering across the top, a wavy psychedelic font that read "peace". And the familiar round peace symbol below that. I didn't expect my parents to like something that looked as overtly "hippie" as this – in fact, I had a shameful suspicion that that was why I chose to wear it today. I looked my mother in the eye. "What, you have a problem with my shirt?"

She tisked, looked at her soup, and picked up a spoonful of it. "I don't want to argue about this, dear."

"Yes, you do – you just don't want me to argue back." She looked at me from the corner of her eye and scowled. I gestured toward my shirt and said, "What's wrong with peace? Maybe, maybe next time I can wear one that says 'war' – would that be better?"

Dad muttered, "Huh, I'd like one o' those."

Mom turned her glance back to him. "Oh, Ian, shush." Then we ate silently for a while. Idly I looked around. Behind me I could hear the soft buzz of the electric wall clock. A dusty pair of flat plaster elephants, painted pale blue, hung on the pinstriped wallpaper near the fridge, and I realized I could not remember a time in my life when those weren't in that exact spot. Nothing changed here.

When our soup was finished, mom dutifully collected the dishes and put them beside the sink. Then she set out new spoons and took three little glass bowls, filled with cubes of orange jello, out of the fridge to set before us. For a while we

just ate, with gentle clinking sounds.

Then mom made another attempt. "So anything else new? You know I keep hoping you'll meet a nice boy soon and settle down. There must be lots of them coming into a hardware store, I would think."

The first thought to cross my mind was Noar. "No, no nice boys on my horizon so far.... But *this* is new, maybe it will interest you? I have an appointment tomorrow afternoon to get tested in a lab."

"You *what*? Gracie, are you sick? What's the matter?"

"No no, sorry." I waved my hand at mom. "I'm fine. This is, like, science things – I'm helping someone with some research. At that paranormal institute, up by the dairy bush."

Mom dropped her spoon and looked at me. Her brow wrinkled, and her eyes and mouth got round with a look like a mixture of indignation and fear. "*That* place? What in heaven's name would you be doing in a place like *that*? Those people are messing around with the *occult* up there! You *know* better!"

"No, mother, no, they're not. It's just plain regular science." I assumed.

"Oh, they can call it that if they want, but I've *heard*. Those people are doing mind reading and witchcraft! I'm shocked at you, Grace! I'm really shocked!" I heard dad sigh, and glanced over at him. He was just looking at his bowl, eating his jello, and shaking his head, but I wasn't sure on whose account.

"You're overreacting," I said. But the fact was that she was reacting pretty much as I could have expected. And I realized that I hadn't needed to mention it to them at all. I later wondered if this was just one more way for me to try and push them away.

As soon as dad finished his dessert, he stood up without any word or ado, trudged over to the fridge, and took something out. With his back to me, I couldn't see what he was doing, but I didn't need to. There was the clink of a bottle set onto the counter, the jingling rummage in the silverware drawer, the short sharp hiss of opening, the clunk and rattle of the opener and bottle cap being left on the counter – and then he took his beer out to the living room.

My father's Friday evenings proceeded like clockwork. After dinner, he had a beer while he watched *Hee Haw*, and then *Don Messer*. Then he went out to meet the boys at the Legion, while my mother would take over the TV to watch either an old movie if it was good, or medical dramas if it wasn't.

Once dad left the kitchen, mom turned a little in her chair to face me more directly. This was when I saw what looked like a fresh bruise on her arm. I stared at it a second, to be sure of what I was seeing, then looked her in the eye. She sat still, her mouth tight, the softness under her chin quivering, her eyes glaring bright at me, as if daring me to try saying even one word about it. I didn't.

She relaxed, then, and shook her head and said, "Well, I'll see if Gord can have a word with you about this – maybe you'll listen to him if not to me. And I'll have to pray harder for you, I suppose. The Lord knows that this isn't –"

"– isn't how you raised me," I finished for her. "Yes. I know. I – there's more to us than how we were raised, mother. We have to be who we are."

She sighed. "Well, I'm going to keep praying anyway. I mean, what more can I do?"

"I wouldn't know."

She stood up. "Would you like some tea? I think I want some."

"All right sure," I said. I had to give her credit: my mother made a good pot of tea. She filled the kettle and set it going on the stove. Then she scooped loose tea out of its can and tucked it into the little metal tea egg, woefully stained. Once the egg was resting in the teapot awaiting the water, mom sat back down and leaned in closer to me.

"Now, while your father's not here, I...." She glanced back over her shoulder toward the living room, then turned back to me. "We've run into a spot of trouble, and I wondered if maybe you were able to spare anything."

I glared at her, and I could feel it wasn't very friendly. So here it was. This was why she invited me over "for no reason". And right after work on a Friday: my pay packet was still in my pocket, so she knew I'd have cash on me.

I tried to just breathe and relax my chest. I suddenly let myself remember that

she had pulled this once last year as well, and I felt played. Finally I said, tightly, "Did dad go to the track again?"

"No!" Once again her eyes lit and she dared me to doubt her.

I struggled to push my anger down. Anger at them, but even more at myself, for walking into this, for not having the strength of character to refuse to play along, to simply say no. "What were you looking for?"

She glanced down for a second. "We could really use fifty."

I made a little cough. "Only if I don't pay my rent this week. Or eat." My jaw felt tight.

She looked back up at me, quietly glum. "Well, anything would help."

I sighed, pulled the little brown envelope out of my pocket, then turned a bit away from her so she couldn't see inside while I tucked some fingers into it. I saw a twenty. I could eat mostly rice and oatmeal next week. And I wouldn't be buying any books for a while longer. I slid the twenty out and set it on the table in front of my mother without a word.

She picked the bill up and slid her hand down inside the open collar of her dress. I could barely hear her thank you.

The kettle was just starting its low breathy rumble of warming up, but I stood up and hitched up the waist of my slacks. "I'm gonna go now."

"What about your tea?"

"I changed my mind. Thank you for dinner. Don't see me out – the kettle's going to go soon."

When I reached the living room, I saw my father slouched back in his beat-up recliner, a cigarette in his fingers, the beer on a small table beside him. He was entranced by the sight of *Hee Haw* on the small black-and-white TV. Suddenly he laughed, a soft rumbling *hur-hur-hur*. The only times I ever heard him laugh were when he was watching that ludicrous show. Of all things.

I went past him to get my jacket off its hook, running a silent diatribe in my head,

disparaging and despairing of my father's tastes in the things that gave him pleasure. (Rather than letting myself realize just how few of those things he even had.) I waited by the door for a moment, to see if he would say goodbye. Some days, he did. Today was not one of them.

I tried to close the door behind me as quietly as I could. Even though the sun was still out, it felt cooler and I buttoned my jacket. The ball hockey kids were gone – no doubt indoors now, eating their own dinners. Perhaps a lucky few were having Lipton's.

I made it back home well before dark.

Seven

The next day, I left McPhail Manor just after lunch, greeted by an even warmer, near-summer afternoon perfect for a long walk. An added bonus was that such a walk could save me the cost of bus fare to the Institute – avoiding even such tiny expenditures as that one seemed like a good idea, after the dent that my mother had put in my budget.

Once I passed The Wien and hit Hamilton Street, I turned north, away from the hippie crowds. A few blocks up this way would take me out of downtown, then on through a residential stretch, and up to the dairy bush area – I gave myself about forty-five minutes to reach the Institute at a leisurely pace.

From out of the clusters of Saturday afternoon shoppers and loiterers, I heard one or two cries of, "Hey, Slick!" I waved back and gave a carefree smile. Dressed for the heat as I was, in my roomy tank top and cut-off denim shorts and clip-on shades, I felt about as ravishing as I ever got. No harm done if I decided to amuse myself by interpreting these calls as wolf whistles.

The trees along the side streets were filled in nicely and made a gentle rustle in the breeze. There were fewer cars going by now and more children on tricycles, their short shadows directly beneath them. It had been a while since I was in this neighbourhood, and at one point I had to stop and question whether I was taking the correct turn. But it's hard to get truly lost in a town this size, and, about when I expected, I found myself scuffling across the wide stretch of asphalt parking lot surrounding the Institute for Paranormal Studies.

Where now sat a long, flat building of brown brick and big dark windows, all very rectilinear, there once stood the quirky stucco premises of Westgate Dairy, surrounded by gravel, back when I was in primary school. Another, smaller low building ran along the line of trees in back, where there used to be a row of stables. That was back when the milkmen still drove a few horse-drawn milk wagons along their routes – I can remember straining for a look at the stables whenever my father happened to drive us past the dairy, in case I could see a horse or two being unhitched back there. The dairy horses, whether here or clapping and jingling down the streets, were a high point of my young day – long gone, now. Behind the trees was a stretch of field still growing wild, known as the dairy bush even today. The Institute had not built out into the bush yet. But who knew when that day might come?

A flat awning over the main entrance shaded me as I pressed the buzzer on the intercom. I waited. For what felt like a while. I pressed it again. And waited some more. Then I heard the soft crunch and scuffle of footsteps approaching off to my side, and I turned to look.

A gangly young man, a few years my senior, perhaps, was sauntering around the building from the back, giving me a slow wide wave. Very lean, very tanned, sun-bleached crew cut, big ears, broad smile. Dressed for the weather much as I was, in blue jeans torn off at the knees, a white T-shirt with a Belvedere U logo and torn-off sleeves, and sandals. He looked very much like someone who grew up listening to surf music and never left. "Heyyyy," he called to me. "Are you, uh, Grace, ummm, Hemphill, right?"

I gave him a little nod as he came up to me. "Correct."

"Cool." He held out a large sinewy hand, which I shook. "I'm Steve." Now that he was closer, his distinct smoky aroma and glassy pink eyes told me that Steve was hipper than he looked. And perhaps explained the width of his smile.

"Yes, you are," I said as I released his hand. "But I was expecting Dr. Bloomfield?"

"Professor," Steve said, beckoning me to walk back with him. "Oh yeah, he'll be here soon, don't worry. I'm his assistant? I help with setting up the equipment and all that? So he doesn't really need to be here until I get all that done, anyway. We're cool."

He led me back to the smaller rear building by the trees. "The labs are back here, okay? I was setting up here when you buzzed. Buzzed, heh! And I'm the only one working here right now, so it took me a while to come get you, sorry."

"Ah, that's fine, I didn't wait long, really." I looked up at Steve while he held open the door of the lab building for me. "Oh, did you know that I have no idea what we're doing here today?"

"Heh! Nothing to worry about, I promise." Our footsteps echoed as we headed down a long, dim hallway. I unclipped my shades from my glasses and clipped them to my collar. Steve stopped us at a blue door and held that open for me as well. I entered and found myself in a bright clean room, more echoing than I expected. The floor was gray shiny linoleum and the walls were painted light

blue – hence the name The Blue Lab, I figured. A small, glassed-in booth took up one corner near the door. A large white projector screen covered much of the back wall. And in the centre of the room, facing the screen, was a chair of thick wood. A cable ran from the base of one chair leg, across the floor, and into a wall of the booth. And a microphone hung from the ceiling over the chair, about seven feet from the floor. Not exactly an electric chair chamber, but the similarities were a bit unnerving.

Steve escorted me to the chair. From its seat, he removed a leather strap with fine wires running from it, and gestured for me to sit. He showed me the wired strap. "This here is a set of electrodes that I attach to your head –" I guess he noticed my eyes widening at that. "– no-no, they aren't needles, nothing pokes into you, you don't feel any shocks or none o' that, I promise! It just feels like nothing. Really." I exhaled and nodded. "So okay if I go ahead?"

"Yes. Sorry, Steve."

"Heyyy, we are fine, man." He pulled the strap snug across my forehead and around, then closed its velcro fastener. "We are smooth sailin', baby." I turned to look behind me and could make him out crouched by my elbow, laboriously plugging the other ends of the wires into little sockets built into the frame of the chair. "The professor is gonna monitor your brain waves while he asks you some questions –"

I giggled. "You mean this is like a lie detector?"

Steve looked up at me and grinned. "Heh! Naa, but ya know, he could make it act like one if he wanted to – he's really smart." He reached under the chair and lifted up another small velcro strap with one wire. "Oh, and this is just a pulse monitor – it goes here." And he fastened it around my wrist. "And that's it. Not so bad, right?"

"Yes, it's all fine. Totally comfortable."

"Ah, good." Then his face fell. "Aw, man, maybe I shoulda asked you if you need to, like, go down the hall first before I got you all hooked up here, cuz now you can't get up, right?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Good point, Steve." And I got him to unstrap me, direct me to the bathroom, and then put the straps on all over again when I returned.

After that, he went into the booth. Then I heard his voice over a hidden intercom. "Oh hey, can you say hello?"

I announced to the empty room, "Hello hello – say good night, Gracie."

"Perfect, thanks." I heard him coming back out to the chair, and he brought the smell of grass with him. When he came into view he offered me the joint. I took a small toke just to be polite.

After I exhaled, I said, "So how did you end up working here? I figure it must be an interesting place – I always wondered about it."

"Yeah, it's all right. I'm one of the professor's T.A.s for Psych 101 back at Bel U, so when he was looking for –"

He was interrupted by a voice coming through the door from out in the hallway. "Put it out, Steven."

"Uh-oh," said Steve as he trotted back to the control booth. The door opened, then I heard clipped footsteps coming my way, and that same voice muttering, "How many times. I ask you, how many times."

Then a short man of about thirty came into view before me. He looked sharp and serious: a strong, snouty face with piercing eyes, black-rimmed glasses, thick wavy dark hair that just brushed his ears. White turtleneck and a trim, charcoal gray suit. He gave me a little bow, with his hands behind his back. "Miss Hemphill?"

"Yes."

"I'm Hal Bloomfield, with the psych department at Belvedere U. I just wanted you to know that if anyone else other than Joyce had answered the phone when you called, we wouldn't be here today. I gave all the other girls instructions not to book me this weekend. I had to cancel plans to do this."

I felt flustered. "Oh no, I'm sorry, do you want –"

He held up both hands. "No no no – I'm just saying. Just saying. I'm trying to convey to you how pleased I am to be working with you, that I was quite willing to change my plans for an opportunity like this. I'm very excited about today, is

what I mean."

"Oh. Well, I'm glad, then."

He nodded briskly. "And rightly so. Now. Here's what I propose to do. I take it Steven has already explained these wires with which he has trussed you up so thoroughly?"

"Yes, professor," said Steve through the intercom.

The professor nodded again. "So. We will be tape recording this entire procedure, as well as taking readings of your brain activity, while we discuss and test your aura-viewing capabilities – that *is* why you're here, no? I did understand that correctly?"

"That's right, doctor."

His mouth tightened. "It's 'professor', not 'doctor' – and don't get me started. Now. My primary area of interest is the human energy field, and the human aura is one of the foremost manifestations of that. So you can understand my interest in getting more information about it from someone with your capacities, no?" I nodded. "Excellent. Let's begin. Start recording, Steven."

Professor Bloomfield started to pace slowly around in front of my chair, addressing an invisible audience. "We are in The Blue Lab of the Institute for Paranormal Studies. It is May 15th, 1971 –" He paused to look at his watch. "Two-nineteen pm. Professor Harold Bloomfield conducting the study of today's subject – state your name for the tape, please."

"Grace Hemphill."

"And your date of birth."

"February 27th, 1952."

"What nationality are you?"

"Um, both my parents are descended from Scotland."

"Thank you. Subject is therefore of course Caucasian –" He stopped to look me

over with a quick up and down. "– approximately five foot four, one hundred fifty pounds." I gaped because he was right. "Subject reports the ability to view the human aura, which is the purpose of our study today. Now. How long have you been able to see people's auras, Miss Hemphill?"

"All my life, as far back as I can remember." When I was very young, it took me a while to understand that most other people didn't see them. My mother thought it was a defect of my eyes, and finally took me to get them checked when I was eight. That was when we found out that my eyes were genuinely bad and I needed glasses. And once I got them, suddenly my grades in school improved dramatically. But glasses didn't "cure" the auras – if anything, I now saw them even more clearly.

"Please describe the appearances of the auras you see."

I told him much the same as I had told Heather: a small field of clearer air surrounding the person.

"Are they always clear?" the professor asked. "Never coloured, or cloudy, or patterned?"

"Never. Sometimes they can look a little wider or narrower, but not by much."

"Hm." He paced and thought for a few seconds. "Miss Hemphill, I'm now going to ask you to look at me. Do you see my aura? And can you describe it?"

I looked at him intently, then said, "Yes, I see yours very clearly. It's wide and strong and very clean."

His brows drew closer together for a second. "Now, when-when you say 'strong', what does that look like, exactly? What does that describe?"

"I'm... I'm sorry, I'm not really sure how to explain. Sometimes I also get a sense, a, a feeling from the aura. But it isn't a visual difference, it's, it's just very subjective, I suppose."

He gently pushed his glasses up his nose. "All right then, thank you. I... I'm now going to ask my assistant Steven Wagner to participate." The professor beckoned toward the booth, and in a few seconds Steve stood beside me. He waved at me and gave me a relaxed smile.

"Now I ask you to repeat with Steven. What do you see?"

A short pause, then: "Very much the same as yours. This is what I see most often. There's rarely much difference from one person to the next."

"I see. I'm now going to ask Steven to bring us the mice."

I blinked and gave Professor Bloomfield a puzzled look, while Steven tentatively raised his hand as if he wanted to ask a question in class. "Oh hey, I forgot them, sorry – they're still in The Green Lab."

The professor's shoulders fell as he sighed. "Then will you please go get them? Quickly, Steven?" Steve trotted to the door and out, while the professor rubbed his forehead. Then he explained to me. "We have white mice in a cage. They won't get out and you don't have to handle them. I just want you to look at them and see if you see an aura or not, and any differences if you do."

"I understand," I said. "I can see how that makes sense."

"Thank you, Miss Hemphill. I wish I could hear the same from the dean."

I heard the door open and then Steve was in front of me, holding a wire cage with four cute little mice scurrying around on wood shavings. "The mice are now here," the professor announced. "What can you see, Miss Hemphill?"

"Well..." I tried to lean forward a little, careful not to pull on the wires. "Sometimes it's hard when they move around so fast. But... all right, there, one held still, and yes I can see it."

"The same as the human ones you saw?"

"Maybe a little narrower, I think. But the same general look, yes."

"I see."

"And I see one around the cage, too."

I saw the professor's jaw sag a little. "The cage?"

"Yes, sir."

"I..." He looked at the cage, then at me. "Um, Steven, you can put those back now. We're almost done." As Steve left again, the professor leaned toward me a little. "Are you saying that you see these auras around inanimate objects?"

"Yes, usually. But not quite the same."

"How, how do you mean?"

"Well, the ones around objects are usually smaller and dimmer, harder to see. Sometimes I can't see them at all. But sometimes I can't see people's, either. None of it is very consistent, I suppose."

"This... I, I'm not sure what to make of this." He looked up at the ceiling over my head. "How about the microphone up there? Can you see one there?"

I looked up carefully, mindful of the wires. "Yes. Not very wide."

"Oy," he said. I heard Steve come back in and saw the professor motion him back into the booth. "Ahhh, we've now run all scheduled tests and this concludes today's study." I could make out soft clicking sounds coming from the booth, and then Steve was at my side, disconnecting the wires and setting me free.

Professor Bloomfield held his hands behind his back again, as I stood up and gently rubbed my head where the band had been. "Thank you for your time and input, Miss Hemphill. I trust the experience wasn't unduly stressful for you?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine. But, but when will I know?"

"I'm sorry, when will you knowwww...."

"What it all means. I was hoping someone here could tell me what they are, or why I see them, or something like that?"

"Ah! Uhhhh... until I have a chance to study the brain wave recordings, I won't have any idea what we found here today. If anything. But I'll be honest with you: judging by what I heard here today, I suspect that we actually have nothing useful."

"Oh." I bit my lip.

"I'll admit, I started from the assumption that the human energy field is unique: different from other creatures, possibly even different from person to person, like a fingerprint. That would be an exciting result. Now, I'm not saying that I'm going to ignore any data that don't support my hypothesis – I mean, a disproof can be just as valuable as a proof, and all that – but it looks to me like what I got from you today is that human beings are objects. And it doesn't tell us any more than that. The things you see might even end up just being no more than some sort of visual aberration on your part. I, I don't see that as especially useful information. I'm sorry."

"All right," I said. "I understand. Or at least I think I do."

"Here's what I suggest, miss: call back in about a month or so. If I find anything like what you're looking for, I'll leave word for you in the office. That's the best I can offer. Otherwise, we just soldier on for the sake of science." And he gave me what I suppose he intended to be a reassuring nod.

"Thank you again, professor – I enjoyed meeting you."

"I appreciate your time and effort working with me, Miss Hemphill. Steven? Let me finish that – you see Miss Hemphill out, please."

In the dim echoes of the long hallway, Steve finally said, "Know what?"

"What?"

He glanced down at me and gave me a sly grin. "I think he's taking the wrong approach to this. I was thinking about it the whole time."

"How do you mean?"

"He's missing the point. The fact that you see auras at all, that is extremely far out. I think he needs to be asking why you do, and other people don't. He needs to find out why you're special."

I gave him a little smile. "Thank you for that."

When he pushed open the outer door, the bright sun made both of us blink and squint. "Maybe I can drop him a few hints, steer him in the right direction. But I gotta be careful, man – if he doesn't think it's his own idea then he'll never go for it." Steve snickered at that, then held the door for me. "Anyway, you're good to go now." We flashed finger-Vs at each other, and he slipped back inside and let the door shut.

I tried to enjoy the beauty of the day during my walk home. And paid a bit more attention to the auras I could see around most of the things I passed. Did they mean anything, after all? I knew Noar would tell me to just let go of the entire concept of finding meaning, that I was trying to stuff the cosmos into a little box. But at the same time, I felt a quiet peace, almost a reassurance, when I thought about the fact that there were other people who genuinely wanted to learn what was happening around us. Who yearned for the truth, as I did.

Eight

It was still early by the time I reached downtown, so rather than retrace my steps exactly, I decided to shift over in the direction of The Square. It was as crowded as a summer beach on a day like this. I squeezed my way through and across, greeting a few friends, scanning the crowds from side to side without seeing him. Then I crossed York Street and headed up the wide stone steps of the library, patting one of the worn stone lions for luck as I passed it.

I found no entry for Germaine Greer in the card catalogue – still too soon, or perhaps our librarians weren't even planning to bring in an item as explosive as that. Then I went to the circulation desk to ask for help: if you didn't already know the name of the book or the author you were looking for, the card catalogue was not much help, after all. Miss Kowalczyk was on duty this afternoon. When I let her know that I was looking for material on matriarchal societies, or the human energy field, the best she could do was direct me to the sociology and human biology sections. Once there, I'd need to browse.

Nothing useful jumped out at me in either location. But in sociology I did notice the copy of Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*, which I had borrowed shortly after its release. I vividly remembered it as the first time I had ever seen anything in print which discussed sex. I also remembered my mother being mortified when I brought it home; she begged me not to read it outside of my room. (Not that she had any idea what was in it – and once I found out what was, I vowed never to tell her. No, her objection was to the word "naked" being so shamelessly emblazoned across the cover.) If nothing else, that book made me feel, once my time finally came, that I had a somewhat better idea of what was going on.

I patted the other lion on my way down the steps, then crossed the park again – still no sign – and decided to hang out on Hippie Street for a while before dinner. This brought me past King's just as I saw someone leaving the store with what appeared to be a can of kerosene. (Even though I was off on Saturdays, the store was still open – Mr. King's daughter Wendy worked my till on Saturdays, reminding me that I was not indispensable.) My steps brought me closer behind the person, and I decided that this was a small woman carrying the can, a woman in stained, dusty denim overalls, dirty white T-shirt, tough boots covered with dried mud, and a long heavy curtain of black hair held with a wide band.

She listed to the right, and the weight of the can pulled her arm down taut, but she didn't appear to be struggling with it.

The weight slowed her down, though, so that in a few seconds I was caught up to her on my way to Hamilton. I happened to glance over as I passed her – and suddenly realized that it was Harriet from the bookstore. She noticed me in the same instant, I suppose, because she called out, "Grace?" I stopped and turned to face her. She was resting the can on the sidewalk and looking at me with a small smile.

"Hello, Harriet," I said, "this is a surprise." Part of the surprise for me was how different she looked. In these working clothes, I realized that she was only about my height, if that. Somehow, in the long dresses she always wore to work in UnWyse, she felt much taller.

"For me as well, but a nice one." Her smile got brighter. "Where are you off to, on such a lovely day?"

"Nowhere in particular, really," I said. I gestured toward the store door and added, "I didn't realize that you shop at King's."

"Well, a few times." She looked mildly puzzled.

"Because I work there – I have done for a couple of years – and I don't remember ever seeing you in there."

"You do?" Her eyes widened with dawning understanding. "Ah, but not on Saturdays, it looks like."

"True."

"Maybe I happened to always go on a Saturday – but now I'm going to make a point of going there on weekdays when I need to." And she actually gave me a little wink.

"That might explain it," I said.

She looked toward Hamilton Street, then back at me. "I, uhh, I'm honestly not in a hurry to get back to the farm just yet, so I was going to go have a coffee first. Would you like to come with me?"

"I, uhhh...." I didn't want to have to tell her about my budgetary woes.

"My treat," she added, almost eager.

That sounded like a sign from the universe. I grinned. "Then yes, thank you."

Her smile squeezed her eyes. "I just need to drop this in the truck first." She picked up the kerosene can again, waited for a break in the traffic, crossed Newman Street with a careful trudge, and stepped into the shadows of a back alley. I followed close behind.

After spelunking past the backs of a few buildings, we came to a small driveway. I was able to recognize that we were at the rear entrance of Gentle Earth where she worked. Parked on the gravel was a pickup truck that looked a little older than I was. The air was wavy above its dull roof. A few patches and flecks of paint suggested that this truck had been red, once upon a time. But then I noticed a few swirls of bright paint on one front fender – paisleys and curlicues and a cartoon flower, all in clashing, random colours. When I pointed at this decoration, she smiled.

