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## Isabel Undone

Lynne Berggren  
*University of South Florida*

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Isabel Undone

by

Lynne Berggren

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Major Professor: Rita Ciresi, M.A.  
Rosalie Baum, Ph.D.  
John Fleming, M.A.

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Isabel Undone

Lynne Berggren

ABSTRACT

Isabel, a forty-year-old woman, measured her successes and failures against her perfect sister Natalie's. But after Natalie is murdered by her husband, Isabel's identity unravels as she picks up the pieces of her sister's life and becomes the mother substitute for Natalie's daughter.

While Isabel tries to understand how Natalie's life spiraled out of control, she develops feelings for a horse trainer named Sam. As Isabel discovers that her sister was having an affair, Isabel and Sam begin a relationship of their own. However, conflicts arise when clues implicate Sam as Natalie's lover. Isabel retreats, and realizes she will have to stop seeing Sam unless she can prove that he wasn't involved with Natalie. She is about to call it quits when Sam reveals the truth about his past. Isabel is then pretty sure he wasn't involved with Natalie, but she's still afraid to trust. To complicate matters, Isabel's having a difficult time with Jenna, her adolescent niece, and doubts she can ever be a good mother.

While Isabel pursues Sam, Jenna falls for a boy named Bradley, and begs Isabel to move back to Croton; but Isabel doesn't know if she can break free of her sister's shadow there. Finally, Isabel agrees to relocate to Croton if she can solve Natalie's murder. Isabel discovers her sister wasn't the perfect daughter their father always thought she was, which enables her to pursue a relationship with Sam.

## Introduction

When I was in elementary school in Florida, I read about a book a day since I was frequently home sick with bouts of pneumonia, the usual books for young girls like *Little Women*, the *Pippi Longstocking* series, and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farms*. My reading inspired me to write fragments of coming-of-age novels featuring young girls. While I was lying in bed, my father, a philosopher, would attempt to cheer me up by discussing being and nothingness, asking me if the world would still exist even if I were no longer in it and whether or not my dolls could really talk. His conversations disturbed me and I tried to solve the problems he presented me with by writing poems about snow, the passage of time, and death. For years, I was afraid to drive by funeral homes or cemeteries and would bury my face in the vinyl upholstery of the backseat of the car whenever we passed by such places, hiding from death as if it were contagious.

In middle and high school, I stopped writing, except for mandatory essays, because my inner critic told me my writing was too melodramatic and immature. I realized there was so much I didn't know about the world and love. Instead of reflecting on life, I started living it. I still read a great deal, with my choice of reading material influenced by my English mother. I devoured works by the Bronte sisters, Dickens, and Jane Austen and read Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Being an American myself, I also read Poe, Hawthorne, Dreiser, Twain, and Hemingway.

I began college as an English major, studying Shakespeare and 18<sup>th</sup>-century

poetry, followed by courses focusing on the works of T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Faulkner, Joyce, and Thomas Pynchon, among others. In college, I also took a tutorial on the complete works of Dostoevsky. That semester, the classics professor found me wandering the streets at six in the morning, in a trance like Raskolnikov's in *Crime and Punishment*. When he spoke to me, I had no idea how I had gotten where I was or what I was doing there. My Russian literature professor told me I had better gain a little aesthetic distance before I read *The Idiot*, since one of the characters dies in it.

At New College, there were no fiction writing courses, only poetry workshops. I took a few of those and wrote mainly in the style of other poets, as we were told to do. On my own I devoured the works of such writers as Neruda, Heinrich Boll, Andre Gide, Kafka, Colette, Rainer Maria Rilke, Tolstoy, Eudora Welty, Elizabeth Bishop, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

My reading made me realize how complex the human psyche is and inspired me to take psychology courses, even to major in psychology for a year. But then I took my first art history course and fell in love with the visual arts. I switched majors and ended up writing my thesis on *Michelangelo's Last Judgment*. In order to better understand the nature of sin and the possibility of redemption, I studied the Bible and works by Thomas Aquinas and other theologians with a religion professor. After college, I went on and earned a Master's Degree in art history, interning at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and then working for a blue chip art dealer in New York. My exposure to the fine arts has added a rich dimension to my life and work, because it has taught me to look at the world differently.

After I left school, I continued reading voraciously and never owned a television set until I got married. I read all of Proust and books by Margaret Atwood, Louis Erdrich, Anne Tyler, Jean Rhys, Jane Smiley, Penelope Fitzgerald, Jamaica Kincaid, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and others. I read and fell in love with Boyle's novel World's End when I was living in the Hudson Valley. What most impressed me was the way he integrated the region's history into his story-telling. I also admired his appreciation for the beauty and idiosyncratic aspects of this part of the country, and his writing influenced my own feelings about the landscape I frequently hiked in or rode my bicycle through. During this time, I also developed an interest in creative non-fiction and read works by Rick Bragg, James McBride, Tillie Olsen, and Annie Dillard.

All of my studies and life experiences have influenced my writing, not just the English classes I took. As Margaret Atwood said, the best teachers are the great dead ones, and, I would argue, all the other accomplished writers who have piqued my interest and drawn me in to their worlds. Still, I cannot discount the value of my studies in psychology, because they helped me delve into the motivations of my characters. Art history heightened my descriptive abilities, and I frequently find myself thinking of artworks when attempting to describe a character. My varied background provided me with a great deal of material. But I wasn't ready to start writing yet. I needed the impetus to break through my fear of writing and put pen to paper again.

That impetus came when my father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer six years ago. The day after my father's surgery, he was in so much pain and so delirious that he begged me to lie across him to make the pain go away. I was petrified the weight of my body would hurt him since the incision ran the course of his torso, following his rib

line in a perfect arc. He kept begging me and eventually I gingerly placed my chest on top of his, trying to absorb some of his pain myself. The only way I could process that experience was by writing about it. I wrote a story that was a cross between a nonfiction and fiction piece. It had many problems--first and foremost, I did not maintain enough aesthetic distance from my material. Nevertheless, I did capture the emotions associated with facing a parent's mortality and with watching someone who was previously healthy and strong become wracked with