"I'm trying to paint the whole thing up psychedelic, like the Furthur bus or something. Someday. But I'm just using what spare drips and dregs of paint I can find from wherever. My brother says I'm improvising – he calls it 'The Jazzmobile'." And she gave a bright little laugh.

I looked over the truck again; it appeared sober and worn, yet not sad, its one festive patch a message of hope. I could actually see some aura around it, and I somehow got a feeling from this machine: humble about its appearance, but proud of its stamina. "That's going to be a long job, then."

She opened the passenger door, then hefted the can up into the cabin with a soft grunt. After she closed the door, she looked at me and said, not unhappily, "The time is going to pass, whether I do the job or not. Come on."

We squeezed between buildings and came out on the sidewalk in front of Gentle Earth. I looked across the street, between the clusters of pedestrians, to the awning beside Moon's store. A couple of people sat there, but not him. Of

course he wasn't always going to be found in the exact same spot, but that's where I always checked. This is what we do.

A few doors down the street was a coffeehouse, a converted row house now named The Third Eye. Like all the others on the street, it had an unlighted, hand-painted board for a sign, and a gathering of chattering loiterers around its front door. Unlike all the others, it had a superior reputation for its coffee, and I was glad that Harriet chose to go there.

It wasn't late enough for it to be truly crowded inside, so we managed to find a small table without trouble. (Later this evening, once the featured musical entertainment began, this place would be packed with a line out the door. The Third Eye also had a superior reputation for the acts they booked.) I guarded our table while Harriet went to place our order; then she returned with my coffee-one-cream and her espresso and sat down heavily. She seemed especially glad to be off her feet for a while.

"I guess you would come here fairly often, being so close to work?" I said.

She made a mild shrug. "Now and then, when I can afford to."

"Ah, there it is. Affording is always the issue."

With a gracious nod, she said, "Amen." She picked up her cup and blew delicately across the top of it. I noticed her hands: there was dirt in some of the nails and creases, embedded dirt that resisted washing. They looked like hands that worked hard, and willingly.

I held my coffee up in a toast to her. "Thank you again."

"My pleasure. When I saw you, I thought that this would be a wonderful opportunity for you to begin asking your million questions." Her nose crinkled.

"All right, umm...." I blushed. Put on the spot this way, I needed to sit and think and sip for a few seconds. "You, you said that this farm you live on is run by a women's collective? Did I get that right?" When she nodded, I went on, "So that means you're a member of this?"

"You could say that. I don't want to make it sound like some sort of registered corporation or something. It's not that formal, even though I would say it's fairly

serious."

"So how does it work?"

She paused. "Wow, um...." Then a short giggle. "I wish Artemis was here to answer something like that – she'd do a much better job."

"Oh. She's in charge there, I take it?"

Harriet sipped. "Officially, no one is The Boss – we're supposed to be a democratic collective. But Artemis has been there longer than almost everyone, pretty much from the beginning, and she knows more. So I guess a lot of them do treat her like our leader, anyway." I nodded. "I'm told that, back around '58, about a dozen people – back then they'd be called Beats – moved out this way from Belvedere and pooled their money to buy an old farm a ways out of town. One of the men, who figured he was something of a wit, decided to name the place 'Visigoth Acres'. The idea was to reject the uptight, misguided mainstream culture, and create a place where they could live in truth and freedom, as they said."

"Sounds a lot like some of the hippies now," I said.

Harriet nodded vigorously. "The first hippies mostly grew out of the Beats – people forget how much they overlapped. Artemis and Anya were part of that original group that started out learning how to live off the land. The way I hear it, the only reason they survived the first few years is that some of the Mennonites in the area took pity on them, taught them and shared with them.

"Eventually the women noticed that they were doing all the farm work and housework, and the men all sat around getting high and expecting the women to service them. The ladies felt that this was part of the mainstream culture that they were supposed to be leaving behind. By about '64, they banded together and told the men that they no longer had any say in how things were done. Apparently they needed weapons to actually make that happen, but it did. And, one by one, all the men decided they'd rather be somewhere else. The ladies renamed the farm Sacred Mother and declared the collective women-only from that point forward. And it's been working fairly well since then."

I blinked. "That's a, that's an unexpectedly spiritual name."

"Well, Artemis is an unexpectedly spiritual person, I guess you could say. Pretty sure the name Sacred Mother was her idea." Harriet took another sip. "I'd really like you to meet her someday. I bet you'd find her interesting, and I think she'd like you. She'd probably be willing to help me answer your, ah, remaining almost-million questions." And she gave me a warm grin which I couldn't help returning.

"It seems like all of you work on this farm, then," I said. "So you do that on top of your job at the store?"

"Yes. Everyone has to contribute somehow. It's our way of preventing Lazy Man Syndrome from creeping back in. A couple of us also contribute financially by working outside. There are still things we need to buy in order to get by. My job here in town is only part-time, anyway. But I think Eden thinks I'm a slacker for doing it."

"Ah, so you aren't, like, completely rejecting capitalist decadence."

"I don't think that was ever the idea for us, although I know that it is for some other places. We mainly wanted to live more in harmony, make less of an impact on the environment. In our own small way. Even Visigoth Acres was ahead of its time in that way – they were concerned about ecology before anyone even knew the word."

"That sounds like a real trip. I could get into that."

"But I think this is just as important: we end up at Sacred Mother because we're looking for a way to live, out from under the, the pressures of the...."

I chimed in. "Men with guns?"

Harriet made a little grimace. "Yes. The male power structures."

"I could get into that, too."

"More reason for you to meet Artemis, I think. Someday I'd like you to visit and see for yourself."

"I'm allowed to?"

"Oh yes, we have guests sometimes." She giggled. "We're not a P.O.W. camp."

"Or a convent?"

She actually blushed. "Not as such, no."

Then a commotion at the back of the tiny establishment caught our attention. Afternoons at The Third Eye maintained an informal open mike policy – if you can call it that when there wasn't actually a mike. Anyone was free at any time to perch on the stool on the tiny low stage in the corner, and present their art to the patrons. The only rules were: two songs or poems, or no more than ten minutes of prose readings or standup comedy – and only one stint on the stage per artist per day. In retrospect, I should have been surprised that there was ever a moment's silence on that stage, but such are the mysterious ways of the universe. However, that silence was about to end, as a man with a guitar was just mounting the stage and taking his seat on the stool.

I knew that man.

I said as much to Harriet – breathlessly. "Oh my gosh! I know him!" And I could already feel tremors inside my chest.

"Do you?" she said. "Hmmmmm."

No one, not even he himself, announced him – that's how casual the open mike was here. Noar, looking completely at ease, as if he were actually resting somewhere else, somewhere more serene, began a folk-flavoured song I didn't recognize. It seemed to me that everyone in the room watched him as raptly as I did, and all other conversation ceased.

Finally the song ended, to mixed applause. Some people clapped enthusiastically, some politely, some not at all. Noar looked around the room with a soft smile, as if he were addressing a group of disciples. Then he announced, "I know that at least one person here will be happy to hear this next one." And he began playing "Ripple".

I smiled. I may have sighed. I told myself that he decided to play it only when he saw me in the audience, that he chose it and played it for me. I didn't care if it was the truth. I just let the hope fill me with light.

A few people joined in for the singalong portion at the end; then there was similar scattered applause, and Noar eased himself off the stool and down off the stage with as little fanfare as he had climbed it. A blonde girl sitting beside the stage stood up when Noar left and walked close behind him.

He nodded to people as he threaded his way between the tables, heading for the door. When he came close to our table, he smiled and quietly said, "Peace, Grace." Then he looked at Harriet and nodded. Did his smile get a bit bigger for her? He just kept moving. I noticed the blonde girl following in his footsteps: a tall slim girl, but even she only came up to his shoulder. Did she scowl at me as she slipped past our table? The whole encounter came and went so quickly that it almost felt surreal.

After Noar left the coffeehouse, I stopped looking at the door and turned back to Harriet. She regarded me with a gently amused expression. "So how is it that you know Hunky Jesus?"

I looked at her with an open-mouthed smile, amused but also mildly scandalized. "I've seen him around downtown, spoken with him a few times. And his name's Noar."

She blinked. "Noar?"

"He told me that he was given that name in a vision. Isn't that far out?"

Harriet gently shook her head. "A vision. Heavy."

Which reminded me: I still wanted to ask him about his visions. And about so much more. I needed to know that man.

Nine

By the time I got back home to Number 88, Mr. McPhail and Heather had both already eaten. I exchanged greetings with him as I passed him in his traditional chair, on my way upstairs. Her, I didn't see. Her door was shut when I passed it to go wash up before making dinner.

I fried myself a little leftover rice and chicken, and hoped the smell didn't make anyone else hungry, because I only put on enough for myself. While I was looking in the fridge, I noticed that Heather had bought milk – she told me that she was going to buy that and bread this afternoon – so I needed to remember to pay her for my half. Just as Bev and I used to, Heather and I had an agreement to go halves on those, to avoid wasting money and food. The rules didn't strictly forbid this.

So after I ate and cleaned my dishes, I went back upstairs, gathered some coins from my underwear drawer (my Weekend Bank), took them across the hall to her door, and knocked. For a moment there was no answer. She didn't usually close her door tight when she went out, so I assumed she was in. I knocked again and heard her faint "yes?" coming from inside.

I eased the door open enough to poke my nose in. "Sorry to bother you – I just wanted to bring you the grocery money."

"Far out! Bring it in! Bring more if you want!" She giggled.

I opened the door wider, and stepped in to see her sitting cross-legged on her bed. A long leather strap rested crumpled in her lap; around her were a few shallow bowls of stiff leather, holding beads of various colours and shapes. She held a threaded sewing needle in each hand while she looked up at me.

Flaunting my mind-blowing powers of deduction, I said, "You do beadwork?"

"Yep. Making a headband right now."

"That was going to be my guess," I said. "Do you sell them, or just make things for yourself, or...?"

"I've only just gotten to the point where I think I might wanna sell them. Maybe at Moonwalk, I was thinking – I mean, I see that he sells that kind of stuff. I just

thought I'd work on this one a bit before I go out. It's relaxing."

"In a different way, probably, right?"

She snickered. "Right."

I thought for a second. "Would you mind if I watched you for a little while?"

"Fine with me. Just don't sit on the bed so my beads don't knock over. Oh, and I kinda space out when I do this, so I might not hear you if you say something."

"Understood," I said, and sat cross-legged on a yarn mat beside her bed. She went back to her work, and I tried to follow every detail. It seemed like she made about six or so stitches to hold down each bead, laying down a short string of them, looping around and around that string, in and out of the soft leather, again and again. Her aura looked even clearer than usual for her. I felt as if she had already forgotten I was there. And there was a sense of deep peace in the room that I couldn't explain but also couldn't deny.

She stitched steadily but without hurry, then picked up a selection of more beads onto one needle from a few of the bowls, and stitched them beside the last ones. Her bedside clock was the only sound. I watched her as if in a dream. And at one point, it occurred to me that I was observing an example in life of things I had read about in introductions to Zen: the focus on the present moment and the present task to the exclusion of all other thoughts, the ways that physical movement, done with intention, could serve as a form of meditation. Somehow I was sure that nothing was on Heather's mind other than the bead she was stitching at this second. And I got a sense of how spiritually nurturing a time like this could be, providing a peace for which so many of us hunger. I felt as if she had found a subtle form of truth in doing this work, and I almost envied her.

Finally I felt the urge to speak, but it was barely more than a whisper. "I never thought about how much work there is in these," I murmured, "how much time it takes."

Heather didn't blink, or reply, or glance at me, or stop the smooth motions of her hands. Long seconds went by. And then, still looking only at her work, she answered, but soft and indistinct, as if she were talking in her sleep. "The time will pass, whether I make this or not."

Hearing the same idea twice in such a short time jarred me. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was a message from the universe, even if I didn't grasp it yet. Somehow, that also felt like my cue to leave: to stop feeding off of Heather's positive energy (if that's what I was doing) and sit a while with this insight of mine. I got to my feet as quietly as I could and slipped out of Heather's room without a further word.

I settled on the sofa in front of the off-duty fireplace in the parlour, with my journal and pen, and that newspaper *Open the Gate*, which I had yet to finish reading. I couldn't see the title of the book Mr. McPhail was reading, but it looked like a new one. I alternated between reading smudgy, profane opinion pieces, which in all honesty didn't impress me much, and writing down my own thoughts and opinions, which also didn't impress me much. And CBC Radio provided a hushed backdrop of sound.

After a while, Mr. McPhail spoke up. "You had that meeting at the Institute this afternoon, didn't you, Grace? How did that go? I don't mind telling you that I am blasted curious about that place!"

With a small smile, I straightened my glasses and glanced over at him. "Can't say as I've ever done anything quite like it." And then I told him all about the professor who wasn't a doctor and his oddly charming Igor and the wires on my brain and the mice and the ambiguous results.

He pursed his lips. "Well, they say that a null result is still worth recording. So don't be disheartened."

"I admit, I had my hopes up for more definite answers from them."

"The wheels of progress turn slowly." He slid a bookmark into his book, closed it and set it aside. "But I will say this: I approve of their commitment to use a scientific method to investigate these phenomena. Too often, people either approach these things like True Believers, with no rigour, or they dismiss them outright without even looking. This is a welcome change, I'd say."

I rolled my pen in my fingertips. "I always felt like science should be willing to study anything that's out there. But I also think that it has its limitations, and it should be willing to recognize them."

Mr. McPhail looked at me thoughtfully. "You are a wise young woman, Grace Hemphill," he said. Then he cracked a small smile and added, "Which is an, uh, obsequious way of saying that we think the same about that. And you also put me in mind of another book I read, years ago."

I cocked my head at him. "Are there *any* books you *haven't* read?"

"Yes. There are four – and I intend to get to them in the near future."

I giggled. "I'm sorry – go on, please."

"A nobleman named Korzybski –" [He enunciated the name with slow deliberation.] "– wrote a dense book called ***Science and Sanity***. Much like quantum theory, in some ways: I followed very little of it, a few claim to understand it, even fewer actually do. But one of the simpler things he wrote in it has stuck with me after all this time: *'The map is not the territory.'*"

I blinked and started to digest this. "And what does that mean to you?"

He shifted in his chair and made a small wince. "I can only speak for what I get out of it myself, right or wrong. But a map is our description, our understanding, of a place. It's what guides us, helps us decide where to go. The territory is the reality, the truth of the place out there. But by its very nature, a map cannot describe every detail of the place it means to cover. It has to be incomplete, somehow."

I nodded. "And so they can't ever be the same."

"Right. But people so often behave as if a map is everything they need to know. They trust it to be accurate and complete – even though inaccuracy is always possible and incompleteness is unavoidable.

"Medieval maps, at least, had some idea of what they didn't know. They left blank spaces. Sometimes the mapmakers would write in those spaces, 'Here there be dragons'." He laughed. "I love that. They weren't saying that they knew for sure the dragons were there, of course. But they never saw any around here, so where else could they be?"

"And eventually it came to me that science is a map. It's a way of describing and

organizing what we know about the 'territory' that is the universe."

"It's our way of imposing order on reality." Yes, I knew I was stealing Noar's line.

"If you like."

I thought for a moment. "I wonder if you could say that one of the blank spaces on science's map would be what they call anecdotal evidence. Almost everyone has a story about something strange happening to them, or someone they know. But science doesn't acknowledge these things because they want to study things that can be repeated – things that always give you the same results."

"Insisting on reproducible results," he said, "deliberately limits what science is able to map. But that's still the essence of what science is. I'm not sure how much choice scientists have in that regard. But there's a big difference between scientists saying 'this area is blank, so we don't know what's going on there' and the ones who say 'there is nothing there – those things don't happen'."

"Because they think their map is the truth," I said.

He raised a finger. "One of the most important truths inside 'the map is not the territory' is that only the map can ever be mistaken. The territory is never wrong."

"The cosmos is what it is." One of these days, I'd need to tell Mr. McPhail about Noar, and how he was writing my material.

Just then Heather came downstairs, looking upbeat for her night out in denim jacket, multi-coloured paisley maxi-skirt, and deeply experienced sneakers. "Where you headed?" I called over. (I knew that Mr. McPhail would never ask: he didn't want to appear nosy, or make it seem like he was our dad and was keeping tabs on us. Me, I simply thought of it as taking an interest.)

"Johanne Renaud is playing at The Keepsake tonight. Wanna come?"

I knew that The Keepsake would be charging admission for a show like that. "No thanks," I said, "I'm pretty tired."

She shrugged and scuffed across the parlour to the front door. "Okay then. Don't wait up!"

Mr. McPhail smiled at that. "As if," he called back. And then he returned to his reading, and I to my journaling... and suddenly I felt like the definitive spinster character in an old movie. Staying in with a book on a Saturday night. For a while, I didn't write, didn't even really see the pages – I just thought about whether I might want to change that aspect of my life.

Ten

Around mid-morning on Tuesday, the bell on the store door jingled and Harriet came in quickly. She was equally quick to close the door behind her, then shook the rain off the sleeves of her long beige jacket and tried to brush some back off of her hair. She smiled when she saw me at the counter and said, "You were warned!"

I laughed. "And I took it seriously, believe me. How are you?"

"Damp but wonderful. I'm looking for one of those hook-and-eye locks – can you tell me where you keep those?"

"Better yet, I'll show you." I slid out from behind the counter and led her past the stove, back to the crates of nails and screws and fittings. I gestured toward a few small boxes of locks. "Whatever sizes we have are all here."

"Thank you." She was about to bend to look them over, but stopped and turned to me. "Oh! Are you busy on Friday night?"

"Um, I can't remember the last time I was."

"Would you be interested in coming to dinner with us then?"

"Us at the commune us?"

Harriet nodded. "On the weekend I asked the others if it was all right. I just kept thinking about how I want you to meet them – Artemis especially."

I watched her warm eyes. "There isn't any reason I would even want to say no."

She reached out to touch my shoulder briefly, a tap almost too gentle to feel. "Wonderful." Then she glanced to the side and said, "And I think I see exactly what I need here." She reached into the box of fittings with a soft clinking and pulled out a fairly heavy lock.

I glanced at it, then led her back to the counter. "All right then, that one will be twenty-seven cents."

She rummaged in her purse. "So can you come meet me at the store at six on

Friday? That's when I finish work." Then she laid a quarter and nickel on the counter near my fingers.

The clunky old cash register made its loud ding as the drawer opened, and I got her change for her. "Far out," I said, "looking forward to it."

"Thank you." She dropped the pennies and the lock into her purse, then gathered her jacket around her as she opened the door. "Break's over – I need to get back."

"Stay dry!" I called to her.

I could hear her laugh as she closed the door after her, and she called back, "I don't see how!"

I spent a good portion of my lunch hour standing in line in the bank, eating my apple, my jacket dripping now and then, with quite a few of my fellow Westgate-ites in the same boat. This week I had much less of my pay than usual available to put away, of course, but I still wanted to save up what I could. When it was finally my turn, I said hello to Miss Thorne at the wicket. I always took some small pleasure in being served by her: her printing in my bank book was always so painstakingly neat, it actually looked attractive.

When I came out of the bank, I gave the mostly deserted park a quick look, but spotted no one unusually tall. Then I made my way, avoiding the deeper puddles, back west to Hamilton Street to squeeze in a quick errand.

At the doorway to Moonwalk, I flapped the rain off the hood of my jacket before squeezing inside. I heard "Space Oddity" playing in the store, which happened at least once a day there, but by now I knew better than to comment on it. Once you got Moon on the subject of "Daviiiiid", it was hard to stop him. From behind the counter, Moon spotted me, flashed me a bushy grin, and cried out, "Hey maaaaan! What's happening?"

"Just a quick question, Moonie: do you sell other people's stuff here?"

He gestured expansively around himself. "Pretty much all I *do*, sweetie – *I* didn't make any of this!"

I waved a hand in front of me. "No no, sorry, I mean... I know someone who makes beadwork, and we wondered if you'd let her sell it here?"

"Oh for suuure, baby, very cool. Just let her know that I keep ten percent, okay?"

"Far out! Thanks, Moon!"

"Peace, dearie," he called after me as I went back outside, and glanced under the awning next door. I still had a few minutes before I was due back, so I crossed the shiny wet street and ducked into Gentle Earth – I had thought of a quick question for Harriet.

When I got in, I saw that she was with a customer, so I wandered slowly around the tables and waited. I came to one that mostly carried piles of pamphlets, and today one of them caught my eye. Its title was "Are You In Trouble?"

I picked it up. Below the simple drawing of a young woman on the front, it said "We can help." Inside was a list of questions along the lines of: Need someone to talk to? Hurt or in danger? Need medical help? Think you might be expecting? Then it went on to state briefly that the UnWyse Collective could help or could direct you to help, and gave the store's address and phone number. The pamphlet didn't specifically say this, but the drawings on the inside – a teen girl, and a young mother holding a baby – gave the impression that the help being offered was intended for women. And I felt strange when I realized that I couldn't recall ever seeing such help offered anywhere before.

I folded the pamphlet in half and tucked it in my back pocket – no particular purpose in mind, just a feeling. And just then, Harriet came over and said, "Hello again."

"Sorry, Harriet, I should've thought to ask before: do you want me to bring anything for dinner on Friday?"

She smiled easily. "That's very thoughtful of you, but no, thank you. All we need is you – and your questions." Then she winked and giggled.

I turned to leave. "I can dig it," I said. "See you then if not before. Peace." And she wished me peace in return as I made my way back to the hardware store. There were brief flashes when I found myself oddly aware of the paper folded in

my back pocket – I didn't know what to make of that.

I felt like quitting time on Friday couldn't come soon enough. My weekend wishes to Mr. King were quicker, and perhaps more bouncy, than usual. And I walked straight back to McPhail Manor with a brisker step. I gave Mr. McPhail my rent as soon as I got in, then trotted upstairs to stash most of my pay in the Weekend Bank, wash up, and change. Somehow I felt that I shouldn't wear my best clothes to visit a farm, so I put on an old stained T-shirt and blue jeans and got my old sneakers out of the back of my closet.

Mr. McPhail looked over at me as I came down the stairs and headed to the coathooks for my jacket. "Are you dressed for a hayride? Hard for me to be sure with you youngsters."

I giggled. "Maybe!", I called back from the doorstep.

On my way back downtown I went a little slower, now that I had ensured I had lots of time until six. The late sun was still warm, but I could already feel a hint in the air of a cool evening to come. Hamilton Street was thronged with the youth of Westgate as I turned onto it. Just a few doors ahead, I could see Officer Ianuzzi leaving Gentle Earth and vanishing into the crowds. And as always, I looked across the street at the awning beside Moonwalk.

He was seated under it.

I immediately veered across to get closer to him. No guitar, no music from him today: he appeared to be merely resting there, or perhaps meditating. But even though I moved quietly, and we were surrounded by people talking and shuffling as they walked past, his eyes opened as soon as I drew near and he looked up at me. And then he gave me a gentle smile. If he thought that I looked especially dishevelled, dressed down as I was, he gave no indication.

"Grace," he said. He looked much as he did the first time I saw him. Today his jacket was open – I could see a loose shirt of white linen beneath it. And then I also saw the blonde girl from The Third Eye lean forward from his far side to look up at me as well. Her hair sun-coloured, large round sunglasses telling me nothing, nose and pale lips small below them.

"Noar," I replied. I waited a second to see if there might be any introductions or acknowledgment of the other girl, but there were none. So then I said, "We meet again."

"However briefly we are always fated to," he said, with a light in his eyes. "If you believe in fate."

I felt like he was looking inside me, a feeling unsettling and thrilling all at once. I said, "I hope that one of these days we can have something longer."

"I'm open to that, if the cosmos ever brings it our way." Then I noticed that the girl had one hand on his upper arm, where she sat snug against it, and she tugged on it, a little irritably. He acted as if he didn't feel it, as if she wasn't even there.

Not quite wanting to leave, I said, "Any chance you'll be playing another coffeehouse soon?"

He gave a careless shrug. "I just did that on the spur of the moment. So maybe, I don't know. I don't usually plan ahead."

"I guess planning would be trying to impose order on the cosmos, right?"

He laughed, and his teeth were beautiful. "Right on! You're a quick study – I like that." The blonde tightened her lips, looked at him, then at me.

I edged back from them. "I, ah, I'm expected elsewhere, so I should go. Peace."

With a sage nod, he said, "There are no shoulds. But yes, peace."

I found Harriet in the store just as she was putting on her jacket and preparing to leave. She guided me through the back, where there were rooms I had never seen nor suspected, and out the back door to her truck with its festive fender. We climbed up into the cabin, sat ourselves on the wide firm bench seating, and she coaxed the engine to life. It sputtered while she was turning the key, but quickly settled into a low, smooth, soothing rumble. I got the feeling that this truck was well cared for.

Harriet eased out of the driveway and merged into what Westgate called rush-hour traffic. "I need to pick up Doris from work before we can head out," she called over, "so be prepared to squeeze over."

I nodded. "I got it."

We left downtown, and, after a few more minutes, Harriet pulled the truck up near the entrance to Calder's Grocery. A thirties-ish, tough-looking woman wearing a grocery uniform stood waiting by the door; when she saw us, she trotted over. She pulled open the door and hoisted herself inside with a low grunt, while I sidled over til I bumped Harriet's arm. "Doris," said Harriet, "this is Grace."

"How do," said Doris with an enthusiastic nod. "Our dinner guest, eh?" I nodded back. "Well, relax, cuz the food's good – money-back guarantee." Then she cackled and actually slapped my shoulder. Harriet put the truck in gear, left the parking lot, and headed for the highway leading north.

"Do you have enough room?" I asked Harriet – I wanted her to have space to move, even though I felt pinned between these women and wasn't sure where else I could go.

She kept her eyes on the tree-shaded highway ahead. "This is just fine, thank you, don't worry." She made a gentle wriggle against me, as if to demonstrate that she could move comfortably.

"So where ya from, honey?" said Doris over the truck's steady growl.

"Uh, here." I gave her a feeble little smile.

"Hey yeah, me too!" Another hearty nod from her. "Where d'ya work?"

"King's Hardware, downtown."

"*Oh* yeah? That's *Gord* King, right?"

"Uh, right."

"Ho yeah, he's awright, ain't he, eh?"

"He, he's a really good guy, yes. Very nice to work with."

"Hm yeah, that, too!" And Doris cackled again. It took a second but I blushed, and tried not to let my face look like ew. Harriet just tisked and shook her head.

"Um, so where is your farm, exactly?" I said. (Changing the subject?)

"We turn off up at Fifth Line," Harriet said, "then go west about two miles. So about ten miles from town altogether."

I tried to envision it. "I don't get up this way very often – I don't know this area very well."

Doris said, "No one does, except the people who have to." And she nudged me with her shoulder. "Middle O' Nowhere, Ontario!"

I watched the landscape flow past us, farms and patches of woods in what seemed a random jumble, while Harriet and Doris began to chat between themselves. Most of the fields were brown earth, with a few crops barely beginning to grow. But all the snow was gone and the land looked warm and serene. I could see how some people could find the peace they were searching for in a place like this. Not sure if it was mine, though. This promised to be a good opportunity to find out.

Finally we turned off the gravel line road, past a classic mailbox on a wooden post, and drove up a narrower, rutted dirt path. Rolling, wild-grown fields passed us on either side. Then we came to a sign at the side of the path. A large board mounted on two posts. White, with large, curvy, multi-coloured letters, reading "Sacred Mother".

The fanciful curls and colour choices on the sign looked familiar. I turned to Harriet and said, "You painted that sign, didn't you?"

She gave a little nod and a little blush. "I did, yes."

I grinned in gentle triumph. "I recognized your style!"

Harriet called over. "You hear that, Doris? I have a style!"

"More like an attitude!" Doris said.

Shortly past the sign, the truck came to a stop near the door of a wide, low house made of old stone. A long veranda of weathered wood ran across most of the building. White-painted wooden shutters flanked the windows. The roof of the house appeared to be slate; a stone chimney stood quiet, but a thin stream of smoke rose from a smaller metal one. I could see the top of a barn peeking up from some distance behind. The sound of insects and birds was quiet, yet somehow seemed to fill the air.

Harriet pulled the key out of the ignition and looked at me. "This is home," she said.

Eleven

As soon as we entered the front door, Doris called back through the house, "Okay, here we are! Get crackin'!" Then she snickered as she walked on through the front room. I hovered by the door for a moment, watching. She and Harriet left their shoes on, so I did the same. The wide room I found myself in reminded me of the hardware store: stone walls, heavy wooden beams across the ceiling, not brightly lit. There was a large fireplace, even larger than Mr. McPhail's, at the centre of the back wall, unlit now, and a scattering of fat, vintage sofas and chairs upholstered in earth tones. Everything, even the hardwood floor, looked well used, with a sort of expectant quiet about it.

I followed Harriet through and came into a kitchen, nearly as wide, with a long wooden table surrounded by a dozen mismatched chairs. Seven place settings were clustered at one end: plates, small bowls, cutlery, glasses of water. Across the back wall was an old, wide wood stove, then a counter and white sink below a large window. The windowsill was crowded with plants in an assortment of beautiful pots, and in front of those stood a black hand pump, its spout directly over the sink. Through the window I had a better view of the barn; a few chickens and goats grazed and wandered near it.

A tall woman at the stove, gray hair pulled back into a bun, her back to me, picked up a plate of chopped vegetables, and then I heard a sizzle as she dropped them into what I guessed was a frying pan. Doris brought a bowl of eggs to her. Harriet gently called, "Anya?" And the woman at the stove turned to face us with a mild but serious expression, her features severe but still lovely. Harriet gestured to me. "This is my friend Grace. Grace, Anya."

Anya and I both nodded, and she blinked and said, "Welcome," so softly that she almost sounded unsure. Then she quickly turned back to the stove and reached for an egg.

The back door opened with a rattle, and closed with a bang, and two more ladies came in, shaking water from their hands. Harriet introduced them as Signe and Eden. Signe seemed not much older than me, wearing a long ash-blond ponytail and a coarse kaftan. Eden looked about my mother's age, and her short auburn hair reminded me a bit of mom – but she was much taller, strong-looking, almost a wrestler's build and swagger. I could almost smell the warmth of the sun on both of them.

Then I heard footsteps behind me, and Harriet gently took my elbow to turn me around. "And this is Artemis. Artemis, my friend Grace."

When I first saw Artemis, I felt like everything stopped for a moment. She was only of medium height, but seemed imposing. She took me in with a quick look, her expression sober, almost grim. Her hair was prematurely white with patches of iron gray, chopped short as if she had taken a knife to it without a mirror; it bushed up around her head, wild, spiky, and free. I could see lines of muscle at the hinges of her jaw, others running down her neck. She wore only a brown leather vest, laced up, a pair of heavy jeans with a long history of patches, and dusty work boots, but somehow made them look noble. And her eyes, her blazing green eyes, and her aura, held such surprising force that I knew at once: even around someone as big and dominant as Eden, Artemis was the sort of person who would always lead.

She stepped forward and offered her hand; when I took it, the strength in it was no surprise. It was hard and rough and warm. "Welcome to Sacred Mother," she said. "Haru has told me about you." I wondered what there was about me that would be worth telling anyone, but only nodded to her. I saw the flow of muscle and sinew in her arm as she brought her hand back.

Anya called back over her shoulder. "Everybody sit! The first batch is ready!" Harriet steered me into a seat next to the head of the table, then sat herself beside me. Everyone else pulled up their own chair – Artemis took the one at the head. Using her apron bunched up as a potholder, Anya brought the wide iron skillet over to the table, then dished up her creation with a spatula. She served me first, then Artemis, then Eden and Signe. Then she took the pan back to the stove and I heard sizzling as she began a new batch.

I looked down at a steaming helping of eggs fried up with sliced potato and green onions, and a little cheese, looking something like the rubble of an omelette. It smelled wonderful, and I found it hard to wait. Then I heard clinking, and I realized that the others weren't waiting. I guessed that "eating it while it's hot" overruled "wait until everyone has been served" here. I still felt uncomfortable starting on mine... and then Artemis spoke low to me: "Go ahead. This is how we do here, we're all fine."

I actually glanced over at Harriet first, to make sure, and she gave me a little smile and nod. So I went ahead, took my first forkful – and almost dropped my fork as I cried out, "Oh wow!"

Anya half-turned to look back toward me. "What?"

"I, I just —" I shifted the food in my mouth over to one side so I could speak better. "This tastes *amazing!* This is *so good!*" I caught Anya starting to grin as she turned back to her work.

Eden guffawed and spoke around what she was chewing. "Probably the first time in your life you ever had real food!" A few of the others chuckled. I just dug in, feeling my neck and shoulders go limp from the deliciousness.

Anya then served the second batch and seated herself. Once everyone was eating, a sort of industrious quiet fell over the kitchen. I wasn't sure if this was normal for them, or if my presence inhibited them in some way. But after a while I realized that the silence made me uncomfortable, so I spoke up. I looked around me while I asked, "So, are you the UnWyse Collective that runs the bookstore?"

Artemis was first to reply. "No," she said, then swallowed. "UnWyse was started up by a woman who came out from Toronto to set up the work here. The rest of them are townies, as far as I know." She nodded toward Harriet, then said, "Haru is the only one of us who actively participates in it. In theory I sit on the board, but to be honest they never ask me to do much. It was a good opportunity to bring in some cash while doing something constructive."

"I see."

Then Artemis almost let herself smile. "She warned me that you'd have questions. It's okay, feel free."

I grinned and blushed a little. "All right, if I think of any more." I heard a quiet laugh from Harriet beside me.

After we finished the main course, Harriet insisted on collecting the dishes, while Anya filled our bowls with sliced pears from a large preserving jar. I scooped up some of mine, and found it mouth-watering and exquisite. "Did you grow these?" I said, wetly.

Signe nodded, wearing a self-satisfied little smirk. "Right on, sister!" So I flashed her a peace sign.

Once everyone finished eating their fruit, they got up from the table as if on some pre-arranged but silent signal. Anya moved a poker around inside the stove, while Doris started pumping water into a large galvanized tub. Signe and Eden went out the back door again – I noticed Eden picked up a large pail from near the door as she left. Harriet headed for the back door as well, but then turned to the side, opened a large wooden trap door in the floor of the back porch, and went down below the house.

Artemis tapped my upper arm with the back of her hand as she stood. "You come with me," she said. She handed me a small metal bucket which was resting near the sink. While I held it, she squeezed past Anya and Doris to scoop up eggshells and potato peelings from the counter, and dropped them into the bucket. She led me into the back porch, then stopped to take down a bushel basket hanging from a nail nearby. We then headed outside and along a beaten path toward the barn. I could see Signe and Eden ahead of us, already there.

"Thanks for being willing to help out," Artemis said, "and for coming dressed for it. Haru said that you weren't a tourist – she knows I don't have much use for those."

I nodded ahead of us. "What are they doing?"

"Signe's going to put the chickens to bed and do a last check for eggs. Eden has the goats to milk, then she'll get them penned up for the night – they're her babies."

I smiled. "And what are we doing?"

She nodded toward my bucket. "First, dropping that off in the compost, then there's a bit of washing to bring in."

We reached the barn. Like the house, it had walls of stone, and was a bit lower than I might have expected. A small wooden shed stood up against the south wall, with a large woodpile beside it. We went past those into the wide open door.

Inside the barn, the dimness and the animal smells made me blink. I scuffled through some hay strewn on the floor and realized that it would be smart to

watch my step. Off in one corner, I saw Eden hunkered over on a low stool with one goat standing calmly in front of her. Another one nibbled at something on the ground. Besides the two does, there was a pair of young kids, like creatures made of springs, scampering around and bleating. Pungent but cute. One of them bounced over closer to us when we came in, looked up at me, wagged its tail, then hopped in and butted its head on my leg.

"Hey!" I said, but then giggled as it scurried off again.

"And that's them when they're tired out after a long day," said Artemis. She led me to a pair of low stone stalls, open at the top and the front, not far from the goats' pen. One was filled with what looked like brown and gold thatch with random bits showing, the other with a pile of rich dark dirt. She got me to empty the bucket into the thatch pile; then she set down the bushel basket, picked up a nearby pitchfork, and turned the pile over a few times. Then she picked up the basket again and led me outside.

I could hear far-off, gentle clucking coming from behind the barn, and the soft breeze in my hair, and the songs of wild birds off in the distance. The low sun was warm on my back, casting long shadows in front of us, and I made a point of appreciating the peace. "It's really nice out here," I said.

"Yeah, it's lovely until bug season," said Artemis. "Then you have to pick your moments."

We came to a small clearing, where poles held up a couple of clotheslines, the washing waving gently where it hung. A little past the lines there was a tiny log cabin. I was a bit surprised to see that it was one of the only things around here that didn't look very old.

Artemis noticed me looking at it. "That was built after I came out here," she said. She got me to put down the bucket and hold the basket. Then she started to unpin the laundry and load it into the basket, and went on talking. "Back about '60, '61, there was a couple here, Ivy and, and what was his name... Henrik! They wanted a bit more privacy, so they built that to sleep in. Henrik was good at that sort of thing, good with his hands. Wasn't afraid to get them dirty. He was a good influence on the other boys – I was sorry to see the two of them go. Things kinda went more downhill here after that. Anyway, Anya stays out here now, because she likes her quiet."

"So... it sounds like things are working all right out here for all of you, without any men around?"

Artemis burst out in a short laugh, with a bit of an edge to it. "Oh, my dear child, that is the understatement of the year! Look around you: seriously, what do we need men for?" I felt like that was a rhetorical question, so I waited quietly to make sure, and she continued. "All the work here was always done by the women anyway – it was once we realized it that we knew there needed to be some changes. We organize ourselves, we negotiate, we plan, we budget, we do everything. Been doing it for years, and everyone is healthy and happy. There's only one thing some of us might need men for – and those who do, they're welcome to take the truck into town on Saturday night. Just so long as they don't bring them back here, then it's no one else's business."

I could feel the basket gradually growing heavier. "This all sounds... exciting," I said. "And, to be perfectly honest, a bit scary."

She looked me in the eye, and there was a kind light in hers. "Unfamiliar is a better word for it, dear – nothing to fear here." She set the last of the clothes into the basket, and then bent to pick up the empty scraps bucket. "Haru told me she was wondering if you might be thinking of asking to join us."

My eyes widened. "Oh, I, it's way too early for me to be thinking about that."

Artemis gave me a gentle nod. "Wise woman. Good to take your time about something that big." She led the way back toward the barn; I moved slower now, loaded down as I was. "She told me that you once used the expression, 'men with guns' – I think that says a lot with a little. So you recognize how the power structures work, out there."

"I think I do," I said. "Or I'm beginning to."

"I think all women know it, deep down," Artemis said. "But they aren't willing to admit it, out loud or even to themselves. Doing that may be half the battle right there." When we came near the shed attached to the barn, she went over to the shed door. "Hold on. I want to show you something."

The door creaked open; inside was quite dark. Light came when Artemis lifted a shutter, a large board hinged at the top, and propped it open with a strip of one-by-two. "This is our workshop," she said.

I set down the basket of laundry and looked around. The shed was cramped, stuffy. There was a workbench over by the window she had opened. At the other end of the shed was a stool and what I eventually recognized as a treadle-powered pottery wheel.

Artemis must have seen me looking at that, because she said, "That's Anya's: she makes the most lovely pottery. We are so blessed to have her." Then I heard a soft clack behind me, and she said, "And this is mine."

I turned around and saw her holding an arrow in one hand, a bow in the other. Both had an unpolished beauty in them. With the window behind her, she was a silhouette now, edge-lit. "I make these here," she said. "I feel like this is my calling."

I reached for the bow and she carefully handed it to me. I hefted it, ran a finger along the rough string. There were the beginnings of carved decorations near the hand grip, a work in progress. "Wow," I breathed. "This is beautiful."

"I even make the strings," she said. "Using the old ways, the native ways." She paused, then said, "We can do anything, Grace. We can do everything." I nodded. She went on. "We do all the 'great' things men do. We're artists, scientists, explorers – and the men do their damndest to keep it quiet and hide us.... I think about how things would be if we *did* actually do everything. I mean, even as it is now, we're the ones who make sure everyone is fed, everyone is well. But here's what women *don't* do: they don't conquer; they don't colonize; they don't exploit." She shook her head, then: "So if women were in charge? Making sure everyone was cared for instead, the way they needed? What kind of world would that be?"

I wanted to point out that the biggest colonial empire of all time was Queen Victoria's, but I felt like that would sound rude and smart-alecky, so I just stayed quiet and listened to what she wanted to tell me.

She reached and gently took the bow back. "And this is another thing we don't need men for here. We can defend ourselves. We never know when the day might come where we need to."

I felt a soft chill. "Have you used that on someone?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. But I am quite willing to. I *have* taken down a couple of deer, over the years, though. We ate well, those winters."

"So now I can see why you took the name Artemis: goddess of the hunt, and her weapon was the bow." I thought for a second. "You did take that name yourself, didn't you? Or is that actually your real –"

She laughed softly. "No, it's not. When we changed over from Visigoth Acres to Sacred Mother, it was a time for new beginnings. I took on the name then, to reflect that. It's also a way of, um, managing expectations, I guess. When you meet a woman named Artemis, you see her differently, treat her differently, than a beatnik chick named Norma Wilton, right?"

"Maybe. But I think anyone meeting a woman like you is going to be impressed, no matter what she's called."

"Thank you." She gave me a small nod. "But I still think a little insurance never hurts."

I recalled something from my reading. "Wasn't the deer supposed to be sacred to Artemis, though?"

She sighed. "I know – and I never met anyone else who knew. What can I say? I've only ever hunted for food. And only a few times. And... and life isn't always neat." She laid down the bow and arrow, picked up the small bucket, nodded at the basket for me, and led me back to the farmhouse. Warm, welcoming light was showing in some of the windows.

Twelve

The light of the fireplace filled the front room with gentle cheer. A couple of kerosene lamps made their contributions on small tables in the far corners, and a thick candle sat on the heavy coffee table, so that the air was filled with gold. And voices filled it with music.

Eden and Doris were gone: apparently Friday night, as well as Saturday, could also serve as an occasion to take the truck into town. The rest of us sat back relaxed around the table while Artemis led the *a cappella* singing of a song I didn't know, but which sounded ancient. The others joined in at times in a call-and-response, but all I could do was listen. The music was strange to me but pretty; the lyrics seemed as if they might be in English, but an English so old that I only recognized a few words. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the singalong, though.

I sipped at my hot cup of spicy herbal tea, unfamiliar but interesting. Everyone had a cup near them; additional refreshment was provided by a joint being passed around. I relaxed, and listened to the singing, and was struck by the sense of peace, of well-earned rest I could feel from all of them.

Most of them smiled when the song was finished. I wondered if I should clap, and decided against it. Artemis, seeming more at ease, called out: "Haru! Play us something!" Anya murmured, "Yes, please." Harriet blinked and smiled, stood up from her spot beside me on the sofa, and stepped over to a set of shelves. She came back holding a mandolin, and sat next to me again.

She plunked quietly at it, listening closely and turning a couple of the tuning keys. I noticed that one of the four pairs of strings was in fact only a single. The wood of the mandolin's body showed syrup-golden in the firelight. Harriet looked up at the others and said, "'Milk Cow'?"

Signe called out from her seat close beside Artemis: "Yeah! Right on!" She then rose to her feet, holding the joint currently making the rounds, and walked it around the table to me. Meanwhile, Harriet began playing an intricate combination of strumming and rapid picking to create a quick, frilly sound. Soon the others joined in, singing what sounded to me like an old country blues song, but not one I knew. Again, they all seemed to have a good time with it, and even I could feel the communal spirit their singing created – on some level I wished I could join in.

I took a couple of hits while I listened, then got up to pass it to Anya, who took it but immediately passed it on again to Artemis. When the song finished, Anya stood up and stretched, then exchanged a simple good night with everyone and went outside. Artemis reached and handed the now-tiny joint to Harriet, then sat back down and began to roll another. I picked up the mandolin from where Harriet had set it down between us, and just looked at it. My mild buzz made it look even prettier now. Artemis knelt beside the coffee table and lit the new joint from the candle.

"Do you play?" Harriet asked me.

I shook my head. "No – I wish. No, I don't play anything." These women were so talented and skilled, and suddenly I felt like there was nothing special about me. (Forgetting what Steve had said back at the Institute.) Intellectually, I knew that it was enough to simply be myself, but a part of me couldn't help wishing for more.

The others began to talk, slow and lazy, with long thoughtful pauses. Sometimes they asked me about what I did, or about my family – and in that case my answers became terse and opaque. Sometimes they told each other bits about their day, as when Signe mentioned that Cissy hadn't laid today. (I hoped that Cissy was one of the hens.) I realized that life here was very simple, without distractions: a life lived in full awareness.

Finally Artemis looked over at me, blinked, and said, "So! Are you missing the men yet?" They all snickered at this, and even I joined in.

With a rather airy drawl, I replied, "I can't say as I am, man – I mean, woman."

"All right, then," she said, "tell me this. I'm curious. What can you bring us?"

I blinked slow at her for a little while. "I what?"

"Just thinking. Just saying. I know you're interested in this place. A little. So if you liked it here. If you wanted to stay. What do you think you have to offer?"

I shook my head. "You mean like money?"

"No no," Artemis said. "No no no. Although we can always use that, but no. We're only a small tribe. We need women who can pull their own weight. People

who can make a contribution to the life here. Skills or experience or."

"Uhhhh...." As I floundered, Harriet passed me what was left of the joint to finish off. After I did, I finally said, "I don't really know. I didn't think about it." I had to admit, during my time here, I had moments where I was wondering if I would like this life. But I never once stopped to wonder if this life would like me.

"Well, do think about it, all right? And when you do, be sure to talk to me. Cuz I, I like your soul. That's a good start."

"Aw, thank you," I said. I sat for a moment, looked aside, then leaned over very close to Harriet's ear and whispered, "Where's your bathroom?"

"Oh, right," Harriet said, and stood up. She held a hand out to me. "Come on." I stood up then, sort of enjoying the subtly spongy feel of the floor, and followed her. She stopped to pick up one of the kerosene lamps, then led me through the dark kitchen and the back porch.

Outside, the chorus of crickets was full and loud in a way I had never heard before. Besides the lamp, which quickly attracted clusters of small white moths, there was no light out here other than the stars. So many of those, so many that I could barely breathe. The night air was chill, with a hint of dampness, and it woke me a little. I waved the moths away from my face, but Harriet simply moved as if they weren't there.

She led me away from the house, in the general direction of the log cabin, surrounded by unsettling dark. Finally the lamplight caught the shape of a rickety wooden shack the size of a broom closet. There was no moon – or any other celestial object – cut out of the door.

"Heavy," I said.

Harriet handed me the lamp, and I had to stand and take a breath before I could open the door and go in. In this moment, I was sure that Sacred Mother was not the place for me.

Inside, there was a sturdy shelf just beside the door, where I rested the lamp. Clouds of moths instantly gathered around it, and spiders stirred in their plentiful webs at the sudden light. I held my breath against the powerful smell as long as I could, then breathed through the fingers of the hand over my nose and mouth

when I had to. My desperation was the only thing keeping me inside there. While I sat, I looked around, then spotted a small bundle of roughly cut squares of newspapers, stuck onto a nail in the wall like bills on a desk spike. Call me soft, spoiled, citified, whatever you like: so not the place for me.

When I came out, I breathed deep of the sweet air – the far-off hint of the barn no longer even registered. I handed Harriet the lamp and she anticipated my question: "You can get wash water from the rain barrel, over near the back door."

As we walked back carefully in the circle of lamplight, I could spot the waning crescent of the moon, down low in far-off trees, ineffectual. I said, "The darkness out here blows my mind. Never saw anything like it."

"Well, I came out here from Toronto," Harriet said. "I bet I noticed the difference even more than you do." We both snickered softly.

When we returned to the front room, Signe was on her haunches in front of the fire, poking at it to put it out. Artemis was standing near the kitchen doorway, the other lamp in her hand; her big shadow waved gently on the wall closest to her. "Good night, ladies," she said. "Don't stay up too late." Then she padded through the kitchen and into a black hallway, Signe following close behind.

Harriet set the lamp on the coffee table, next to the extinguished candle; then she sat back into the sofa once again. So I sat beside her again, and she looked at me. The colour of her skin in the soft light was beautiful and warm.

"I guess people here go to bed earlier than I'm used to," I said.

"Yes, the work starts early. And it can be pretty draining. I expect that Doris and Eden will be back before too long."

"Well, thank you for a really interesting evening, Harriet."

She looked at me quietly for a long while, with the hint of a smile from the hint of a buzz, then said, "Would it be a problem for you to stay here tonight? I mean, do you have something you have to get back for?"

I blinked. "I, uhhh.... no?"

"I mean, I could drive you home now if I had to. But I *am* tired, and I'm probably not in the absolute best shape to be behind the wheel, so...."

"Oh yeah, I can dig that. Oh man. Yeah."

"You'd have to stay in my room, though. House rules."

I wanted to be cool. I believed that I was. I even said, "Cool. My, my house has the same rule, even."

And so Harriet took the lamp and led me through the darkened house, into the same hallway as Artemis, and she creaked open a heavy wooden door for me to enter. Her room was small and sparse. A tall, narrow wardrobe, a wood-framed bed almost as narrow, piled with pillows and quilts, a heavy wooden chest at the foot of the bed, a bedside table near the window with a shallow ceramic bowl, beautifully glazed, a box of matches, and a loudly ticking, wind-up clock. And it was only at that moment that it hit me: I had not seen a clock anywhere on the farm until just now.

Our shadows danced over the walls as Harriet pulled a couple of long, white, flannel nightgowns out of the wardrobe and offered me one. Then we turned our backs to each other while we changed. I noticed her clothes were piled on top of the chest, so I put mine there, too. Then I stood for a few seconds, avoiding Harriet's eyes, noticing the coldness of the air, feeling awkward. But I reminded myself that I was cool, and arbitrarily chose the side of the bed away from the night table to slip into. The bed linens were chilly, and I shivered, and turned my back to Harriet, trying to settle in. I heard her wind the clock, then a faint squeaking as she turned down the wick in the lamp. The light quickly faded to nothing. I felt the mattress and quilts shifting as she got in the bed on the other side.

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. But after a few minutes, I realized that there was no light for them to adjust to. I was blind. I propped up on an elbow and looked over my shoulder toward the window. Finally I could see a few stars, but I couldn't even see the windowsill: only the place where the stars implied it. And the sounds: the rolling surf of the crickets, faraway rustling and rattling, the occasional squeak or hoot – the night was alive here in a way I had never experienced before. On top of that, the unfamiliar creaks of the house, and the clock's metallic ticking. I wasn't sure if I would be able to sleep.

Then I heard Harriet whisper behind me, "Are you awake?"

"Very," I replied.

She waited a second, then said, "Thank you for coming."

I turned over to face her, but could see nothing. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Artemis really likes you. I had a feeling she would, remember? When she said she liked your soul – the only other person I ever heard her say that about is Anya. So that's rare praise, coming from her."

"Well, I think I like her, too. I know she impresses the hell out of me – she is quite a trip."

"She's very strong," Harriet said softly. "I think she can be harsh with it, sometimes. But I, I think she sees what I see in you."

I blinked. "What do you see?"

I heard a couple of breaths. "Someone who wants to know. Someone willing to look. Willing to go to new places."

I tisked. "That sounds a lot more adventurous than I ever feel." We lay quiet for a few seconds, then I said, "Why does she call you Haru?"

Harriet sighed. "My, um, ethnic name, I guess you might call it, is Haru. Or Haruko. Takamura. But our parents anglicized our names almost as soon as we were born. Artemis doesn't approve of that: she wants to reject it."

"So you have brothers and sisters?"

"Two younger brothers. Ken is nineteen –"

"Same as me."

"– and Ray is fourteen. They're coming out here to visit me tomorrow, actually. Which is another reason I was hoping you could stay over: I'd really like you to meet them." I found it curious that she was so eager to introduce me to people. And curiously sweet. "Do *you* have any?"

"Brothers? No. Or sisters – I suppose I was more than they wanted as it was." She tisked. "So why did you come out here from Toronto, anyway?"

I felt her shifting, trying to get comfortable. "Part of the exodus from Yorkville, you could say. A couple of years back. Plus, I spent a lot of summers on my aunt and uncle's farm when I was little, and I always loved it there. So when I heard about Sacred Mother, it seemed like a good opportunity."

"And your experience on a farm gave you something to offer, right?"

"That was probably it, yes."

We fell quiet for a while, and I just listened to her breathing, and the strange sounds of the night. I could feel us winding down. "I really don't know if I have anything," I eventually said.

She thought for a moment, then: "Maybe we all just haven't looked deep enough."

"Mmf. I don't know, man. I don't."

There was a much longer lull, and a pleasant heaviness crept over me. Absently I turned onto my side, my back to her. I let out a long breath into the deep darkness. I was dimly aware that my nose was cold.

And then, so softly that at first I wasn't even sure, I felt Harriet's fingers rest on my shoulder. I stiffened, and could feel my eyes grow wide. I held my breath and lay quiet. For a while her hand just rested there, light and warm and firm. Then she barely squeezed my shoulder, waited, squeezed again. And then a couple of slow caresses, soft as a sigh. Her touch was not insistent, or commanding – more tentative, like putting a toe in the water.

I swallowed, but stayed still and silent. I didn't know what else to do. I wasn't alarmed, or affronted, or afraid. I felt no revulsion, but also no attraction. I thought that I ought to – needed to – say something, but I didn't know what: I had no experience to fall back on.

After a moment, I suppose my hardness and lack of response registered with her, and her hand fell away, as gently as it had come. I thought I heard her sigh.

Then she shifted behind me, and I could feel her breath in my hair, growing slow.

Long minutes passed before I could let my shoulders and stomach relax. In a strange way, I almost felt bad for Harriet, that the water was so cold.

With all the relentless alien sounds, and my jumble of thoughts, I wasn't sure if I was ever going to sleep. But at some point I did. It must have been even before the truck returned, because I had no memory of hearing it.

Thirteen

I woke not long after sunrise, to the sound of the bedroom door creaking open and Harriet stepping in quietly. Already dressed in overalls, she carried in the ceramic bowl, filled with warm water from the stove, and set it down on the night table for me. She let me know that there was bread and cheese in the kitchen for breakfast, along with a partial pot of tea, then asked me to meet her out in the field once I was done.

Next to the bowl of water, she had left a small gray towel, and a tiny bar of soap scavenged from a hotel room somewhere in the past. I got the impression that those were saved aside for special visitors. I washed up as best I could, threw last night's clothes back on, and slowly made my way out to the kitchen.

I cut myself a ragged slice of bread, did a marginally better job with the cheese, and sat alone to eat. I could hear voices outside: it seemed that everyone else was up and ready long before me, and already at work. I allowed myself enough time for a quick spot of warm tea, then headed out the back door, bracing myself for the others calling me a city-slicker slug-a-bed.

As I passed the barn, I could see Signe near the henhouse, and hear Eden inside the barn itself. A bit further to the west was a field, not huge, of freshly turned earth, where everyone else stood working with long-handled tools, or on their hands and knees working in the soil. The way they explained it to me, they were able to get by on less than an acre of actively farmed land. By using labour-intensive, alternative cultivation techniques, they could grow a wide variety of produce in that space, and end up with enough to feed themselves plus an even greater amount to sell at the regional markets.

I saw Harriet hoeing near a bushel basket resting on the ground, so I headed toward her, waving to the others farther off. When I reached her, she dug into a deep pocket of her overalls and pulled out a pair of dirty, tough leather gloves for me. "I had a feeling you wouldn't think to bring some, city gal," she said, then giggled. If she felt at all awkward about anything that happened in her room last night, she gave no indication.

I tugged the gloves on and asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Take that fork there –" She gestured toward the basket, where a short gardening fork lay beside it. "– and work along with me. You break up my pieces

even smaller. And anything you find growing, pull it up and plop it in the basket. Only thing growing here this time of year is weeds." So as she chopped at the soil, moving in small backward steps, I followed along on my knees, breaking up chunks into a finer crumble, and gathering up the defiant early weeds.

"So even though you got today off from the store, you don't really get the day off," I said.

She stood the hoe up and leaned on it for a moment. "If nature ever takes a day off, then maybe *we'll* be able to. I don't mind so much, though. It's good karma for me to be doing work where Eden can see it. I get tired of the cute little jabs about how I don't do enough around here."

I had no way of telling how long we worked there, preparing the ground for planting. But I was aware of the sun rising higher. At one point, Harriet and Anya stopped and went into the back porch, to emerge shortly with armfuls of wide-brimmed straw hats for all of us. And Harriet and I took turns going back to the kitchen to bring back mugs of water.

Lunchtime seemed to come unexpectedly early but was most welcome. After that, Artemis advised Harriet and me to wash up – the Takamura brothers were due to arrive soon.

In the relative stillness of a rural afternoon, the growl of a car engine and the crunch of tires on gravel carried very clearly. Harriet headed out the front door faster than I had ever seen her walk before. As I stood up from the sofa, I could hear other sounds from outside: the thunk of car doors, a pair of voices calling "Harry!", and then a young voice alone saying, "Yeah, Harry the Hairy Beast!" And then footsteps on gravel, and Harriet's melodious laugh.

I debated going back into Harriet's room and hiding. Even though I washed, I was still in deeply dirty, sweaty clothes, having nothing else to wear. Without a hairbrush, I had been forced to finger my hair into some sort of submission, but I was sure it looked like what you find under a rock. This was not the sort of first impression I wanted to make on young men – especially ones related to my friend. But I knew that Harriet would insist on introducing us. So I settled for taking a deep breath and telling myself that I felt pretty.

Just as I drifted closer to the door to take a better look at what was happening, Harriet came back in, followed by two boys who looked very much like they would have to be her brothers. She began immediately: "This is my friend Grace. Grace, my brothers Ken and Ray." She gestured as she named them, to indicate. Ken was barely taller than Harriet, bright and chipper, with a wide aura. He wore his hair in a *Rubber Soul* Beatles style, and his sparse mustache was hardly more than a wish. He was dressed sharp, though, in a vivid paisley shirt with puffed sleeves, a black corduroy vest, and narrow white trousers. Ray, the younger one, was shorter, slighter, wore his hair thick and nearly to his shoulders, and sported broken-in blue jeans, a long-sleeved Led Zeppelin T-shirt, and the eager smirk of a born troublemaker.

Ken nodded and grinned. "Hey, how ya doin'?" he said, and looked at me in a way that made me feel like I actually *was* pretty, somehow. Ray just gave me an ironic salute, and I settled for nodding at both of them with a small smile.

We all seated ourselves around the coffee table. Harriet offered tea, Ray asked for a Coke, and Ken reminded him, with a not-that-serious punch to the shoulder, that they still didn't have that here. Ken said water would be fine, and at once I popped up to volunteer to go get it. Below the squeak of the pump handle in the kitchen, I could hear them in the front room, catching up and talking about relatives.

When I came back with the water and sat down again, Ken at once started asking me about myself. I gave him polite, self-conscious answers that bored Ray rather quickly – he got up and wandered over to the shelves to pick up the mandolin and bring it back to his seat.

Ken interrupted himself to turn to his brother and say, "Be careful with that!"

"Harry said I could play it!" said Ray. He turned his face to his sister and said, "Didn't ya, Harry?" She smiled and gave him a nod. Ray grinned back and said, "Harry the Hairy Beast!" Ken shook his head, looking a little embarrassed.

The Takamuras talked warmly together, with easy laughter, for quite a while – at one point I felt a soft flash of envy. Sometimes I would join in with a trivial observation, but more often I would speak because Ken would make conversation with me directly. Sometimes Ray would distract himself, fumbling out attempts to play single-string versions of Led Zeppelin riffs.

Then I heard an engine start up outside, a deeper purr I recognized as the sound of the truck. At the same time, I suddenly caught a whiff of something like smoke, a rich, penetrating, earthy smell. Artemis came into the front room at that moment, holding something that looked like a short, very fat, whitish cigar. Smoke drifted from the end of it and flowed to the ceiling as she waved the burning bundle over her head. Harriet said, "Was that the truck?"

Artemis looked at her, almost sharply. "Doris needs to go into town to pick up a few things." Then she turned and walked back into the kitchen, waving smoke around in there as well.

Harriet quickly got up and dashed to the front door, then I heard her cry, "Oh, no!" The sounds of the truck were already fading in the distance.

Ken and I both said, "What?"

She came back in, closed the door, sighed, and looked at me. "I was going to get you back home before dinner – I can't keep you from your business all day. Now what do we do?"

After a second, Ken said, "I can take her." He looked at me then, and added, "You just live in Westgate, right?" I nodded, and he spread his hands. "So no problem."

Harriet gave him a fond look. "Aw, thank you, Kenny."

"Shotgun!" Ray cried.

Ken turned to look at him. "No, you stay here! It's bad enough I have to put up with you all the way home."

Ray stuck his tongue out at him. "There's nothing to do here! No stereo, no TV – this place should be called Sacred Bummer! At least the car has a radio –"

"Hey hey." Harriet walked over close to Ray's side. "Come on. I'll go get my cards – play me."

He looked up at her. "Two-handed euchre?" She nodded, and he said, "Meh okay then." Then he looked at Ken and said, "But don't take too long."

I took a moment to say my goodbyes to the others out in the field. Everyone else was cordial enough, but Artemis actually lowered her tools, stepped close to me, fixed her eyes on mine, and quietly wished me well and expressed gratitude for meeting me. In that moment, I felt like her mind and attention were exclusively on me; I could feel the power of her focus. To me she seemed genuinely charismatic, and I wondered to what extent she knew about it and consciously wielded it.

I returned to the house to exchange thank yous and see you later with Harriet. Then Ken led me across the gravel drive to a turquoise '62 Rambler station wagon, standing dusty in the sun. He swept an arm to the side and presented the car with a smirk and a flourish: "Behold my most groovy coolmobile!"

I grinned and said, "Trippy indeed." He held open the passenger door for me, then thumped it closed once I was seated. I heard the jingle of his keys as he walked around and got in behind the wheel. Then he started it up, wheeled it around, and drove us down the dirt path leading to the road.

The radio was tuned to a Top Forty station and he turned it down low. "Man, Ray started complaining about the radio as soon as we got out of range of Toronto. He kept saying all the stations we can pick up out here are bummers." Ken's laugh was free and honest.

"He's lucky you didn't hit the country and western station," I said.

That made him laugh again. "Oh, I did, for about half a second, and then he was all 'No! Keep going!' "

"Is it that bad?" I asked. "Having a little brother, I mean."

He gently shook his head. "Naa, not really. The squabbling is part of the fun."

"Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like, to have a brother or sister."

Ken glanced at me for a second, smiling. "Well, I'd recommend both." He let a moment go by, then said, "So what do *you* like?"

"What?"

"What kind of music?"

"Oh! Well, some rock, mostly. 'Ripple' is a new one I like."

"Sorry, I don't know that one."

"It's off the new Dead album."

"Ohhhh, okay, the Grateful Dead, yeah, right. So you're a Deadhead!"

I smiled. "Oh, I don't know if I'd say that, but I like some of them."

A wooded patch cast speckles of shadow flowing back over the car for a few seconds. "So what do you do?" I said. "You were asking me before, but you never said about yourself."

"Oh, I would've gotten to it, eventually. I'm –" He stopped for a few seconds, then snickered, and let out a little sigh. "Okay: I usually tell people, 'I'm in the music business – I'm a jazz trumpeter'."

"Really?" I raised my eyebrows a little, thinking of what a talented family the Takamuras seemed to be.

Ken cleared his throat. "*However*, what I *should* say, is that I am a trumpet player who *wishes* he could play jazz. And I *do* work in the music biz, because my day job is slogging in the warehouse for a record distributor." I laughed. "Yeah, I pack up boxes of LPs and load them into vans."

"Well, that's good enough to convince me," I said. Just then, we drove through an intersection. I blinked and said, "I think we missed our turn."

"Oh!" Ken blurted out, still driving ahead. "Wait! What? Are you sure? I thought it was a bit –"

"No, I'm not sure – I really don't know this area. But maybe. I thought it looked like what I remember from yesterday."

"Oh, um...."

"Well, do you know a different way?"

"I, uh...." He swallowed. "Okay, look: I have never driven from the farm to Westgate before." I stared at him. "I mean, I know how to get to Westgate – from Toronto. And I know how to get to the farm from Toronto. And back. I, I just thought it'd be easy enough to figure out. Westgate's just over that way, right?"

"I don't know, I think it might be more back that way."

"Oh." He licked his lips. "Well –"

"Should we maybe pull over and figure it out?" I felt like plowing on ahead without knowing where we were going was not such a good idea. But then, I wasn't a man.

"Mmyeah, you're right – what was I thinking?" And he pulled the car over onto the gravel shoulder and turned the engine off. He turned to face me, then, looking a little contrite. "So. We're still on Fifth Line, right?"

"Pretty sure," I said. "And at least I remember that we turned left onto Fifth Line to get to the farm. So we needed to turn right off of it to get back to town – that much I know."

"Right." Then he shrugged. And looked sheepish. Then said, "Trying to think."

I took a breath, then said, "Well, do you have a road atlas?"

His eyes and mouth got round, as if my suggestion were purest genius. "I think! If we do, it'll be in the back!" We got out and I joined him at the rear hatch. Close to it was a pair of old cardboard boxes filled with a jumble of vaguely automotive miscellany. "This is the folks's car," Ken explained, "so I don't always remember what all is in here."

I leaned in and started digging through one of the boxes, when suddenly he gently tapped my shoulder and said, "Shhhhh." I stopped still for a second, then slowly stood upright again and looked at him. He was looking sidelong toward the trees beside the road, and was holding a finger to his lips. Then he looked at me and whispered, "Deer."

"Where?" I whispered back, and looked around.

"Back a ways, between those two thick parts." He took hold of my shoulders and sidled me closer to him, then leaned toward the woods, pointing and peering in. "Oh! There's two!"

I leaned in closer to him, til my cheek was almost touching his, trying to see – and then there they were. Females, it looked like, one smaller, spots of sunlight like magic on their backs. My foot shifted in the gravel and they immediately looked toward us and froze. I couldn't tell if they could see us. Probably yes. For a timeless time we all stared at each other, keeping still, and the air was pleasantly warm and the birds made music and the world fell away, leaving only this place and this moment.

Once, Ken whispered, very softly, "Oh, man."

A little more time passed, and then the deer decided to move on into the thicket and we lost sight of them. We stood up straighter then, and he took a step back from me and looked at me with a big smile. After a few seconds, he said, "We never see that at home."

"Neither do we, all that much." We went back to the car, soon tugged out a road atlas for southern Ontario, I impressed Ken with my map-reading skills, and we were off on the correct path to Westgate at last.

"So tell me," I said. "Why did you decide to not give me the same story you usually say to people about your job?"

"I dunno," he said curiously. "I guess you struck me as someone who could handle the truth. And would handle it gently."

I laughed. "You have an awful lot of faith in me."

He shrugged. "And I will remember this route for next time, I promise," he said.

"Oh, will there be a next time?"

He let a few seconds go by, then said, "Well, I think that would be nice."

"Maybe so."

Fourteen

After Ken dropped me off in front of my place, I had to unlock the front door to let myself in: no one else was home. Not so odd on a pleasant Saturday, I supposed. It meant I was free to wallow in the royal splendour of the bathroom and take the longest shower I could ever remember having. Everything about this house felt lavish and deliciously decadent after my brief visit in the country – I noticed and appreciated the tiniest details. Even my toothbrush felt like a lover come back from overseas.

At last, refreshed, changed into my patchwork jeans and white peasant blouse, my hair clean and brushed, I felt presentable again. A small corner of me idly wished that Ken could see me now, but all I could do was shrug. There was a sweet freedom in the moment: late Saturday afternoon, just after payday, with the rest of a long weekend still ahead of me. So I decided to treat myself to dinner out, after the past week of enforced frugal meals; I gathered a few dollars out of my drawer and walked down the street to The Wien.

I ate there perhaps once or twice a month, but every time I went, it looked and felt as if I had just been there. The dark wooden booths, the frosted glass wall lights, hadn't changed, I was sure, since I was born. Seated in one of those booths today was Mr. McPhail, with a fat book at his side and a glass of water in front of him. He saw me, gestured toward his table, and gave me a questioning look; with a small nod, I agreed to join him.

As I slid into the booth, he said, "That was quite some hayride."

"Epic length. That hay was exhausted by the time we were done."

"I see you got some sun," he said. I nodded, and he went on. "Decided to get a bit myself today. Out stretching my legs around The Square for a while, went to the library –" He patted the book beside him. "– and found a bench to sit and read for a while. Beautiful day for it."

Just then, Anna came to our table with a menu and glass of water for me. After brief greetings, she took my order and left. I asked Mr. McPhail about Heather: he said she had taken the bus down to visit her folks, and was expected back Monday night.

"It's good to get out and enjoy the long weekend," I said.

He chuckled softly. "Once you get to my age, every weekend feels short." He drank some of his water and sat quietly for a moment – something he was good at. He didn't like to pry: he seemed more comfortable waiting for you to come to him.

"Can I ask you something?" I finally said.

He pushed his thick glasses back up his thin nose. "Of course, always."

I took a small drink myself. "I was talking with someone last night, and it would have been interesting if you were there for it: have you ever thought about how it would be if women were in charge of everything?"

He gently pursed his lips. "As opposed to your men with guns, you mean?"

"Yes. They were saying that the world would be so much better off that way."

"Well..." He paused for another sip, and thought for a second. "In all honesty, I would bet good money that things wouldn't be any worse. And yes, very likely a lot of things would be better. But it wouldn't be perfect."

"How so?"

"Not sure as I know, exactly. But I figure the world would still have problems – they'd just be different ones, somehow, is all."

"Oh." I blinked and thought for a second.

"It's the nature of the beast, Grace. I..." He scratched his chin. "Well all right, here's an example you can relate to. I remember you mentioning Kent State a little while back. You've talked about that a few times, and I know it's something that troubles you." I swallowed and gave a little nod. "And rightly so: it's tragic, and disturbing, and you young folk are right to be outraged by it. But there are aspects to it that I don't hear people talk about so much."

"Such as?"

"Well, the day before it happened, the students at Kent had burned down one of the buildings on campus. I don't think a thing as dangerous as that can be

justified: some people do think so, but they haven't convinced me. And some of the students were throwing rocks and bottles at the soldiers and police."

"Yes. That part, I knew about."

"M-hm. But that has a way of sounding relatively harmless, when actually you can kill a person by throwing things like that at them. So the men with guns there that day would have some justification to be afraid for their lives." I frowned but stayed quiet. "And yes, some of those men shot some of those students, innocent bystanders, even, and that's inexcusable... but most of them didn't shoot."

"So what are you saying?"

"Just that there is no pure black or white in this world. Everything is gray, varying shades of it. Those soldiers were not pure evil and the students were not pure good. But too many people are too willing to talk about life as if it *is* black and white. So: if the women were in charge, those women would still be gray. Paler gray than the men? That's a matter for debate, I suppose. But my point is that life is never that simple."

"Or neat?"

"Or neat." But then he smiled and held a finger up. "Except math! That's part of the beauty of it. Math and physics! I love the orderliness of it, the certainty. But that's just me."

"Maybe a math life would be simpler," I said.

"Oh, I can promise you that it would be," he said, just as Anna brought our meals to the table and set them down. "But I suspect it would have far less flavour."

Noon on Sunday found me sitting on the steps of my parents' veranda, reading a library book about Western perspectives on Zen. The cement of the steps was cool on my backside, but my lower legs caught the sun. Birdsong was the only sound on the street: people were either sleeping in or already out. And I read, and waited.

After a while, I heard a soft clip-clop of approaching footsteps, echoing in the stillness. I looked down the street and immediately recognized my mother's long gray coat, and small teal hat with its splash of lace, and her glossy black one-inch heels. The only time she ever wore heels was when she went to church, but even then it was nothing ostentatious – oh, I heard from her about those disappointing young women who somehow saw fit to wear high heels in the Lord's house.

I closed my book and stood up as she came closer to the yard; she saw me, gave a small start, and then started walking a bit more quickly. I met her halfway down the front walk.

She looked puzzled more than pleased. "What are you doing out here, dear? What's wrong? Why didn't your father let you in?" And she turned her head toward the house, getting ready to bray "Eee-yaaaaan?", when I patted her shoulder to stop her.

"No no, mother, I didn't knock – he doesn't know I'm here. I just sat out here and waited for you."

"Well, whatever for? You'll catch cold sitting out here on that –"

"I didn't want to – ... I didn't know if he was awake, or what kind of shape he's in, I.... I just don't feel like dealing with him now, all right? And besides, I can't stay."

Her mouth made a little twist. "What's the matter, Grace?"

"Nothing: I just came over because I had something I wanted to give you." She blinked while I reached inside the cover of the book and pulled out the pamphlet from the bookstore, still folded in half. I handed it to her, and watched as she unfolded it and then scowled. It had been weighing on me ever since I picked it up, and I could not figure out why... and then, while I was at the commune, there was a moment, a flash, when I knew what I needed to do with it.

She looked at me, more accusing than thankful. "What made you think that I want something like this?"

"I don't know. Just hang onto it, put it away somewhere. I, I don't want to argue about this."

She gave me a small smile with a hint of triumph in it. "You just don't want me to argue back."

I actually laughed. "You're learning, mom."

She looked at it again, then folded it and slowly, grudgingly slipped it into her purse. Then she looked up at me again, sighed, and said, "You are a real puzzle, my dear."

"If it's any consolation, I am one to myself, too." I nodded toward her purse. "But that was all I came for: now I'm gonna go. You go get dad his lunch." I left her too bewildered to say goodbye and scuffed down the street. I could hear the clatter of their front door as she went inside.

Fifteen

For my holiday Monday, I had a plan – if the universe was willing to co-operate. Although I let myself sleep in, it was still well before lunchtime when I made my way out the front gate and headed downtown for Hamilton Street. Most businesses would be closed today, but the coffeehouses down that way were allowed to remain open. And they figured into my plan.

The day was already the warmest one this weekend, calling for a loose tank top and cut-offs once again. The area near The Wien was almost deserted, but once I rounded the corner onto Hamilton, the street was very nearly as busy as any regular day. But today, the emphasis was even heavier on the younger, counterculture, coffeehouse crowd – the riot of colours and hairstyles and scents was suitably festive.

And the universe was kind: seated beneath what I thought of as "his awning" was Noar, casually playing his guitar, his jacket bundled up behind him as a cushion. A stringy little guy stopped to watch him play for a moment, then wandered on. I threaded my way over to Noar's side and stayed put.

Almost at once he noticed me and looked up, but didn't stop playing. "Grace again," he said. "Enjoying the heat."

I was pleased to see that he was sitting alone today. "Play 'Ripple' for me," I gently demanded. He stopped playing, gave me a nod of acknowledgment, and granted my request. I could feel my smile grow as he played it, and during the final singalong, I hummed under my breath.

When the song was done, he said, "I heard you. One of these days, you need to let yourself really sing."

I paused, ready to reply with something self-deprecating, but instead suddenly said, "Do you have time to go for a coffee?"

"Time is never the issue," he said, "but I'm, uh, between coins at the moment."

"On me?" What a relief it was to be back in a position to make such an offer.

He stood the guitar against the wall and gathered his long legs under him. "In that case, I'd have to be a fool to say no."

I looked up at him as he stood upright. "I would never say you were a fool."

"Ah," he said, "but the day is still young."

He slung the guitar over his back, picked up his jacket, and we pressed our way down the street to Creaky Pete's, the coffeehouse of his choosing. Not one I went to often – nothing about it particularly appealed to me – but I was willing to follow his lead on this today. He took charge of a table for two, rested his guitar against his chair where he hung his jacket, and told me that he wanted a double espresso. I went to order that, along with my regular, and brought them back.

Noar picked up his small cup and sipped at it tentatively. He glanced over at me and said, "So what can I do for you?"

The first thought that popped into my head was *where do I start?*, but I played coy and asked, "What do you mean?"

"I could feel you, uh, filled with purpose when you showed up today – you had something on your mind. I'm not often wrong about things like that."

"Right on," I said with a firm nod. "I want you to tell me about your vision."

"Well, it's twenty-twenty," he said, and then laughed.

I laughed, too, probably a heartier laugh than was actually called for. "No, man, seriously. You told me that you were given your name in a vision. I want to hear about that."

"Ah, cool." He rested an elbow on the table and settled in. "All right, it was about four years ago, the first time I dropped acid."

I reminded myself that I was cool, that I didn't need to ask questions or make comments, so I simply said, "I see."

"That was a great awakening for me – *the* great awakening. That was when I, I truly came to see that the cosmos is what it is. I was given a chance to know the deeper truths of existence."

"Wow, very heavy," I breathed.

"And somewhere in all that, where everything was opened up like the sky, I... I was going to say I 'met a being'. But, but it's hard to describe. I never actually 'met' anything, and I couldn't be sure there was a 'being' there. But I became aware of a presence in the everything. It's like I saw it but not with my eyes, I heard it but not with my ears. It was a part of the cosmos, a, an aspect, that was choosing to speak to me. I can't think of a better way to describe it."

I nodded, trying to digest, and waited for him to go on.

"It said that now I knew the truth. And now I could know my true name, which was Noar Morningstar. I couldn't ask it anything – I had no voice. And then I knew that was really because there are no questions. No meanings, no shoulds. I knew that matter and space and time are all illusions, and only the cosmos is."

I sipped at my coffee. "The dream of the gods. That is so... spiritual."

"Well, that was why I took it. I wasn't one of those punk kids dropping it every week for the high and the laughs. There were people using it as a serious tool to investigate – to open your perceptions, to gain insights into the nature of reality. I was a seeker. And I only ever took it again once after that."

"Oh?"

"I wanted to know more, naturally. But the second time, I heard a message – I think it was that same being again, but hard to be sure. And that time, all it said was, 'The good pupil learns his lessons once.' And it was true: what I saw that time boiled down to all the same things as before. The truth of the cosmos was still the truth. So I knew it had nothing more to teach me that way, and I never went back."

"Sounds like something like that could change your life," I said.

"It did. After that, I left home, hit the road, just seeing what I can see. All these illusions around us do have a purpose, sort of – they're there for us to experience while we can."

"That sounds like you have nothing, though, no security," I said. "That would worry me."

He shrugged. "Worry is pointless. And none of us have anything, anyway." He lifted his cup and drank for a second. "Here's one of the heaviest things I learned – see how much of it you can dig. Imagine you're on a train, sitting in one of the cars, watching the world pass by the window. Things show up, go by, then they're gone. All you can see is the view from the window. Let's say you notice that you see a, a fence post go by, and then some wire. And then that happens again, and again. First there's one thing, and then right after there's this other thing. You never see them together, though."

I nodded, pushed my glasses back up, and tried to follow.

"But if you got off that train, and could see the whole landscape, you'd see that all those things are there all the time. The fence posts and the wire are all there at once. You could see the things further up the track that the train hasn't reached yet. You could see the things the train passed by long ago. It's only an illusion that these things were moving past you and gone.

"Time is like that train. You're stuck by that window, you see things happen and then they're over. You see one thing followed by another, and you feel like the first thing *caused* the second thing. Cause followed by effect, every time. But time is just an illusion. Cause and effect is just an illusion. Everything is actually all there all at once. It's the cosmos, being what it is. We only see a tiny part of it – we see it and put patterns on top of it that don't really fit."

"But what does this mean?" I said. "How do we get off that train?"

"Well, if I knew that, I wouldn't be here," he said, then laughed again. "But there's a freedom in knowing this. Without cause and effect, nothing we do matters, nothing that happens matters. Nothing worth worrying about. Meaning becomes meaningless. Instead of a quest for meaning, life becomes a quest for experience. We stop being misguided."

I looked into my cup for a while, silently. "It's strange," I finally said, "but I find myself feeling like, like knowing what you know must be a really heavy burden for you." Then I looked up at him, trying to see what was in his eyes then.

All I saw was an unshakable peace. "Naw, I'm fine, baby," he said. His presence felt enormous, like it filled the small place and washed over everyone seated there.

I shook my head softly. "You must be very strong."

He winked at me. "I get by." Then he looked over my shoulder and stood up. "Oh, excuse me a sec, I need to have a quick word with a cat over there." I turned to watch him walk to the door and meet a tall, thin man in shades, dressed all in black. They put their heads together, spoke quietly for a second, then walked through the coffeehouse and on into the back.

The murmur from other tables surrounded me while I waited for him to return. I looked at his guitar, then reached out dreamlike and touched a fingertip to its body. I'd always gotten a sense from Noar, a powerful one, of a deeply insightful nature which intrigued and excited me. Today was the first glimpse I'd seen of a bleak side to those insights, and I almost felt sad for him.

But then I saw him walking back to me, and could sense only a carefree serenity in his strong face. And the ease with which he moved his broad-shouldered form between the tables to reach ours made my breath catch, and I could feel my pulse stronger within me.

He sat down, saying nothing about the man he met. "Moon's throwing a party next week," he said. "You should come."

"Uhhhh, far out, yeah," I said with a hopeful smile. "Who's going to be there?"

He gave a little shrug. "People he knows. People I know. Whoever shows up. Next Saturday, eight or nine."

I thought for a second. "So, not this coming Saturday? So that'd be the 5th?"

"If you say so," he said, then chuckled. He gave me Moon's address, an apartment a few blocks farther down Hamilton. Then he drained his cup and stood. "So come. It'll be a chance for you to tell me what *you* think the cosmos is all about. Although I'm sure I'll see you again before that."

As he picked up his jacket and guitar, I slowly shook my head and said, "Oh man, I don't know what it's all about."

He looked down at me. "Well, you've got almost two weeks to get that all figured out." Then he laughed, and turned away. He called back a "Peace!" as he strode for the door.

Sixteen

The weather had turned cooler by Wednesday, and all of the customers entering King's that afternoon were wearing jackets or light sweaters, with a stoic, Canadian air about them. There came a time, a while after lunch, when I heard the bell on the door ring, but couldn't look to see who came in. I was busy waiting on Miss Kowalczyk, who was buying mousetraps. (Not that I wished her any ill, but a part of me hoped she was buying them for her home and not the library.)

Once she took up her purchase and left, I could see who it was waiting patiently behind her – and I actually started a little. "Ken?" I was sure I was blinking hard enough that he could hear it. His hair was wind-ruffled, and he stood at his ease, hands in the pockets of his taupe jacket. He was dressed more simply today, in plain white shirt and black slacks, with a tie-dyed kerchief at his neck the only burst of colour. And I noticed that his feeble mustache was gone, and I couldn't help thinking he looked more appealing, and somehow more complete, without it. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled and stepped in closer to the counter. "Surprise, eh? Yeah, mom had something she wanted Harry to have, and I had some time free so I said I'd bring it down. I saw her down at the store just now, and she said that you work here, so I figured hey, while I'm in town again."

"So, just came by to say hello?"

He shrugged. "I thought it might be nice. I think I said that once before."

I nudged my glasses up. "Yes, you did. Well then, hello."

We both stood silent for a moment, our smiles growing slightly uncomfortable. I flushed. My only consolation in feeling awkward and shy at that moment was that I got the impression he wasn't doing much better.

Ken pulled his hands out of his pockets, let his shoulders drop, and sighed. "Okay, look: I'm really here to ask you if you wanna come with me Saturday night to see Ed Brownlow."

I blinked again, then grinned. "I have absolutely no idea who that is."

"Ah. Ed is basically the most incredible guitarist of all time. I'm his biggest fan, I have pretty much all his records – but he's semi-retired now and hardly ever plays anymore. And the odd time he comes to Toronto, he always plays the taverns and clubs and I can't get in to see him."

"Well, in July you can: they're changing the legal age."

"But will Ed be playing then? Anyway! I heard he lives up in the woods a ways north of here, and he's friends with the guy that runs The St. Lukes Mill. Every once in a blue moon, he plays there as a favour. I found out he's gonna be there this Saturday night."

"Far out. Then you're all set!"

"Yep! So, wanna come?"

"Wait: is he a jazz guy? That's your thing, right?"

"Well, yeah – can you handle that?"

I thought for a second. "I would've thought you'd have fellow jazzniks back home who'd go with you."

Ken tiskied. "They all say that it isn't worth coming this far to see Ed – fools and Philistines! I know it's not what you listen to, but it'll be more fun than going alone. Please?"

I thought some more. "Um, I do hear that the food at the Mill is really good."

"Oh, you've never been?"

"I don't get out that way much." I knew that the Mill was close to St. Lukes, the Mennonite village up north of Belvedere, but I never had any reason or opportunity to go. Until now.

"My first time there, too – but don't worry, we'll find it. I know where we keep the atlas now!" That made me giggle. "And dinner's on me, of course. C'mon – you might end up loving him."

"All right, then, I'll give it a chance. Thank you."

Ken's grin brightened. "Thank *you!*" he said. Then his mouth got smaller and he raised a forefinger. "Oh wait: would, uh, would you be willing to give me your phone number? I mean, in case something happens and I need to let you know."

"Oh. I suppose that makes sense."

I found a paper and pencil under the counter; while I wrote the number down, he said, "Yeah, I, I wouldn't wanna have to drive all the way down here to tell you that I can't make it down here, right?" I giggled again and handed the number to him, cautioning him about the "no calls after nine" house rule.

As he folded it and tucked it in his jacket, he said, "So when do you get off work?"

"Five."

"Aaa, too bad: I gotta get back."

I tried to hold back a smile. "Awfully presumptuous of you."

He shook his head. "Nope, just hopeful." He looked me right in the eye, and made me feel like he liked what he saw there. "Worth a shot."

I blushed, and waved him away, and looked down at the counter.

He turned toward the door. "So, I'll call you on Friday – before nine – to confirm and work out the details. Til then?"

I looked up at him again and nodded. "Til then." And with the jingling of a bell he was gone.

I took a breath and looked around the store. Slick the Bookworm now had dates for two Saturday nights in a row. With two different men, no less. I was beginning to wonder who I was.

That night, after dinner, the three of us were gathered in the front parlour to rest and relax. Mr. McPhail and I took our customary seats with our customary

books, and Heather decided to work on her beading by the small fire, cross-legged on the floor with her bead bowls sitting close by. As it happened, a jazz program was playing on CBC; this time, I paid closer attention to it than usual, trying to get a feel for how well I might be able to handle dinner with Ken on the weekend. I still didn't see the appeal, but I figured that as long as I wasn't begging him to let me leave, we would manage somehow. I was still flattered that he felt he wanted me to share what seemed to be an important experience for him.

I read about koans, and the Eightfold Path, and stories of old Zen masters, but at times my mind wandered. Finally I lowered the book and spent a while watching Heather work; once again, I had a feeling that I was in the presence of a Zen master of my own, right here in this room. Her hands moved with slow, meticulous purpose, and she seemed deeply content and oblivious to our presence.

I spoke her name to get her attention. I had to do it twice.

Without stopping or looking away from her work, she said, "Yeah?"

"What do *you* think of the idea of women being in charge of everything?" I heard a very gentle chuckle from Mr. McPhail, off to my side.

Heather put her work down and gave me a puzzled look. "What brought *that* on?"

"I'm taking a survey," I said.

She smiled and said, "You need to find a better hobby, man." She started sewing again; then, after a few seconds, she added, "But okay. Back home, we hear from the old folks that, as far back as anyone knows about, our women have always been in charge. Of a lot of things. And the men are in charge of the other things. But it's not about one sex being better, or being over the other one. It's about everybody working together, and respecting each other." She made a couple more stitches, then said, "I always thought that sounded pretty cool. And I don't dig why it's so hard for other people to figure out."

"That sounds like a nice, medium gray to me," said Mr. McPhail.

I nodded, and watched Heather stitching for a while. What I could see of the

headband looked impressively pretty. "How long do you think it'll take to finish that?" I asked.

Her reply was a bit soft and distant, as if her awareness were already moving elsewhere. "Don't really know, man. Not worrying about it." We all fell silent then, and there was only Heather's fingers moving, and beads settling into place, and the soft rustle of the fire, and pensive music from the radio... until eventually I remembered that I still had a book to read. When and as I chose.

Seventeen

Saturday evening was wet. As Ken drove us northwest up the county road toward St. Lukes, we passed only the occasional car coming the other way, its headlights reflecting on the asphalt. The station wagon's wipers made a grating squeak as they moved; we tried to ignore them and speak above the noise.

"You haven't gotten us lost once yet," I said. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

His laugh was light-hearted. "Still lots of time for that. But, if you must know, I actually looked this trip up in the atlas and wrote the directions all down before I left home. Got it right here in case I need it." He patted the breast pocket of his many-coloured striped shirt. Then he patted it again and said, "Oh no, wait."

Just as I said "Wha—", he glanced sidelong at me, trying to hold back a smirk. "Kidding," he said.

I grinned and shook my head. "I never know with you."

A patch of pale gray sky showed low through his window, the sun setting unseen behind solid cloud, as we got past a stretch of forest and drove by low fields. "Gotta keep you guessing," Ken said. "It's the closest thing to mystique I ever get."

That made me think of Noar, who seemed to me to be built entirely of mystique. No, actually, make that fifty percent mystique and fifty percent jungle cat. By contrast, Ken seemed almost determined to make himself small. And yet, somehow, that didn't put me off: it made me curious about him instead.

The St. Lukes Mill stood beside a dark creek, its old wooden waterwheel no longer moving but still mostly intact. The large rough stones of its walls shone in the wet. Inviting warm light showed through leaded windows. We ducked our heads and dashed from the car, splashing the shallow puddles on the gravel lot til we reached the front door and shook ourselves off.

We were only a couple of minutes early for our reservation, and were seated at once. The table was pale wood, tastefully carved, the matching chairs

comfortably padded, the tablecloth floor-length and simple white. The candles on the tables, the abstract art hung on the walls, all spoke of more elegance than somewhere like The Wien – but for just that reason, this was not the sort of place where I wanted to eat regularly. It did make for a tasty special occasion, though.

Tonight I followed Harriet's lead and opted to wear a cape dress, wheat-coloured, and after the waiter took our order, Ken said, "You look very nice tonight."

"So do you," I replied, then added, "You shaved, didn't you?" As if I wasn't completely sure of the fact on Wednesday.

He glanced down and shrugged. "Yeah. Time for a change, I guess. I had that for a while. Long enough." He picked up his water glass and looked at it, then grinned. "Actually, I got the impression that you didn't dig it so much."

I blinked, my mouth open. "Why would you think that?"

"I dunno. Back on the farm that day, sometimes I felt like when you looked at it, it was like your smile got a little smaller or something."

"Well, I..." I drank a bit of my water. "I would never ask you to change anything for me – I mean, I'd never ask anyone. I, I mean, I hardly noticed it: it certainly didn't bother me."

"It's all right. I think this looks fine." Then he smiled. "After I took you home then, I asked Harry if she got any vibe like that from you, and she just said, 'How long have I been telling you to get rid of that scraggly thing?' " And he laughed.

I tried not to smile too big. "Ah, so you really did it for her."

"We can say that."

We both took a sip of our water, then I said, "I was listening to some jazz on the radio a couple days ago. Trying to get ready for tonight."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you do homework." He hoisted his glass in a small toast.

"You said the other day that you only wished you could play jazz. How did you mean? Like, why don't you if you want to?"

"Oh, man, I have tried, honest! But I...." He looked down for a few seconds, then back up at me, with an expression thoughtful but not down. "I think I just don't have the brain for it, eh? I mean, I've got years of music lessons, I can play my horn – I even teach a couple of people. I'm a good reader and I'm not bad at picking things up by ear, either. But to be a good improviser – and that's the basis of what jazz is, right? – you need to be able to *think* music, *fast*. Come up with something new that sounds good, and then play it in that same second. It's the creating on the spot, in the heat of the moment, that's the part I don't have. I mean, I've tried, for years, and I'm not getting anywhere."

I looked at him seriously. "I'm sure that most of the great musicians had to work at it for years. So please keep trying, all right?"

"Oh, I will! It's not like I wanna quit... but, I'm starting to warn myself that it might never happen." He looked over at a corner of the restaurant, where a tiny stage was set up, a stool standing in a white light, a small amplifier beside it. Then he looked back at me. "You know what I really need? I should be in the trumpet section of a big band. They'd have one lead trumpet who was their great improviser, and then backing him up would be a couple of other guys, who just read the charts in front of them and sounded good. That could be me – I sound okay. And that's most of what I love about the music, is the beauty of the sound. If I could be a part of that sound... man, that'd be heaven."

"So maybe you could do that?"

"I'm sure gonna try. But there aren't that many chances anymore. Hardly any big bands left. Sometimes I think I should've been born thirty years earlier – I would've fit right in."

"Ah, but then you would've missed this dinner."

"And I wouldn't want that." Once again, he made me feel as if he liked what he was seeing when he looked my way. "I am definitely in luck, the way things turned out."

We were just finishing dessert when a gray-haired man in a blue apron, his hands in his pockets, stepped in front of the stage to introduce the evening's musical guest. He then moved aside and there was a polite spatter of applause as two other men took the single step up onto the stage; one carried an electric guitar of blonde wood, the other an acoustic bass. The man with the guitar sat on the stool and plugged the guitar in. He reminded me of Mr. McPhail, but with shorter, blunt features and no heavy glasses. The bassist standing behind him was a younger man, tall and dark with a neat afro and short beard. Both of them wore black suits and ties, as if to ensure that no one would ever accuse either of them of being with the times.

Without a word of greeting or further fuss, the bassist began a brief intro. This was the first time I had ever heard one of these basses played live, and the dark fullness of its sound surprised and impressed me. It filled the small venue with unexpected ease. And then Mr. Brownlow began to play along, and his sound in turn was a revelation for me. I was used to hearing electric guitars in rock bands – the smooth, beautiful sound he got when he played, glowing like embers, was completely new to me. I began to get a sense of why Ken responded to this music as deeply as he did.

I glanced over at Ken for a second, but in this moment he only had eyes for the stage, watching and listening with a rapt focus. I could almost feel his intention, to be present for every moment of this performance, not to miss a movement or a note. I tried to do the same, and soon realized that I couldn't follow the musicians' technique – it was dazzling beyond what I was able to comprehend. But the gorgeousness of the sound was something I could appreciate, and did... how there were moments where the guitar sounded like chimes, sometimes like a celeste, through what sort of finger magic I couldn't explain. This was lovely, romantic music, perfect for sharing with someone. Knowing how Ken was touched by this gave me a deeper sense of who he was.

The song breathed to its conclusion, and I joined the other patrons in respectful applause. Mr. Brownlow, apparently shy, said nothing, but launched into the next number. The duo maintained a consistent mood throughout, focused on beauty rather than flamboyance, and time seemed to fall away. I lost count of how many songs they played. At last, he finally spoke to us, merely to announce a half-hour break before he and his partner returned for another set. Then they left the stage to mild applause again.

I turned to Ken and saw his eyes vivid with delight. "Are we staying for that?" I

asked him.

"Unless you can't," he said.

"I'm good for more – this is easier to take than I thought."

Ken grinned. "Right on." Then he eased his chair back. "Hey, excuse me for a minute, okay?" He stood and headed out the back of the room.

While I sat and waited, I looked around at the other tables: mostly couples, mostly older than us. Our waiter came and refilled our coffees, and I sipped at mine, thinking that I might like to use the facilities after Ken came back.

Just then, he returned and flopped back into his chair. "Awright!" he said.

"So, did you notice where the ladies' room is?"

"Oh, sorry, I dunno."

"Weren't you back there using the –"

"Ah! No no, I went backstage to get Ed's autograph! Got Mal's, too!"

"Really?"

"Yeah! They talked to me for a bit and everything – Ed told me to keep practising."

I tisked and shook my head. "You are such a groupie!"

He mock-pounded the table with his fist. "And I don't care who knows it!" Then he laughed, and I stood up and wandered toward the back. It looked like it was up to me to locate the restrooms. And if Ken needed to use them later, I might even show mercy and tell him where they were.

When I came back, we drank our coffee lazily, relaxing in the candlelight and conversing in a hush, just as all the other tables seemed to be doing. "I see what you meant about this music being in the moment," I said. "You were right in

there, every step."

"When I eat, I eat," Ken said, "and when I sleep, I sleep. And when I listen to music, I listen to music."

I nodded. "Zen Buddhism. You're into that?"

"I've picked up a bit at home – not sure that means I'm 'into'. Harry is a bit more, I guess, if any of us are. Sounds like *you* know something about it, though."

"I've been reading up on it lately. I always found that sort of thing really interesting, even back in school. Not that much to read about it around home, though."

He blinked, then sipped. "You're not still in school now? Like, night classes or anything?"

I shook my head. "Once in a while, though, I will even take the bus into Royal Falls or Belvedere just to visit the campus libraries there. Trying to find books we don't have here."

He smiled. "You *oughta* be in school – you sound like a born scholar. Very bookish."

I blushed. "Is being bookish all right?"

"On you it looks good."

By the time the second set finished and we decided to head back, the rain had let up. The air was filled with that wonderful smell of wet earth, and the crickets sang in the night. Ken made a point of holding the car door for me before starting up and driving us back to Westgate.

The headlights caught the puddles still scattered over the back roads, but there was nothing to be seen off to the sides except the occasional far-off light in a farmhouse, brighter stars in the black. Ken left the radio off to leave space for quiet, sporadic conversation.

And then, when we hit an open stretch of the road, he said, "I wanna stop for a second and show you something." He pulled the car over onto the shoulder and turned off the motor. I looked at him, and it must have been suspiciously, because he held his hands up and said, "Totally harmless! I promise!"

He left the car lights on and got out. "Come on around back," he said. He was opening the hatch by the time I reached him. The red tail lights gave him an air of mystery as he reached for what I could barely make out as a dark rectangular case. I heard snaps open, then saw bright red glints as he lifted out his trumpet.

He fitted the mouthpiece in and said, "I didn't wanna do this while there were other people around, right?" He licked his lips, and fitted his fingers into position on the horn. "Just a little surprise for you. And remember, I'm not warmed up."

And there, in the darkness and wide open space of the nowhere, Ken played for me. And after the first few notes, I recognized the song.

"'Ripple'," I whispered.

It sounded different, the way he played it. A little slower, more flowing. He brought out the melody's sweetness so that it almost ached. And his sound. Oh, if this was how he sounded not warmed up, I couldn't imagine him when he was fully prepared. It took a while for me to notice that I wasn't breathing and needed to. I just stood, not moving, letting his sweet song and beautiful tone fill me.

When he was done, I let a few seconds pass, hoping to preserve the moment. I could feel my eyes trying to well up and blinked it back. "You learned that for me," I finally said.

I could see his crooked little smile in the red light. "I remember you said you like that one, so yeah."

"That was one of the most beautiful things I ever heard," I said. "Thank you."

"You are so welcome," he said. For a moment we just stood and looked at each other. Then he made a little shiver and took the mouthpiece out, replacing the horn back in its case. "That was all, really. I should get you back. But thanks for letting me do that."

"The pleasure was all mine."

He turned his face to grin at me. "I'll bet you five bucks it wasn't."

Ken parked the station wagon in front of Mr. McPhail's iron fence and insisted on walking me to the door. We thanked each other, and said that we had a wonderful evening, and then stood listening to the crickets and looking at each other awkwardly. I figured I knew what he wanted, and I wondered if I did as well. I leaned toward him, because it seemed the thing to do, and he leaned at the same instant – but unexpectedly swerved and placed a tender little kiss on my cheek, then backed away down the front walk.

"Good night, Grace," he said. "I'll see you again."

"Yes. Good night." I watched him go back to the car, feeling a curious mixture of disappointed and impressed.

Eighteen

The further the following week progressed, the more excited I grew about the prospect of Moon's party on Saturday. On the one hand, I was embarrassed about how high-school my flutterings seemed to me; on the other, my feelings were what they were, and it seemed pointless to deny them.

Shortly before noon on Wednesday, the bell on the store's front door jingled as Mr. Kowalczyk went out. Mr. King ambled over to the counter, looking with unmistakable confusion at the two one-pint paint cans standing beside the till. The sides of the cans were covered with colourful drips and runs of dried paint.

Still watching the cans, as if he expected them to come to life, he said, "Did I just see you buy those offa Boris?"

"Yes, for a nickel each."

"But... they're empty, right?"

"Not quite."

Finally he lifted his gaze from the cans to my eyes. "Well, holy mackinaw, girlie, what the almighty is up with that?"

I nudged my glasses up. "I've started telling anyone who buys paint: once they're finished with it, if there's even a dribble left and they were only going to throw it out, bring it to me instead and I'll buy it."

"So yer buyin' people's garbage for a nickel."

"Only if it still has a bit left – I have a friend who can use it."

A light half-dawned for him. "Ohhhhhkay."

"And don't worry, I'm using my own nickels to pay for them."

"Huh-ha! Aww, Grace, I would never worry about sumthin like that with you, eh?"

"And if anyone brings some in while I'm away at lunch, will you please pay them and I'll pay you back?"

"Can do! About that time fer you now, ain' it?" Well, when the boss says I can go for lunch a few minutes early, I go. I got my lunch bag out of the office, borrowed a brown bag from the counter to carry the paint cans, then headed outside.

It was already hot at noon, and the festively coloured crowds on Hamilton Street were dressed for it. I started eating while I sidled between clusters of people til I reached the door of Gentle Earth and went in. Huge, slow, wooden ceiling fans moved silently, getting in practice for the summer months. Over by the corner tables, Harriet stood, unpacking a box of books. Her long floral sundress, topped with a lace shawl, made her look tall and unpretentiously elegant.

I waited til she was done, then held the bag out to her as I came closer. "Brought you a surprise," I said.

She gave me a little smile, took the bag and peeked in. Her mouth opened as her smile grew bigger. "Oh! Paint? Oh, thank you!"

"Just some little dribbles," I said. "For your truck."

"Exactly! I can always use this." She reached out and gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. "You are so sweet! Come on, I'll put these in the truck." She led me through to the back entrance and outside. The humble old wheeled beast squatted in the sun, casting a short shadow. Harriet rested the paint cans on the floor of the passenger's side.

She closed the door, then looked at me, squinting in the light. "I'm pretty sure Kenny likes you."

"You think so?" I admit, I had already suspected he might. I wasn't yet sure if I hoped it or not.

"He stopped at the farm to visit for a while before he went to pick you up on the weekend. He was so amazed that there was any girl who was actually willing to go listen to his jazz with him." At that, I just laughed, and she shook her head. "But it's not just that. I can see his face when he talks about you. And he talks about you far more than he needs to."

I blushed. "Well, I really did have a good time with him that night. He's good company."

Harriet looked at me carefully for a few seconds. "I think he feels like he's the sort of company that not everyone appreciates."

"Oh." I blinked. "If you want, you can tell him that *I* do."

"I might."

"And his talent blows my mind."

She brushed back a strand of her hair and guided me back into the store. "And mine. Yet he wonders if he even has any. It's like he doesn't really grasp what he has going for him. And dismisses what you try to point out. I find that's true of a lot of people."

I let Harriet get back to work and trotted across the street to Moonwalk. Moon was selling a packet of papers to little Freddie Tamm, still as skinny as when I knew him back at Collegiate, but so much hairier now. As Freddie turned away from the counter and went by, he nodded and said "Hey, Slick." So I nodded and said, "Hey, Freddie".

When I reached the counter, Moon nodded and said, "Hey, Slick." Then he gave me his bushy grin. "What's happenin', maaan?"

"Just passing by, Moonie. Thought I'd ask if you want me to bring anything on Saturday, like maybe chips?" I shrugged.

He peered over the tops of his little round specs and his brow crinkled.

"Saturday?"

"Party?"

He blinked a few times, then said, "Uhhhh...."

"Noar said you were throwing a party this Saturday night. He invited me – was he not supposed to?"

Moon looked aside for a second, then spread his hands open. "Oh! Maybe *he's*

throwing one, but I'm going to Toronto Saturday night."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I thought he said –"

"No problem if he wants to, man. I mean, I won't be missing out on any partying either way." He leaned a bit toward me and said, "New club opening up – it oughta be faaaaabulous! Wouldn't miss it, sweetie!"

"Ah, cool. Well then, uh, have a blast. Peace."

"Peace, Slick."

While I ate my banana, I took a cursory look around the street, and then made a quick circuit of The Square, hoping for a word with Noar. But by the time my lunch hour ran out, there was still no sign of him.

When Mr. King heard me come back in, he called, "So! Did yer friend like their garbage? Huh-ha!"

I grinned back. "Yes, she loved it, thank you very much!"

He stepped a bit closer, dusting his hands off on his shirt. "But seriously, though, what use would those be to anyone? Ain't enough left in 'em t' cover anything."

"She's using them for an art project. Needs lots of different colours for it, but only a smidge of each one. So yes, for her those are very useful."

"Art, eh? No wonder I don't get it."

"Sometimes you just have to look at something and think about it a bit differently, I suppose." I nudged the little pile of bags by the till. "Oh, and I took one of these bags here – how much do I owe you for that?"

Mr. King stuck his tongue out at me, just a little, then gave me a huh-ha. As he went back into the office, he shook his head and said, "Lord bless ya, Grace Hemphill, you are one of a kind."

Nineteen

On Saturday afternoon, I spent longer than usual trying to decide what to wear, wanting to dress for the warmth of the evening as well as make an impression. I finally opted for my favourite light peasant blouse with the multi-coloured embroidery, my maxi-skirt with earth-toned jungle print, my little denim purse with the beads, and my backless cork-soled shoes. I even spent a little while in the bathroom painting a small blue flower on my left cheek.

Heather and I walked downtown together after dinner, casually chatting. Her loose plans for the evening involved nothing more than cruising the coffeehouses. As far as she knew, I was attending tonight's party simply because I was a friend of Moon's, and I let her think that. I hadn't said a word to her about Noar. In fact, I hadn't mentioned to anyone just how much that man had gotten under my skin – I was embarrassed by it.

I dropped Heather off at The Third Eye and continued walking on, past the coffeehouse strip and on to the next block of assorted retailers. Squeezed next to the sewing machine store was a narrow doorway leading to an even narrower staircase: the way to Moon's second-floor walk-up.

The dim hallway had a strange, musty smell; I could feel cracks in the linoleum more than see them. The apartment door was painted mailbox red; a small bundle of beads and feathers on a leather thong hung from the brass numeral on it. I could hear music coming from inside, as well as Noar's muffled voice, saying something like "after midnight, later is better". I knocked, and after a few seconds the door was pulled open and back by that slim, bright-blond girl, wearing a loose, flowing lavender tunic, and looking no more pleased to see me than she ever had. She turned back into the apartment without a word, and I followed her inside.

Music came from my left: it took me a moment to recognize it as the Dead's "Dark Star". To my right I could see a kitchen from which low voices came, including Noar's. The blonde went in there, so I did as well.

Noar leaned back on the edge of the counter near the sink, looking subtly dangerous in black T-shirt and jeans, his big hard arms folded. He faced a short, brown-haired, heavy-eyed girl in a loose-woven kaftan, and a soft-looking boy with a tie-dyed T-shirt and bangs halfway down his nose. Noar hadn't noticed me yet – he was saying to the boy, "You can do this. Think of it as your big

break."

And then the boy and girl both raised their hands in front of their chests, palms together, fingers up, and gave Noar a little bow. He simply bowed his head back to them. Then the two of them walked past me out of the kitchen, giving me the barest nod of acknowledgment, and left the apartment.

The blonde girl was about to follow them when Noar said, "Solar." She stopped sharply and turned to face him.

His face was expressionless but his eyes were fixed burning on hers. "Remember what I said."

She put her hands together and bowed, the same as the others had done, and then softly closed the apartment door behind her on her way out.

Finally Noar looked at me, with the same steady warmth and strong aura that he always showed me. "Grace. You made it. Go have a seat in the living room – I'll be right there."

I passed what seemed to be a couple of bedrooms, dimly seen through partly open doors, as I went down the long hallway to the other end of the apartment. It ended in a living room of impressive size, with a scattering of mismatched sofas and rugs, all showing patches of wear, around a salvaged wire spool serving as the coffee table. Candles and incense burned on the table; a homemade hookah sat close by. Two tall windows overlooked the lights of downtown just starting to come on; a faded Robert Crumb poster was taped up between them. Bowls of chips and nuts sat on the deep windowsills, as well as on the table and casually placed elsewhere. A sleek component stereo system rested on a board, which in turn lay across a half-dozen milk crates packed tight with LPs. All as comfortably bohemian as I would've expected from Moon's pad.

I was the only person in the room.

I called back down the hall: "Am I early?"

His reassuring voice came back: "No no, never fear. Sit! Relax!" So I slipped off my shoes and unslung my purse, chose the fattest sofa, and curled up in a corner of it. I was still trying to identify the scent of the incense when Noar came in, carrying two glasses filled with what looked like club soda. He looked at both

glasses for a second before handing me one; then he settled into the other corner of the same sofa and laid his arm along its back.

I sipped my drink carefully: under the intense sweetness I caught the burn of alcohol. "What is this?" I said.

"Vodka and Seven Up. It seemed safe." He smiled and then drank some of his.

"Never had that before," I said. I didn't want to admit it to him, but I had very little direct acquaintance with alcohol of any kind. My observations at home had put me off it, somewhat. A few experiences at parties had taught me something about pacing myself, though, so I wasn't afraid. I sipped it again. "It's nice."

"Let me know if you want something else." I heard clicking in the corner, and then "Dark Star" started playing again: the turntable was set to repeat.

"Is this your favourite song?" I asked him.

"One of, sure." He leaned in to reach for some chips, and I could see his forearm ripple in the low light. "So what happened is: turns out everyone else decided they wanna go see somebody performing up at The Keepsake, I don't even remember who. So they're all off doing that, and then they'll be back here later. Guess I kinda messed that up."

"You didn't want to go, too?"

He shook his head. "I'm good here." He fixed his eye on mine. "Hope you are, too."

I flushed and grinned. "I suppose." And I took a bigger swallow of my drink as he grinned back. We sat quiet for a moment, and then I noticed a book lying carelessly on the floor. "Alan Watts," I said. "I know the name but haven't had much chance to read him yet."

Noar stretched his arms above his head and made a low growl, then said, "Yeah, I've been checking him out a little. That's Solar's book, dunno where she picked it up."

I gave him a puzzled frown. "She lives here?"

"Yeah, all those folks you saw there. Her, Rena, and Damian. All been crashing with me here for a while now. This pad is really roomy. Moon calls them my disciples." And he laughed his easy, beautiful laugh.

I drank some more. "Are they?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Sometimes, the different places I go, I meet people who seem to like to hear what I have to say. Sometimes they even feel like they get something out of hanging around with me for a bit. I can't ever promise them it'll be worth their while, but if that's their bag, then far out."

I looked into my drink. "I... I suppose I understand that, somewhat." I drank some, then looked up at his eyes, feeling quivery. "I mean, sometimes I feel like there are things I could learn from you."

His head made a short bow. "You flatter me." Then he noticed my glass. "You want a refill? You look almost ready for one."

I glanced down, taken aback at how little of my drink was left. "Oh! Um, yes please!"

He got to his feet smoothly and reached for my glass. His fingers brushed mine – I think I tried to make sure they did, and that surprised me. "Same again?"

I nodded vigorously. "Yes! Thank you!" I watched him walk down the hall with his sure, languid gait, and I could feel my pulse in my throat. While I waited for him, I looked around the room, listening to the music, smiling absently, feeling so relaxed and so comfortably warm. I was glad there was no loud, full-on party happening here after all – it was so much easier to hear him and talk with him and focus on him.

When he returned with my glass, I tried to make a point of sipping slower. "So I suppose you've been to a lot of places," I said. "I mean, if you pick up disciples everywhere you go."

He laughed again, and leaned forward to give my shoulder a playful nudge. "I told you it's not like that!" He had some of his drink, then rested it on the table. "Like I said before, it's really just about finding experience – trying to see what illusions are waiting for me out there."

"Is it worth chasing after them if they're only illusions, though?" I heard "Dark Star" starting up again, and was fine listening to it as long as he wanted to.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure if 'worth' comes into it, but the illusions are all we have. So that's what I work with. I just don't make the mistake of thinking of them as actually real or important."

I took my glasses off, set them on the table, and rubbed my eyes. "So you, you don't mistake the map for the territory."

He cocked his head. "What was that?"

" 'The map is not the territory'," I said, hoping it would sound impressive.

He muttered to himself for a second, then broke into a huge, lovely grin. "Man, that's good! I'm stealing that!"

I tried to remember Korzybski's name. "Oh, um, it's not mine –"

"Doesn't matter! It's mine now!" And once again he laughed.

I snuggled back deeper into the corner of the sofa. "So tell me," I said. "Tell me where you went and what you saw. Illusion or not."

And he told me. He told me of leaving Pennsylvania, passing through the Deep South, crossing Texas on a Harley. When he described the mystic cliffs of Sedona, and I had a fantasy of him standing on high, the desert winds in his hair, surveying the endless landscapes, I began to wonder if he was mixing my drinks stronger than I realized. I became aware of an odd feeling that I could only call *looming*, as if some mystery were approaching us. I felt unsettled. I noticed him pausing to watch me, and then he went on telling his stories, but slower and softer.

The first place I saw it was in his beard. I stared at it, and I couldn't follow the words of his story anymore, at least not in that moment. His beard looked refreshed, renewed, as if it were made of thick brushstrokes of brown paint that had just been laid down on canvas, fluid and glossy. The locks of brown seemed to wave, gently, rhythmically, like undersea plants swaying in the currents.

His hair began to do the same, to take on that same light, that same life. I was

captivated, and disturbed, but in a way that felt cleansing somehow. A note from the stereo caught my attention and I looked away at it. The music had become fountains of golden sparks, splashing across the room in beautiful arcs of sound.

I looked back at Noar and the golden sparks filled his eyes. And all at once things happened, in the corners of my eyes and the front of my mind. I became aware, clearly aware, that somehow my eyes were able to see truth as well as light – they could behold the invisible. The texture of the sofa's upholstery fluttered delicately under my fingers, before my eyes. Farther off, the walls flexed, softly, barely, like a pulse. And there was a message in it all, a message for me, and my eyes could sense the truth of it. In a sudden flash I knew. It was not the knowing of learning that something is true: it was the knowing of being aware, of grasping with your innermost self, with no possibility of doubt, the way that you are aware of your own awareness, the way that you know you are That Which Knows. The universe truly was one, it was All. It was vibrations, the dream of the gods. All that we thought we saw and knew, truly was only manifestations of this oneness, this energy. More than that: like brainwaves, these vibrations were conscious. The universe was alive. Not alive or conscious the same way we are, but still truth. I saw auras of inanimate objects because they themselves were actually alive – not like we are, but expressions of the underlying aliveness of the universe, just like everyone and everything. Even the I that was apprehending this cosmic depth was only one small corner of the universe, manifesting Grace-ness. There was no me, there was only a part of the All. Noar's aura was bright, blinding bright, but with truth not with light. It flowed out from him, filled the room, filled everything and was the dream of the gods. I felt his aura filling me and I moaned with a soft trembling ecstasy. My moan was a whisper in my ear and the echo of water in the deepest chasm all at once. Noar reached out to me, brushed my cheek with the backs of his fingers, and with that touch his Noar-ness flooded me. My pulse was an underground rumble that my ears felt more than heard. My own aura reached for his, expanding, stretching, mingling with the vibrations in the glow of truth. His other hand reached for me and his face came closer to mine and all I knew was the oneness as he and I were submerged in the All.

Twenty

I woke naked in a small, rumpled bed, in a shadowy windowless bedroom that smelled of dirty laundry. Light came in through the partly opened door, telling me that the sun was up. My memories of the evening and night were scattered, some vibrant, some vague, some strange. Everything seemed like a dream, but a dull soreness, low and deep in me, told me otherwise. Then I found subtle stains on the sheets, and caught a scent from them, and suddenly my stomach was lined with snakes.

I tried to breathe deep and be calm. The bed creaked as I rolled out of it and felt around on the floor, trying to find my clothes. They were tossed carelessly across the room but after a while I found them all. It took me a few more minutes to remember where I left my glasses and shoes. The apartment was silent and empty: if anyone did come home later on in the night, they had all left again.

I went to the kitchen to get a drink of water before I went out. My hand shook as it held the glass. I'd had sex before, but this was my first time unprotected – I tried to remember why I had decided to, or if I had decided to. A lot of things were slow in coming back to me. But somehow this moment felt even more unreal than the dreamlike memories of last night. I struggled to remember my calendar, and how many days it had been, and tried to convince myself that maybe it would be all right, maybe I didn't need to worry.

I steadied myself with a hand on the wall as I went down the echoing staircase, then blinked in the high morning sun. This stretch of the street was quiet on Sunday morning, but a block farther up I could see people already gathering at the coffeehouse doors. I walked toward them, trying to think of what I wanted to say. What I could say. What I could do. If I could even find him.

I don't think I should call it luck, but whatever it was was with me that morning, because I spotted him seated under that fateful awning again, with the blonde girl Solar close beside him. They were sharing a box of chocolate-covered raisins and a conversation. I didn't notice anyone else on the street – none of the passersby existed for me as I approached the two of them. But I began to catch snatches of what they said. I overheard her saying something like, "...big deal about tits and red hair."

And his voice, low: "It was an experience. Show my journey some respect." And then I was right beside them, and they stopped talking and looked up at me.

Their expressions told me I was irrelevant, meaningless.

Then Noar glanced over at Solar and said, "Split." She started to protest, and louder he said, "Split. Later." He took the raisins from her while she stood up, brushed off the seat of her jeans, and pushed on down the street. Then he looked up at me, watching my eyes, waiting without a further word.

I stood silent as well, for what felt like a day but was only a few seconds. But in that moment, I was shaken by a burst of clarity. I could see Noar's aura as clearly as I ever could, and it was just as wide and strong as before – but now, I felt nothing positive coming from it. And I was forcibly reminded that I really didn't know what these auras were, or what they meant. I never had known. Sometimes they seemed to support my intuitions about people, but they weren't a foolproof barometer of the soul. Sometimes, when I lost touch with my better judgment, I used the auras as an excuse to tell myself what I wanted to hear.

And I also saw that, in this man's beauty and his attentions, I had felt caring, felt regard for me – things that in fact he had never shown me. And I had let it happen. I had allowed myself to be led astray by simple chemistry. What could I say to him now? Did I plan to appeal to his sense of compassion? Of right and wrong? Hadn't he been warning me against that all along?

But I needed to say something, just to satisfy my own sense of agency. And, finally, I said, "You spiked me."

His gaze on me was steady, and there was no trace of his customary soft smile. "I helped you."

I got louder. "You put me in danger." I'd heard stories of people who were slipped acid without knowing. Some of those stories I knew were scaremongering – some I knew were true.

"I helped you see. You were looking for the truth – I gave you a chance to find it. And you were never in any danger. It was only one small dose. And I didn't drop any last night. I was there with you, watching out for you. I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

I felt my eyes widen, and they stung. "*You* happened to me."

He blinked, his face still dead. "So when did you say no?"

My eyes burned worse. "Could I have?"

He shrugged, and began to look bored, and I trembled. The night was a blurry mess. I remembered flashes of it that still glowed with joy, somehow... when he carried me into his room as easily as if I were a kitten, and I felt light and cuddled and sheltered... the hardness of his chest on my soft one... burying my face in his hair and breathing his dark scent. I didn't remember saying no, to anything. But I also remembered him reaching his release in me, more than once, and never even trying to find mine. Somehow I felt uplifted and transfigured, and used and discarded, all at once.

My voice quavered. "You –" It cracked, and I started again. "You should have given me a choice. You should have let me choose."

He sighed, and slowly stood up. Then he looked down on me, his face still dull, and said, "What did I tell you about shoulds?" He shook his head and turned his back on me. "I'm going," he muttered. And he left, eating chocolate raisins.

And I stood, watching him go. Did I want to chase after him? Scream at him? Hit him? Make him do the right thing? What was the right thing, now? What could it be, when he wouldn't even acknowledge that it existed?

I walked home, past clusters of people I didn't see.

I spent Sunday in my room, only coming downstairs briefly to eat. I told Mr. McPhail and Heather that my head was bothering me. I spent my time staring blankly, and crying, and writing in my journal, and praying. The sorts of prayers that my mother disdained more than any other: she had no use for people who only have time for the Lord when they want something, and then forget Him. She said that even heathens were preferable – at least they had integrity. Well, she'd have no use for me, now.

I prayed anyway.

My days at work were filled with the same quiet, nauseating fear and desperation. Mr. King noticed that I was pale and withdrawn; I told him about my headache. He offered to send me home, but I said the work was a welcome

distraction from how I felt. Which was to some extent true. And besides, I couldn't really afford to lose the hours. But I didn't tell him that.

I debated calling the UnWyse help line, or possibly going over to talk to Harriet. I wasn't sure if I was ready to share something like this with her yet, though. Finally I decided that I was being premature. Better to give them a real problem to tackle, rather than just the fear of the possibility of one.

I spent all my evenings in my room, and went to bed early every night. I missed Mr. McPhail, and our books, and the fireplace, and even the CBC. I told them that I might be coming down with something, because I didn't seem to be able to shake this head.

On Wednesday evening, there was a quiet tap on my bedroom door. Once I answered, Mr. McPhail spoke through it, telling me that there was a Ken Takamura here to see me. At the mention of his name, I stiffened. I could feel my hackles raise, purely on the basis of the fact that Ken was a man, and I wanted nothing to do with men. (As if, somehow, Mr. McPhail wasn't also one.) I told him to let Ken know that I wasn't well enough to come down, and couldn't see him.

A few minutes later, there was another knock, and Mr. McPhail said, "I have something for you – may I come in?"

I wiped my eyes and said yes.

He stepped into my room quietly and handed me a smallish rectangle; I could see that the paper wrapped around it was a page of colour funnies from the weekend edition of *The Daily Quotidian*. "That Ken fellow asked me to give you this," Mr. McPhail said.

I took the package and just nodded, and he carefully stepped back out. I felt a powerful impulse to throw the gift through the nearest wall – but I could tell from the way the package felt that it was a softcover book, and despite everything, I could not bring myself to mistreat a book. So I tossed it onto my writing table, and then turned my back on it, lay down on top of my comforter, stared at the wall, and prayed some more.

The first thing I was aware of on Thursday morning was that the boisterous birds

outside my window woke me with their pointlessly cheery singing, earlier than I needed to be up. A moment later, I felt the deep twinge of the most glorious onset of cramps I had ever experienced. Over the next couple of days, while I went about my life, I sat with those cramps, monitoring, hoping. And then the moment came when I fetched supplies out of my drawer, almost tearful with gratitude that I needed to use them, and limp with the sweetest relief.

I breathed deep, said a little prayer of thanks, and then – I confess – I forgot about praying after that. Surely a disappointment to my mother once again.

Twenty-One

There was a sense over the next few days of getting back on the horse, of starting my life up again after putting it on hold for a week. Mr. King seemed to relax when he saw that I was back to my usual pedantic self. He even bought me a coffee and said "welcome back" when he handed it to me. I ate my lunches out on The Square almost every day, and waved to friends passing by, gabbing with those who stopped. And life felt very normal, except that I couldn't stop scanning the park to see if he was nearby. Now, though, I was hoping that he wasn't.

At random moments I would look around me and smile, and sometimes send little gratitude vibrations up to the universe because I got my life back. (Did that count as praying?) I took my turn buying milk and bread, and bought oats at Gentle Earth and waved to Harriet, and dropped in to Moonwalk to see if there was a new issue of *Open the Gate* yet – there wasn't, but I bought a cool, cheap little necklace while I was there. (I didn't want Moon to think of me as The Chick Who Never Buys Anything.) I called the Institute to see if there were any messages or test results from Professor Bloomfield, but there were none.

But through all this, sharp-edged recollections of that night kept coming back to me. Not flashbacks: more like persistent thoughts. Unexpectedly, my most powerful memory of the night was my vision of the universe, my glimpse behind the curtain of reality. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was not just some hallucination fuelled by chemicals, but a genuine revelation of a genuine truth. I felt like I now had a better understanding of those people who called their acid experiences the most powerful, lasting, and significant spiritual events of their lives. Something kept telling me that there was a still deeper message in this for me, and at times I just sat quietly, trying to let that message come.

On a warm Tuesday evening in mid-June, I was standing by the kitchen sink with a glass of water, parked in front of the clattery oscillating fan, when the phone rang. I was right there, so I picked it up. I was sure it would be for Mr. McPhail, but I could save him needing to run to pick it up in time. When I said hello, it felt like I had thrown the person on the other end off their stride.

They said, "Hel– huh, wh– um, is, is this Grace?"

I blinked. "Yes?"

"Oh hi! It's Ken!"

"Oh!" My first reaction was to stiffen – and then, all at once, a voice came to me, so clearly that I could almost actually hear it in my ears. It said *don't blame him*. I took one deep breath, then said, "Ken. Hi."

I heard his soft laugh. "Sorry, you surprised me there – I was expecting somebody else to answer."

"I... can understand that, yes. So, so how are you?"

"Oh, I'm good – but how are *you*? That's why I called."

"Ah. I'm, I'm better, thank you. A lot better."

"*That's* good. Yeah, I, I figured I'd give you a while to, ah, to recuperate? Heh. And then see how you are. So, good, yeah."

My fingers played with the phone cord. "Just some little bug, I suppose. Not really a big deal."

"Awright! Um, did you have a chance to look in that book yet?"

I blushed and my stomach fell a little. "I.... Ken, I am really sorry. But I, I was in such a fog when it came that I forgot it was even here. I haven't even opened it yet!"

"Aw no! Really?" But he was giggling when he said it.

"Yes, I'm sorry. What, what was it for, anyway?"

"Just something I saw that I thought you'd like. I didn't feel like waiting til Christmas, I guess. Oh yeah: surprise! It's a book!"

My smile finally surfaced as I laughed, and a soft wash of warmth filled my chest. "Well, thank you very much. And, and I promise I'll read it this week."

"Not to worry," he said. "But I should go – I can't afford to stay on here too long."

"So you have said before." I smiled wider. "You really just called to see how I was?"

"Yeah, I really did – that's not so bizarre!" He laughed, and I noticed how much I was coming to enjoy that sound. "Anyway, good night, Grace, talk to you later."

"Later – good night." And my smile was still there when I hung up.

When I went up to my room and looked at my writing table, I was fully expecting Ken's gift to be glaring at me in accusation. But no, it just sat on the far corner, oblivious. I swallowed quietly as I tore the comic-strip wrapping off, and inside was an Alan Watts book, one which I hadn't read. Also, thankfully, not the one I saw on the floor that other night, but the memory of it came back unbidden, and I found myself pushing it down. I didn't want any of that to taint what Ken had given me.

It was too late at night for me to be starting a new book, but I did at least take a moment to look inside. On the title page was an inscription in ballpoint:

the sound of one book reading

– K.

That got a little smile out of me. I felt a sense of something close to wonderment, that he could know me so well as to make such an excellent choice for me after so short a time. Or maybe he was psychic. Or very lucky – I seemed to recall him once claiming to be.

There was a quiet stretch at work the following afternoon, so I spent some time in the office going over the store's accounts. It was while I was in there, sitting right by the phone, that it rang. I answered with, "Hello, King's Hardware."

"Hello, can I speak to Grace Hemphill, please?" A woman's voice.

"Um, speaking." I blinked, not quite recognizing who it was.

The voice got quieter. "Oh, Grace, it's Harriet – I'm at the store. Listen: your mother is here. She says she's looking for help. I don't know if she wanted me to tell you, but I thought you should know."

The edges of the world got white and vague. "Can I come over there?"

"If you can, I think that would help."

I hung up without thinking to say goodbye and surprised Mr. King at the till by bursting out of the office. When he saw my face, his eyes and mouth got round.

"I, I have to go," I said. "My mother's in trouble."

He blinked and turned a bit redder. "You, you go on ahead, dear, don' worry. Lemme know if yuz need anything."

I gave him a clipped "thank you" and then the bell swung wildly, clashing against the door as I hurried out.

The crowds on Hamilton Street felt thicker and slower than usual as I shoved my way through to Gentle Earth. Rose stood at the till and the aisles were busy with shoppers, just as if nothing unusual were happening. I looked over at the UnWyse tables, trying to find Harriet – then I saw her standing in the doorway to the back, waving at me.

When I reached her, she escorted me to one of the back rooms. "What's going on?" I said.

Her mouth was pinched and serious. "She just showed up ten minutes ago – it sounds like she's looking for somewhere to go." She stood at the doorway and beckoned me to go in.

The room was small, with odd smells, as if it hadn't been used or aired out for a while. The fluorescent ceiling light buzzed and flickered. There was nothing in the room but an old card table, a few folding chairs, and, sitting on one of those chairs, my mother.

When she saw me, it felt like she was trying to frown, but her face was too numb to actually do it. Her eyes blazed with a powerful jumble of bewilderment, anger,

and fear. There was a large bruise below her left eye, raw scrapes on her right cheek and the right side of her forehead. She sat with her thin gray coat clutched around her, even in this warmth. On the floor beside her chair was an old, beaten overnight bag, brown plaid with plastic piping flaking off. I still remembered that bag from the one time we all went to the beach for a weekend when I was three. After that, I only ever saw it holding sewing supplies. I suspected that those were not what she brought with her now.

Very quietly I said, "What did he do?"

She swallowed, and it took her a moment to speak. "He'll be home from work soon. I couldn't be there then."

We just looked at each other, and my stomach swirled with sick anger and pain. It trembled in me, and for a moment I felt like I was three again. She looked into the distance, not at Harriet, not at me, and said, "Can someone please get me a drink of water?" She sounded like she was talking in her sleep.

"I will," Harriet said, and left us.

I finally thought to step over to another chair and sit. We looked at each other some more. Then she said, "I didn't ask for you. I didn't want you to know."

I blinked and my mouth opened. "Mother, I would have to find out eventually."

"I suppose." She nodded slowly. "I, I don't know what to do. What can I do? Where can I go? How would I know? I mean, good people don't do things like this."

It took a second before I could say, "Mother, there is nothing wrong with looking after yourself."

She gave a half-hearted shrug. Just then, Harriet returned with a glass of water and handed it to my mother. She said, "Bless you, dear," and sipped at it tentatively.

I looked up at Harriet. "So what happens? What can you do?"

She bit her lip. "I, I don't think we were expecting anything like this quite this soon. We don't have anything like an official shelter organized. I think we should

take her to the farm for a while – whenever I thought about something like this, that was my fallback plan. Right now, I think that's all we've got."

I felt a bit irritated but tried not to show it. "So not everything is really ready because you're just getting started, you mean?"

Her brow furrowed. "We've been making referrals so far and doing well with that, but some of our own resources are not completely in place yet."

I glanced over at my mother. She gave no sign of being disturbed to hear that her fate was up in the air at that moment. "The farm sounds to me like it would work for now," I said, "but how long can she stay there?"

Harriet brushed her fingertips across her lip. "That's up to the others – or to Artemis, basically. A few days? A week? Maybe even two? When it's for a good cause, I feel like they'd all be supportive. The board can locate something else in that time. It might well be out of town, though."

"All I care about right now is that she's safe." I looked over again and saw my mother staring into her glass. "When you take her there, can I come with you?"

"Of course. That might help her settle in, to start with. We're going to keep her back here for the next couple of hours while I'm still at work. So meet us here at six and then we'll go."

"All right. She might want something to eat before then, though." I turned toward her. "Do you want anything to eat, mom?"

She looked up from her glass to me, as if she didn't really see anything. Flatly she said, "No."

"Well, you let Harriet know if you get hungry, all right?" She barely nodded back. More quietly, to Harriet, I said, "I can pay you for whatever you need to get for her."

Harriet gently shook her head. "Don't worry about it." Then to my mother, she said, "I'm sorry there's nothing to do back here, Mrs. Hemphill. I don't want you to get bored. Can I get you something to read?"

She looked up at Harriet, her expression serious but somehow more at peace.

"No, thank you, dear. I brought my Bible. I'll be fine."

I almost smiled. Even when packing the barest essentials, my mother would be more likely to forget underwear.

When I returned to the store, Mr. King stood up from the stool at the till and looked at me, his eyebrows creased with worry. "How is she? What's wrong?"

I stepped closer to him. "She's all right. I mean, she's going to be. But I'm pretty sure that she'd feel this is private family business. She would just tell you not to worry about her."

He pursed his lips, scowled gently, and nodded. I got the feeling that he had a pretty fair suspicion about what happened – that he didn't necessarily approve of everything his army buddies might do, but that some things simply weren't his business. Then he fixed his eyes, piercing blue, on mine, and said, "And are *you* okay?"

I paused, and was surprised to realize that the shivering in my chest hadn't actually faded away completely yet. But I nodded and tried to smile.

He stepped closer to me, looking at my feet, and threw a quick arm around my shoulders to give me a split-second shake-hug. Then he let go and turned away back into the office, his ears red.

Twenty-Two

Promptly at five, I left work. I decided that rather than go home, and risk running late for meeting Harriet at six, I would grab a quick dinner downtown. It seemed wise to be sure to eat something, not knowing how long I might be away or if there would be any opportunity to eat later. So I walked the half-block to The Wien and went straight to Anna at the till.

I explained that I was in a hurry and asked if I could order the chicken sandwich from the lunch menu even though they were on the dinner menu now. She gave me an older-sister wink and assured me she could make it happen.

Granted I didn't have much appetite at that moment, but I knew that keeping nourished would be a good idea, so I pushed the sandwich down and followed it with a large coffee, in case I needed to keep going for a while that evening. I finished eating with a few minutes to spare, so I sat with my coffee and casually looked around, not really seeing, wondering about the future... thinking that my father was certainly home by now, trying to anticipate how he might react, feeling a familiar trickle of dread. But I tried to force those thoughts away and focus on the present moment when the time came to meet Harriet and my mother at the store.

I provided a steady hand and shoulder to help boost mother up into the truck, then nudged in beside her. I tried asking her how she was holding out, but she had no more to say about it other than she was fine. When Harriet drove us to Calder's to pick up Doris, I insisted on getting out and riding in the pickup bed the rest of the way, rather than let Doris do it – the drive up to the farm seemed to me like a good opportunity for Harriet to get Doris up to speed.

The wind whipped my hair around my face, and the corrugated metal of the truck bounced my backside hard as we drove up into the countryside. I watched the cloud of dust we kicked up behind us, noticed the pitchfork and rake lying beside me, the grain of their gray handles. Now and then I turned to peek inside the back window of the truck cabin. Once or twice it looked like my mother was actually exchanging a few words with Doris, but the noise of the truck drowned out everything they said.

I put my hands down flat on the truck floor to brace myself as we hit the bumpy dirt trail up to the farmhouse. Then when we pulled to a stop, I clambered out of the back and went around to help my mother down. For a moment she just

stood on the gravel and looked around, clutching her bag. There was a second where I thought I saw a hint of a smile from her.

When we went in the front door, I guided mother to one of the sofas while Harriet went to the kitchen pump to get a glass of water for her. Doris kept going, right on through the back porch, and bellowed out to the field, announcing a Meeting of the Tribe.

All but one of us sat around the kitchen table – Anya stood at the stove, preparing dinner, but making it clear with quiet interjections that she was paying attention. Artemis sat at the head, my mother at the other end, with myself at mother's side. After Harriet explained the situation, Artemis looked at her with a soft frown and said, "I'm not sure that we're ready for this, this soon."

Harriet blinked and blushed. "I appreciate that, and I'm sorry I didn't have any way to notify you ahead of time. We can only work with what we have. I, I just felt like I had to do *something*."

Artemis sighed and rubbed her forehead. Then she looked around the kitchen. "Well, does anyone have any objections to June staying tonight, at least? Knowing the bind that she's in." After a second, the others shook their heads or murmured no.

"Where can she stay, though?" said Eden. "I don't think we have enough time to get one of the empty rooms ready – they've been sitting too long."

Artemis looked at Harriet. "If we consider her Haru's guest, then she stays in Haru's room."

Without turning, Anya said, "Let me take her." Everyone looked at her as she set her large spoon down on a rest and turned around to face us all. Her warm gray eyes blinked quickly. "She can stay in my cabin. It's a bit roomier, and out there she won't be in anyone else's way."

Artemis looked up at her. "I don't need to ask you if you're sure." They exchanged small smiles, and then Anya returned to her work. Artemis looked at my mother. "If you're willing to share quarters with Anya, then you can stay tonight."

Mother looked at her with the wide eyes of a little girl. "I'll do whatever you say. Whatever I have to. I don't have anything else."

Artemis gave her head a little shake. "At tonight's get-together, we can talk about finding another place for you, give the board some ideas –"

"I'd like to stay here," mother said.

Artemis looked puzzled. "*Stay stay?*" When my mother nodded, Artemis said, "You haven't even been here two min–"

Mother lifted her chin a little. "I grew up on a farm. I loved it, and I've missed it. When I found out I was being brought to one, it felt like an answer to prayer."

Artemis sat quiet for a while, staring at her knuckles, then absently rubbing them. Doris and Eden murmured together for a few seconds. Then Artemis looked up at my mother again, her gaze a bit wary. "What do you feel you could contribute?"

Mother returned a steady gaze of her own. "Anything you want. I heard your chickens before – I'm good with chickens, kept them for years –"

Signe slapped her hand on the table. "Right on! I'm sold!" She laughed.

Mother glanced at Signe for an instant and went on. "I can bake –"

"Everyone thinks they can bake," said Artemis, as if she were trying to resist being convinced.

I shocked myself by blurting out, "*She can!*" Everyone looked at me. "Mom is a *fantastic* baker! She makes the most amazing bread in the *world!* She –" And then suddenly my throat closed up so that I couldn't get another word out, and my eyes spilled over and I burst into loud sobs. I could feel my face burn and my eyes widen in panic. I placed one hand over my mouth, one over my chest, and kept crying as if I had lost control, strange strangled wails coming from my throat.

Then I felt an arm around my shoulders, and wavy through the tears I could see Anya leaning down to me, resting her cheek on my hair, and just holding me.

Letting me be. I finally let my eyes shut, feeling dreadfully embarrassed and afraid, and wept in utter confusion. Anya gave a little pull to get me up from my seat, and half-blind I felt her guide me into the front room and sit me in the softest sofa. Then I heard her footsteps returning to the kitchen and voices resuming, sounding far away.

I sat for a moment, the crying spell starting to subside, and suddenly I felt what had just happened there. I was struck with a painful, shameful blast of recognition, of insight. I realized that, all my life, deep down I loved my mother's bread and never once let her know. So many times as a child, my home had been filled with the most heavenly aroma of bread baking, and I never appreciated it then. In my strange, childish way, I was ashamed of it. To me, baking bread meant putting up with the hassle of cutting it, and having it come out too thick and ragged, and never having nice neat thin slices like my friends whose parents bought sliced bread in a bag from the store. Homemade bread made me suspect, or fear, that we were too poor to have Fancy Bread. It reminded me that my mother grew up on a farm, that my late grandparents were farmers – that I was related to farmers, which somehow seemed unbearably uncool, a dirty secret to hide from my friends. And in all those years, despite all the time I spent ruminating on my life and my world, I never took the time to question that view, to question my shame about my mother, to appreciate her skills and talents and strength of character. It was as if it took that moment in that kitchen to make me recognize my mother's value as a human being.

And in this moment I was more ashamed of myself than I had ever been of her.

I felt someone settle in beside me, wiped my eyes, and looked over to see Harriet watching me carefully with a tentative smile. Very quietly she said, "You all right?" I swallowed and nodded. "We figured you needed a minute. But when I heard you quiet down a little, I wanted to check on you."

My reply was a hoarse whisper. "Thank you. I'm sorry, I don't know what happened there."

She reached for my shoulder and gave it a slow, gentle rub. "This is a very stressful time for your family."

"I'm sorry if I freaked anyone out. Especially mom."

Harriet looked down. "Right now she just seems a bit confused. By everything,

really. I also got the feeling that she isn't sure if she's allowed to leave the table before Artemis says so."

We sat for a moment; then I said, "Do you think she'll be all right here?" I got the impression that no one here was enough of a Christian to suit my mother's definition, and I wondered how she might react once that sank in.

"For the time being, at least. We all need to just wait and see." Harriet stood up. "I think I should take you home now, though. It's probably good for her to have some time not having you around here, help her adjust." Her mouth made a rueful little twist as she added, "And I'm afraid we don't really have enough food ready to feed this many extra mouths without planning ahead."

"I already ate – don't worry about me. But *you* should stay now and eat. Isn't it going to be ready in a minute?"

"I don't mind putting mine on the fire for a bit when I get back," she said. I wondered if she'd been ordered to take me away now, on account of the disturbance I caused. I was afraid to ask, though. I just stood up instead. Maybe she really just thought it would be best to get me home now. Maybe it was.

"Give me a second to say goodbye." I stepped over to the kitchen doorway, and thanked them all for taking my mother in. Artemis held up a couple of relaxed fingers in what looked like a blessing. I told mother that I'd be back when I could, to see how she was doing. She said nothing: she only stared and nodded slowly, as if she wasn't sure whether she was dreaming all this. I wondered that a bit myself.

Harriet and I spoke very little in the truck on our way back into town. She left me with my thoughts. I found it curious how much this felt like a major turning point in my life. Considering how seldom I really saw my parents, the place they were staying should make no difference in my day-to-day. And yet that's not how it felt. Another example of life not being neat.

As soon as I opened the door at McPhail Manor, I heard Mr. McPhail calling from the kitchen: "Grace? Is that you?" I called back yes, and saw him come out into the hallway, drying his hands on a dishtowel. He looked puzzled.

"I heard from your father today," he said. "Most peculiar. I just wanted to keep you informed."

For a second there was that little clutch in the pit of my stomach again. "What happened? What did he say?"

He kneaded the towel absently. "First he phoned and asked for you, and then asked me if I knew where your mother was. Of course I told him you weren't here and that I didn't know. Then, about an hour ago, he showed up here saying exactly the same thing again. I got the impression he didn't believe you weren't here, because it was after you were finished work."

"Oh wow. Did... did he give you any trouble?"

Mr. McPhail cocked his head. "He was rather persistent. I had to tell him that I didn't take kindly to being called a liar – especially not in my own home. I was getting ready to threaten to call the police, but he left before that became necessary, thank heavens."

I lowered my face and rubbed my forehead. "Mr. McPhail, I am so sorry about all of that – I really am."

"No need. But I gather that something has happened with your family. Does that have anything to do with why you're later than usual coming home?"

I looked up at him and nodded.

He adjusted his glasses while his gaze met mine. "And is your mother all right?"

I nodded again. "Enough, yes."

"And are you?"

I smiled a little. "Also enough. Thank you."

He started folding up the dishtowel; his hands shook a little. "Then all I need to know is this: if he calls or comes by when you *are* here, do you want to talk to him?"

I had to think for a few seconds. Then I bit my lip. "Yes, I think that would be

best."

"Very well." He gave me a little nod and turned back to the kitchen.

I called after him, "I hope he didn't disturb you – he can be pretty intimidating sometimes."

Mr. McPhail stopped and looked back. "Oh, I wasn't unduly concerned. I'm tougher than I look, you know."

To me, Mr. McPhail looked like my father could snap him like a twig. I gave him a little smile. "You're wiry."

He grinned back and his face came alive with lines. "Yes! Wiry! Let's say that." And I watched him shuffle back into the kitchen. I found myself hoping that he would never have to confront my father again. I wondered if he felt the same.

Twenty-Three

I was used to going weeks at a stretch without thinking about my parents, so I found it a bit strange when, the next morning, my thoughts kept returning to my mother. I knew she was in caring hands, but wondered if she was upset over the adjustments she was being forced to make. Not to mention whatever it was that finally drove her to flee her own home.

At lunchtime I took a quick walk down to Gentle Earth, to ask Harriet how mother seemed that morning, at least. But that Thursday happened to be one of Harriet's days off, so I had no way to reach her and find out. I made my way back more slowly, and it wasn't until I entered King's again that I noticed I hadn't been trying to spot Noar at all. At the same time, I had a feeling that it would have jumped out at me, the sight of someone that tall moving through the crowds. So I told myself that he wasn't around. A part of me wished I knew where he was spending his time these days, so I could avoid it.

After work that day, I was just getting some vegetables out to chop for dinner when the phone rang. When I answered, the voice on the other end said, "Izzat Gracie?"

"Dad?" I recognized his voice even though I had no memory of ever hearing it over the phone before.

"Where's yer mother?"

I figured my best defence was to play dumb. "What, isn't she home?"

"No, dammit!"

"Uh, could she be out shopping maybe?"

"She was gone when I got home from work yesterday! She ain't been here since!"

"Oh wow," I said. "Well, she hasn't called here. Should, should you call the police?"

"Ferget that! I don't need the whole town knowin' my business, knowin' that I can't keep a handle on my wife. Are you sure you ain't hidin' her there with you?"

"No, she's not here, father!" I raised my voice enough to try and stop him from arguing. "And don't you come around here bothering Mr. McPhail about it again or *I will* call the police!"

He muttered something I couldn't make out, but it didn't sound pleasant.

"Look," I said, "I'll ask around, and you let me know if you find out anything. I still think you should call the police about it." Not that I wanted him to, but it might make him suspicious if I just let the idea go that easily.

"I ain't gonna, I said – and I don't want you callin' 'em neither. You let me sort this out. And if you find out anythin', you better tell me." And then he just hung up. I stood there, then, for a couple of breaths, before I felt ready to take the steps back over to the counter to fix my dinner.

On Friday I used my lunch hour once again to try and talk with Harriet to get some news. Today, I was told, although she was working at the store, she didn't happen to be in at that time – leaving me to my own guesses once more.

While I was out, I decided to cross the street and stop into Moonwalk. I wanted to remind myself how much the store was charging for clothing accessories – that way I could suggest to Heather how she might want to price her work once it was ready.

Moon flashed me a peace sign when he spotted me over by the scarves, and called out, "Hey maaaaan!"

"Hey Moooooon!"

He leaned on the counter and cocked his head, sending a wild shock of hair over one eye. "So! You missing Noar yet?"

I startled a little, but hoped he didn't see. "Uh, how do you mean?"

"He split a ways back, him and his disciples."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, baby, I come home from here one day and pow! Them and their stuff just gone, cleared out. Kind of a drag – I'm gonna miss the extra bread coming in."

I blinked. "He had money?"

Moon shrugged. "Now and then. Good thing, too – I couldn't really afford to feed that entouraage of his."

I couldn't imagine Noar holding a job. "How?"

"I don't knowww, I don't aaask – I am Sergeant Schultz, sweetie!"

"You are Mrs. Kravitz, more like." He giggled. My lips tightened, then I said, "So I suppose some people splash into your life and then one day they're just gone without a word." I thought about his years of travel around the continent, and wondered how many other messes he had left in his wake. Was that his life?

"It is what it is, baby," Moon said. "Actually, though, Damian is still at my pad – I think he landed a gig up at the tool and die. So that's cool – he's kinda fun."

"And extra bread?"

"A little, sure. Anyway, I know you hung with Noar some, so I thought you might've noticed the vanishing act."

I looked aside for a second. "I, I noticed that he wasn't around lately – I mean, he's hard to miss, right? But really, I only ever spoke with him a couple of times. I never really knew him."

Not long before closing time, Ken suddenly came through the front door, wearing shades and a warm smile and a short-sleeved shirt in the colourful stripes he seemed to favour. "Amazing Grace!" he called.

I gave him a smile and what I hoped was a knowing nod. "Oh wow, that's one I never heard before." He snickered and blushed a little, and I added, "What

brings you back to town so soon?"

"I was just in the mood to visit my big sister. Thought I'd say hi while I was in the neighbourhood."

"That's all?"

"Well, that's a reason." He made a crooked half-smile. "Although I think I may be wearing out my welcome up at the farm. I must be costing that Artemis a fortune in sage to fumigate the place."

"Oh, is that what that was?"

"Uh-huh. What I hear from Harry is that she does that whenever a man visits. She's clearing the male energy from the house's atmosphere or some riff like that." Ken shrugged. "She swings to her own beat, I guess. Anyway – I got some time to kill before she gets home, and I know that you're finishing up soon. So I thought maybe we could go grab a coffee?"

I couldn't help smiling. "Once I'm done here, sure. But I'm going to be busy for a while, balancing my float."

"Not a problem," he said, edging toward the door. "I'll just go cruise the Westgate strip for a while and meet you back here when you lock up."

Which is just what he did. Once I was finally free for the weekend, we walked toward Hamilton – but when I saw the crowds collected in front of the coffeehouses, I suggested we have our coffees at The Wien instead.

The dinner crowd was already gathering by that point, so we made do with a pair of stools at the counter – at least we were able to find two vacant ones together. I insisted on buying, and also suggested that we split a cinnamon danish. "Just got paid," I reminded him.

He gave me a diffident look. "You know what? I will let you, thank you. I'm still paying off that loan on the St. Lukes Mill, after all."

My mouth dropped open. "Oh gosh, are you –"

Instantly he broke into a toothy grin. "Kidding!" And I suddenly realized that I

liked seeing his grin.

After they brought our order, I lowered my voice and said, "When you go visit the farm later, is it all right if I come with you? But it'd mean I need a ride back after."

Without hesitation he said, "Yeah, of course. You just wanna say hi to the ladies?"

I swallowed and glanced around, then offered him a hushed explanation of how my mother had secretly sought refuge at Sacred Mother. "I want to go up there to find out how she's doing."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, man, it can be a drag with them not having a phone. I don't think her store wants me bugging them with a ton of personal calls, either. I mean, she didn't even know I was coming today til I dropped in on her at work a while ago. Lucky she said it was cool."

"And Ray didn't want to come this time?"

"Ah, by the time I left town, he was still in school."

I raised my coffee an inch in subtle salute. "Almost as if you planned it that way."

He saluted back. "One might be tempted to reach such a conclusion."

After we finished our danish, Ken agreed with me that The Wien's danishes were the best on the planet. I didn't even need to twist his arm. Then I noticed that the wall clock was approaching six. "Should we be going to meet Harriet now?" I asked.

"No, she's going to take the truck home and pick up Doris. The plan is for me to meet her up there around 7:30, give them time to eat first."

I picked up a crumb from our plate and tossed it into my mouth. "This isn't really enough of a meal to tide us over that long, though. How about we go back to my place and I can fix us a sandwich or something?"

He agreed, I picked up the check, and we made our way out into the warm thick air and up the block to where the station wagon was parked. Ever the gentleman, Ken held my door, and I peeked in the back of the car as I got in.

As he got behind the wheel, I said, "You didn't bring your horn."

"Well no, I don't always."

"Too bad." I refrained from pouting, just.

"What? You were hoping I did?"

I blushed. "A little. I'd like to hear you play again, sometime."

He beamed as he started the engine. "Next time I come out, I'll bring it – I promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

He gave me a little wink. "As long as you hold me somehow." I blushed harder as the car pulled out and down the street.

Once I brought Ken into the front parlour at Number 88, he exchanged greetings with Mr. McPhail already in his chair, and then he looked around the room, gaping at the chandelier, while I paid my rent. I made introductions when we met Heather in the kitchen, just finishing up her dishes. Then we had the room to ourselves and I cobbled together a couple of chicken loaf and lettuce sandwiches. I appreciated feeling comfortable enough that I didn't need to put on a spread or prepare anything fancy for this man.

While we ate, Ken continued to look around himself. "This house is really impressive," he said. "How long have you lived here?"

"Eight or nine months, I suppose. I really like it here."

He lowered his voice and leaned in. "And it doesn't get too weird sharing the pad with an old square?"

I sputtered. "He is a lot cooler than he looks at first glance. In his own odd way."

Ken looked back over his shoulder, then back. "I'll trust your word on that, man."

After a few seconds of silent chewing, I said, "I haven't finished your book, but I'm a good way through it. Just so you know. I'm taking my time with it – taking notes, even."

He smiled and his eyes glinted. "What'd I say? Born scholar! I assume that means you like it okay?"

I swallowed. "Very much. It's helping me sort out some things. I'm very impressed that you knew to pick that one up."

"Sometimes I luck out."

Twenty-Four

The sun was lower in the west as we drove up the county road, past wide fields beginning to turn green, some with sprinklings of grazing cattle. Ken and I shared a giggle when we realized that, without discussing it beforehand, we had both been keeping an eye on the woods in hopes of sighting a deer. But we made it to Sacred Mother without spotting any.

It seemed that Harriet heard the car on the driveway, because she was already out and crossing the veranda before we had closed the car doors. She gave Ken a quick hug of greeting, and then one to me, before she led us back to the house.

My first words after hello were, "How's my mother?"

"Fine," Harriet said. "A bit quiet, still, but fine. I think she's relaxing more."

The other women were gathered around the table in the front room, conversing over a smoke, and we all called greetings to each other. It seemed to me that Artemis glowered at Ken, but lightened and gave me a nod when she saw me. I noticed that my mother wasn't in the room, though, and I asked where she was.

"Resting in my cabin," said Anya. "She doesn't usually join us here in the evenings. So far."

"Thank you again for letting her stay there."

Anya's smile was almost beatific. "It's no trouble at all. I enjoy her."

"I'm going to go see her," I said. I realized that I hadn't expressed it as asking permission, and hadn't intended to – yet I found myself pausing and looking at Artemis, and getting a nod from her, before I actually went out.

All I heard was leaves in the breeze and birds as I crossed the clearing out to the cabin. I tapped on the door and called in. "Mother? It's me."

"Grace?" I heard a huffing as she got to her feet, shuffling footsteps, and then the door squeaking open. "This is a surprise. Come in, dear."

The cabin was lit by a single kerosene lamp, with a few random candles not

currently in use. It struck me as spartan, not much different than Harriet's room. This had a small table with a stool, and a sturdy wall shelf with a few books, as well as the wardrobe and night table. The bed was wider than Harriet's, with mother's Bible resting on it. She eased herself back onto the mattress as I sat on the stool. She was wearing a thick robe I didn't recognize, ivory white and gathered up under the sash – my guess was she was borrowing some of Anya's too-long clothing.

"Are you doing all right?" I said. "You look well." And she did: her eyes seemed more alert than I could remember in years, and the tenseness in her mouth was gone.

"Oh, I'm creaking a bit," she said. "Some of this work I've been doing I haven't done in a long time. But it's coming back to me."

"So you do like being on a farm again."

For a second she let herself smile. "It's like being born again, sometimes. The smell of the earth, and those cute little kids – I wish we could've had a pet. And the chickens like me."

I nodded and smiled. "That's good."

She smoothed down her robe. "I do think I'd like to stay here. I hope they let me."

"I guess we'll see."

She blinked a few times. "Have you heard from your father?"

"Yes."

Her mouth tightened. "I suppose he's not too happy."

I shrugged. "When is he?"

She grimaced and looked down at her hands. She sat quiet for a moment, and then, without looking up, she said, "This is your fault, really."

I felt a twinge of nausea and my eyes widened. "What?!"

She looked up at me, trying to set her soft chin defiantly, but her eyes were wet. "You moved out. When you were at home, things weren't as bad. Maybe because there was someone else there to watch him."

"Or someone else there to catch some of it instead."

Her chin quivered. "It got worse after you left."

I felt my mouth move but no words would come – my mind was too much of a jumble. This wasn't the first time I had heard her try to lay the blame for him somewhere else, anywhere but where it belonged, and I never understood why she felt so compelled to protect him that way. It struck me that, even though I had some new insights into my mother's value the other day, the things that drove me away from her were still there, and still real. And there were no magic words which would change that. I found myself sitting there, looking at my mother, a human being, not black and not white, a mess like any of us, but in her own unique way.

I stood up. "I'm going back to join the others. Do you want to come? There'll be singing – you like singing."

She shook her head. "Smoking bothers me. It was bad enough I had to put up with it from your father."

"Suit yourself." I opened the door. "I'm glad you're doing all right, and I'll come by to see you again when I can."

Her eyes shone in the lamplight. "If you want."

I tried to close the door quietly as I left.

As I came back to the house, I heard what sounded like another ancient folk song come to a close, and relaxed talk starting up. Harriet and Ken were saving a space on the sofa between them for me. But the first thing I did was walk over to Anya, lean down, and quietly thank her again. She reached out, took my hand, and gave it a short squeeze. I wanted to ask her about how she had worked out sleeping arrangements with my mother, but felt that I would be

prying.

I sat on the sofa just as Ken exhaled and passed a joint to me. Doris nodded at me and said, "She's all right, eh?" More a confirmation than a question.

I nodded back. "So far, so good. She was saying again that she wants to stay here."

Artemis spoke up. "She's doing a good job so far. As you can see, she's not so keen on the social aspect yet. But we've always had some people here who are more private than others, and that's fine. As long as everyone contributes and does her share. June is good at the work and willing to do it. I'm happy to have her here as long as she likes. So say we all." She took a sip of her tea, then added, "I have a feeling that, if there is a problem, it'll be that she finds she doesn't like it so much after a while. So then she might prefer to be elsewhere."

Taking the joint from me, Harriet said, "Officer Ianuzzi and his partner were up here yesterday, checking things out. He's the police's liaison with UnWyse, so he needs to be kept informed of any placements like this that the collective makes. He was saying that there's a safe house in Royal Falls being organized – they expect it to be ready in a couple of weeks."

"So that could be an option if she changes her mind, you mean," I said.

"As long as we have goats and chickens," Eden said, "then I bet she's gonna stay here." And she laughed.

Signe got up to close the window shutters, and I realized I could hear the crickets outside. Dusk had caught me by surprise. Ken seemed in no hurry to take me home yet, although I wasn't sure how much he was enjoying the evening. I felt like he was hoping to fade into the background and stay off Artemis's radar. When another song started up, he and I both just listened. But I found myself wondering how it might sound if he added his trumpet to it.

The talk grew slower and quieter as darkness came, and I realized that these hard-working women would soon need their rest. I was getting ready to suggest to Ken that we should leave, when there was a sound of a motor approaching. We all looked at each other, then at the front door. I expected the sound of tires on gravel but it never came – and then the motor stopped.

And then, after a few seconds of nothing but crickets, there were heavy footsteps on gravel, and a voice echoing over the fields: "Joo-ooooon?!"

A voice that no one in that room recognized but me.

Twenty-Five

Before I could say a word, the doorknob rattled violently and the door burst open. My father stood in the doorway, blackness behind him, scowling and blinking as he surveyed the front room. He looked sweaty and flushed, dressed in the brown plaid shirt and olive slacks he always wore for his Friday nights out.

Eden got to her feet and growled, "Whadda *you* want, buddy?" My father took a heavy step into the room, then another, clumping on the wood floor. He just stood, his hands held out to the sides in readiness. I watched him carefully. He had no trouble with his balance, and his eyes were clear: he had only had enough to get him to the point where he was taking pleasure in his anger.

"Where's June?" he said to no one in particular. "I know I finally got the right farm this time, I saw the sign." He saw me and his eyes blazed. "You knew. I knew you knew, goddammit. Where is she?"

Ken looked at me. "You know him?" He tried to stand up, and it was only then that I realized I had a grip on his forearm.

My voice was tight and quiet. "It's my father."

Ken turned to look at my father and tried to take a step toward him – I could feel quivering in his arm. "Hey, Mr. Hemphill, nobody wants any trouble here."

I pulled back at his arm. "Kenny, please! Sit down!" Ken resisted me for only a second, then flopped back down into the sofa, his breath a hiss between his teeth.

Father glared at Ken and made a low hur-hur. "Yeah, listen to the little girl, ya hippie fairy! She knows. She knows better'n anyone." Then he turned his glare to Eden. "An' *you* siddown, too! Just gimme what I want and I can go." As Eden slowly sat again, I glanced around, seeing the confusion and consternation and hesitancy in everyone's faces – and only then did I notice that Artemis was gone.

"I know she's here," father went on, "I was told, so I know, and I'm takin' her home. Now do I gotta tear apart every room in this place or what?"

Artemis's voice came like a sharp crack. "Mister!"

We all turned to face the doorway into the kitchen. Artemis stood there, glowering, feet braced apart, holding her bow, an arrow nocked, the string already slightly pulled back. Her mouth was tight but she spoke loud and clear. "You are trespassing. Clear out now."

My father blinked at her, bewildered. I feel like we all did.

She moved one of her feet back to turn her body sidewise, lifted the bow a little higher, pulled the arrow back a little more. "Not kidding," she barked.

Father's mouth moved quietly a few times before he finally got words out. "Are you *nuts*?"

Artemis's mouth pulled into a tight half-smile and she raised the bow into position. "I don't know. Maybe tonight's when we find out." She pulled the string back farther, still not quite into ready position. "What I *do* know is that you are never going to lay another finger on that woman. Get that into your head."

For a timeless time, the two of them stared each other down, not moving, and only the crickets dared to make a sound. And then came the sound of another car onto the driveway. Artemis still didn't let herself move or blink or look away. I heard a car door open, then a voice called, "Is anybody hurt?"

Officer Ianuzzi.

Most of us, even my father, turned to face the doorway as the officer appeared in it. He was out of uniform, in light blue shirt and dark slacks, and still looked like a magazine ad. He had his hands up before him in a calm-down gesture, and his eyes were wide as he quickly scanned the room. "Everyone okay?" he asked. When he saw Artemis, he aimed a hand at her and lowered it, trying to get her to stand down. Then he quickly returned his gaze to my father. "Ian? You all right?"

My father's mouth tightened. "What're you doin' here, Johnny?"

"Just making sure everything's okay." He took a careful step into the room. "I was talking to Wilf and I got worried about you."

Father's shoulders fell. "I just come to bring my wife home, eh?"

The officer took a breath. "I know you're worried about her, Ian. But she's safe here. You can relax. Just relax, okay?"

My father blinked. "I thought you was my friend, Johnny."

"I am. That's why I came out here."

Father shook his head. "You knew she was out here and ya never told me. Wilf told me. He's my best friend."

"Wilf had a few too many – that's why he told you. Tomorrow morning he's going to be sorry he did. You know we have to do our job, right?"

"Your job is gettin' people back where they belong, ain't it, Johnny?"

"Our job is keeping people safe. And June is safe here. Like I said. Now c'mon, I gotta get you home, buddy."

"No."

"This is private property, Ian. You can't stay here without an invite. You'll get in trouble. C'mon, I'll drive you home."

"I can drive myself!"

"You better not. You're parked up against a bush – you're not even on the driveway. You don't want anything to happen to your car, do you?" After a second, father shook his head. "Wilf and I can bring you back up here tomorrow to get it, when you can look after it better. All right?"

Father nodded and let the officer steer him back toward the door. It was as if he had forgotten the rest of us were even there. As they left, I could hear Officer Ianuzzi saying, "Now you can't come back out here on your own. You hear me, Ian? It's trespassing. I'm trying to keep you out of trouble here..."

Artemis finally let herself put the bow and arrow down and collapsed into a chair, just looking at her hands. Anya stood up then, smoothing down her skirt. "I'll go see to June," she said. "I'm sure she must've heard him yelling for her – I'd be surprised if the moose in the Muskokas didn't hear it. I'm just glad she had

enough sense to stay hidden. I should be saying good night now, anyway." We all bid Anya good night, and I wondered if it was sense or fear that had kept mother away in the cabin.

We heard footsteps coming back and Officer Ianuzzi was in the front doorway again. "I put him in a seatbelt," he said. "He won't be able to figure that out for a while."

And then he related the story. My father had gone for his usual Friday night at the Legion with his army buddy Officer Street. As the evening progressed, father finally confessed his woes to the officer, who took pity. It seems that Officer Street had a less thorough understanding of the importance of confidentiality in this matter, and was more concerned with setting things right for his friend. And so he let father know where mother could be found, and father set off. However, the instructions were either given or received unclearly, so that my father spent an hour barging in on various farms in the area before happening on the right one. When Officer Ianuzzi, off duty, stopped in to see his partner later, he learned what had happened and came out. The fact that he was able to make the trip directly allowed him to arrive only a few minutes after my father finally found us. "This liaison position is going to be a learning experience for Wilf, I'm afraid," he said. Artemis shook her head slowly.

The officer stayed just a little longer, to ensure that everyone was all right. He asked about going back to check on my mother, but we assured him that Anya had already seen to that. Then he said he'd be back the next day to retrieve father's car, and shortly after we heard the sounds of his car driving away.

I leaned in close to Ken's ear. "We should go," I murmured. We stood up, made our goodbyes, the room feeling more muted than usual, and Harriet escorted us out to the station wagon.

Ken said, "I'll bet you five bucks she's gone to get a bundle of sage to fumigate the place."

Harriet said, "Two bundles, more likely, after all that."

For the first few minutes, we drove through the black countryside in silence. Then I finally said, "I thought you were brave, to want to stand up to him."

He tried to chuckle. "Well, thank you for not letting me be any braver." A car far ahead of us turned off onto a line road. "Was it always like that when you were growing up?"

I looked out at the stars. "Not every minute. But you could never tell when it was coming. And over time it was a little more often. I got out as soon as I could – I never understood why she didn't."

"She was probably staying for you."

"But after I left?"

"Hm. That I don't know."

I could see lines of lights on the horizon as home drew closer. "Maybe she doesn't even know."

When he switched the car off in front of McPhail Manor, I turned to him and spent a second just watching the way the streetlights sculpted his face in the darkness. Then I said, "You should come in for a drink or something before you have to drive all the way back home. Give you a chance to calm down a bit more."

"Yeah. To be honest, I could use that."

"Nothing like a late-night coffee to settle your nerves," I said, and he laughed.

The front parlour was dark and quiet: past Mr. McPhail's bedtime. We crept to the kitchen and spoke low while I turned on the fan, put the kettle on, and got out the mugs and a few cookies. Heather was likely out, but I'd find out for sure once I got upstairs.

Over our snack, I said, "You and Harriet must be very close, when I think of how often you come out all this way to visit."

Ken sipped gingerly. "I guess you could say that."

"Are you close to your parents, too?"

He picked up a cookie and looked at it for a second. "It's not something I think about that often, but I guess so." He looked at me. "No offence, but I'd have to say we're closer than you seem to be to yours."

"None taken," I said. "I accept that things are what they are."

He bit his cookie and gave me a sagacious nod. "That's very zen."

"I try." And I bit my cookie back at him.

I looked over at the kitchen clock, and we both fell into a tired silence for a while. I thought and thought, longer and harder than Ken could have suspected. Then I pushed my glasses up and said, "I bet you are pretty tired, after all that went on this evening."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. That gig was intense – glad that doesn't happen every day."

I tapped a fingernail on the side of my mug. "Maybe you shouldn't be making such a long trip on the highway at night. If you're that tired."

He turned his head aside, then looked back at me from the corner of his eyes. "Well, what should I do, then?"

I gazed into my coffee. "You could crash here."

His eyebrows lifted a trifle. "I could?"

I nodded. "Might be safer."

"Might be."

"Probably would be."

He turned his head, as if trying to see through the kitchen wall into the parlour and the sofa. "Well then, as long as nobody minds –"

"Just one catch, though," I said, watching his eyes, waiting for them to return to

mine.

They returned to mine. "Catch?"

I licked my lip without meaning to. "You'd have to stay in my room." His eyes widened. "House rules," I said.

For long seconds he watched my eyes, then said, "I believe in house rules."

"Mr. McPhail doesn't have that many of them," I said, "but the ones there are, are important."

Ken gave me one slow, decisive nod. "Then I intend to show them the utmost respect."

Once we got upstairs, we discovered that Heather was indeed still out. And I am pleased to report that Kenny was every bit as much of a gentleman as I wanted him to be. And I'm more pleased to report that, with a little coaxing, he stopped being more of a gentleman than I wanted him to be.

Twenty-Six

An old Zen master listened as one of his young pupils shared his exciting revelation that the world was only a dream. The master then cracked the young monk over the head with his walking stick and said, "There: was that a dream, then?"

When I read that story, pieces fell into place for me with a click, I felt the underlying message of my vision, and my life turned a corner.

If we did indeed view the universe from the illusion of watching through a train window, this told me that we were stuck inside the train. Matter and space and time might be illusions, but they were inescapable, and therefore real enough to matter. We were obliged to interact with them on their own terms. And if the cosmos was essentially nothing but vibrations, a dream, with no inherent meaning of its own, this left us free to decide, or choose, or create our own meaning, each of us for our own lives.

I had been looking to others for meaning. Noar telling me that there was none, that the endless search for what he called experience was all there was. Artemis basically telling me that men could not be trusted, that they were all ultimately men with guns, that we were black and white. Even though Officer Ianuzzi showed us that a man with a metaphorical gun could be an honest force for good. And I knew there would be those who would tell me to reject my vision of the universe which I was given, because of the circumstances in which I received it, because nothing of value could come from such a terrible night. Everything about that night must be bad – everything about it must be rejected.

In the end, I couldn't be told or shown what life meant: it was up to me to know what I could, and come to my own decisions – the wisest, best decisions I could make – about what my life should be, and then take actions to build that life. In a real sense, the answer to "What is the meaning of life?" was "Who are you?"

I felt that reaching out to Ken that night was a first step, in recognizing what was important to me, what was my truth, and then taking action to guide my life in that direction. But in the days that followed, almost without realizing, I found myself doing more.

I took a resumé up to the Institute. I wasn't sure what I might be able to do there, and they told me they had no job openings currently, but were willing to keep me on file. I wasn't dissatisfied with my job at King's – far from it. But I remembered that sense I got from my visit to the lab, that these were people dedicated to learning the truth. And I wanted to be a part of that somehow, if I could. An important part of crafting a meaningful life for myself was having a foundation of truth – not just what I wished was the truth – on which to build that meaning. So to begin, I did what was in my power to do, and then left it to the universe to see how that would unfold.

I also wrote to the P.O. Box which was the only contact information given for our underground paper *Open the Gate*, offering to write for them. When I thought about the musings and ideas that filled my journal, it occurred to me that I could do more with them, and that I wanted to. That contact paid off almost immediately, when the editor wrote back and asked for sample articles – he seemed excited by the prospect of adding a woman's perspective to his fledgling paper. I recall that time spent writing my first essays for print as one of the most exciting of my life. (And I made a point of expressing my gratitude to Mr. McPhail for allowing me the use of his typewriter.)

After I submitted those articles, the editor followed up with a phone call, offering me a position on staff – volunteer, of course – as a regular columnist, free to write about whatever moved me. Seeing no down side, I accepted. And my byline appeared in the next issue, on a column he had christened "Existential Lib" – which at least wasn't profane.

A Monday morning came, later in the summer, when I walked into King's to begin my shift and spotted Mr. King busy rearranging a display at the back. When I reached him, I could see that the store now sported a shelf dedicated to a half-dozen cans of paint, all clearly used. A small, hand-written, cardboard sign was thumbtacked to the edge of the shelf: "RECYCLED PAINT 25¢".

"This is new," I said.

"Started workin' on it on Saturday," Mr. King said. He looked back over his shoulder at me. "Betcha can't guess where I got the idea from, eh? Huh-ha!"

I thought I recognized some of the cans. "Did Mr. Sano bring these back?"

"Yuh-hup. Gave 'im a nickel each, like you said. But then I got thinkin', maybe this is more than you want, or some o' the colours ain't so good for art maybe. I mean, you can have as many as you want, eh, but maybe some other folks might want 'em for sumthin else. So why not do this? Easy little profit."

I looked at the cans and nodded slowly. "Why not? And I think you're right, I probably don't need all of those colours. Yes, this is a great idea."

Mr. King grinned his tight little grin. "Wendy told me the word for this is recyclin', so I put that on the sign. She says this is good for the ecology and all that, eh? I even had one o' those beardy guys come in here that day, callin' me a friend of the earth! Huh-ha!"

I looked up at him and smiled. "Most people don't realize just how hip you really are, Mr. King."

He laughed again and gave my shoulder a rough nudge. Then his smile fell a little, he cocked his head, and his voice got lower. "Oh hey, have you heard from your mother lately? Gotta tell ya, I kinda miss seein' her at church sometimes."

"She's... she's good. It's hard for her to make it in to church now, being out of town and all." Mr. King knew by now not to pry too far into the details of mother's whereabouts. I had visited the farm to see my mother a few times. Ken took me up once, and Harriet once or twice. And she did seem to be doing well.

The work had taken a little weight off of her, and she had a tan for the first time I could ever remember. She smiled more often and more easily than she used to at home. The others had prepared a room in the main house for her so she had her privacy now, but it still seemed to me that Anya was the one she was closest to and most relaxed with. She joined in the evening gatherings now, not smoking but not casting her glare of disapproval at those who did. She was learning some of their songs, and had also managed to introduce "Amazing Grace" into the tribe's repertoire. In all honesty, her singing voice was atrocious, nails on chalkboard – but hey, Eden's voice wasn't all that terrific, either. That was never what the evenings were all about.

Mother also told me that she missed *Medical Center*. And, somehow, she always managed to find a way to say something to make me feel like I would never be good enough. And I would remember why I didn't visit more often. I was happy

for her, things had changed for the better, but they still weren't neat.

Mr. King said, "Well, I trust that the Lord is takin' care of her the way she needs to be. An' that's what I try ta tell yer father, too."

"How is he taking it?" I said. I hadn't seen or heard from him since that night. For his birthday I had dropped a card through his mail slot – feeling too wary to risk more – and gotten no response.

Mr. King rubbed his chin. "He says he's okay. Me 'n' Wilf still see 'im Friday nights, an' sometimes some other nights, I guess. I dunno, he looks ta me like he ain't eatin' as good as he used to, but what do I know. He don't wanna talk about it much." He shook his head and gave a half-smile. "I mean, I love 'im like a brother, him *and* Wilf, after all we been through, but.... well, I'd never say this ta *him*, but I think he brings a lotta his troubles on himself. Always did."

"That sounds like him."

"Anyway, he says he's fine just like he is. Prolly just bein' stubborn, eh? But I bet me 'n' Wilf are too – we're a stubborn generation, I guess!"

I shook my head, but couldn't help smiling. "Ah, it's not right to lump people all together like that, Mr. King – you lose sight of too many important details."

He looked down at me, blinking, and gave a wheezy little sigh. "Sometimes I wish I could think as much as you do, girlie. But most o' th' time, I'm glad I don't! Huh-ha!"

There was an evening in late August when I stepped out of the store at closing time into the thick, hot air, and found Harriet standing near the doorway in a sea-green sundress and straw hat, waiting for me. She gave me a little wave but didn't quite manage her usual smile. She asked if I had time for a coffee and we decided on The Third Eye again. As we sat with our drinks, she seemed not so much worried as preoccupied.

"So what's happening?" I said.

She turned her cup around on the table before looking up at me. "I... I just felt

like I should tell you. Because you're one of the people I feel closest to out here – believe it or not." She looked me in the eye and tried to smile. But then her gaze fell and she said, "But I'm moving away. Soon."

I could feel my mouth fall open. "Why?"

She bit her lip. "I've been thinking about it for a while. And now an opportunity's come up."

"Well, I...." My hand waved aimlessly. "I, I don't know what to say."

"I feel like... like I'm not fitting in as well at Sacred Mother anymore. I, I don't feel as welcome."

I blinked. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I get the impression that Artemis is unhappy about the men that I bring into the place."

"What? She's mad that your family visits you? That's not right!"

Harriet shook her head. "She's never said as much, but... it's just little things, little looks. They've been wearing on me. I didn't want to admit it, at first."

"Are you sure about this?"

"We have family out in B.C. -- they've offered me a job in their office. It's a good chance for me. And I can't help feeling that it means something, that this came up now, when things are feeling this way at the farm."

I rubbed my finger over my cup and blinked for a moment. "Well, I will miss you. And the ladies at the farm will miss you. And oh gosh your family! I mean, you're so close to them."

She wiped her eye. "Yes, that part won't be so easy. I know. I still think it's the right thing."

"That's maybe most important of all," I said. "But even if you have family out west, it won't be your parents and brothers."

She blinked and nodded, but then gave an uneven smile. "Grace, I'll tell you something you might not realize. I *am* close to my brothers, and they always did visit me pretty often once I came out here." She paused to sip at her coffee. "But Kenny started visiting me a lot more often after he met you."

I blushed and sat speechless.

"I've been trying to tell him for a while now that he doesn't need to use me as an excuse to come out here." She sighed. "I suppose now he can't use that as an excuse, anymore."

We sat silent a moment, then I said, "Well, while I have the chance, I want to let you know that I am honoured and very happy to know you."

She finally relaxed and smiled. "And I you. You are a special woman – I've always felt that. And of course we will stay in touch."

"Of course," I said, already knowing at my tender age that that might or might not actually happen.

"And Sacred Mother will be fine without me. Thanks to June, they'll still have six women on hand even after I'm gone, and that's plenty. Eden says that June is worth three of me." Harriet tried to smile that off, but I frowned and shook my head. She went on: "Your mother is doing very well there. I'm sure you're proud of her."

"I am – even more than I expected."

"And I'm sure someone else will find a way to make up for me. People seem to have a knack for finding Sacred Mother in unexpected ways. I mean, look at June: who could have foreseen her showing up there the way she did?"

"Certainly not me," I said. And, oddly enough, I found myself thinking what a shame it was, that Harriet wouldn't finish painting her truck.

And change kept coming, before that summer ended. In early September, one day the phone rang in the store's office. Because I had given that number as my daytime contact. The Institute of Paranormal Studies was offering me a job.

It seemed that Joyce, the office clerk who had inadvertently connected me with Professor Bloomfield, was leaving to get married. Someone going through the resumés and applications on file, vaguely recognized my name from being in the books for that lab visit. Which led to a chance conversation with one of the professor's assistants, who gave me a glowing recommendation and advised them to dispense with interviews and hire me sight unseen. Why they agreed to heed his advice, I didn't know and truthfully didn't care. But the fact that I had a background in bookkeeping was apparently another mark in my favour when they made their decision. Another job landed thanks to my C & T: my mother was sure to be inordinately pleased.

Of course I accepted the offer. It meant a substantial raise for me, but more besides. This was a position with a future: there was room to move up at the Institute. It meant a chance to possibly be involved in a mission that I felt had value. The extra income would allow me to do something like take night classes and earn my degree. If I decided that a degree was something I wanted, rather than something I was getting because of a vague sense that I "should". And this also meant that I could look at getting my own apartment. Not that I was eager to get out of McPhail Manor – not at all. But it felt like it would soon be time for me to have a larger place: one where, possibly, perhaps, I might have enough room to share it with a funny, black-haired, barely-taller-than-me, indescribably sweet trumpet player some day.

But one part of the process I was not looking forward to: giving my notice to Mr. King. I told him during the first quiet moment we had after I got off the phone. For a while, all he did was blink, his face gone empty. The silence felt long and uncomfortable.

Then he said, "Well....", followed by another silence nearly as long. Then he put on a bluff smile and said, "This is good news for me, girlie! I never told ya this, but you were never quite the right fit for this job. Who I really need workin' that till is some cute little widda woman who talks back just enough – and now I can find me one! Huh-ha!"

I smiled and watched him rub his cheek. "Glad I can help you out with that," I said.

He reached out and gently patted my shoulder. "No, seriously, though, Grace. This is sumthin I would never tell ya, because I love havin' you here –"

I burst in, feeling my eyes start to burn: "And I love being here."

He nodded and went on. "But you always deserved better than here. An' I always knew it. This, this is good for you. That Institute place can offer you a chance ta move up, an' I never could. I, I always knew this day was gonna come sometime, eh? I didn't wanna admit it, but deep down I was prayin' fer this for ya."

I felt my lips press together and quietly said, "Thank you."

He put his hand on my shoulder again, but this time let it rest there, lightly. "I'm proud of ya, girlie – I mean, I always was, but ya know. It's good ta see ya doin' what ya can ta make a future for yourself."

I took in a breath. "That's what it's all about, I think."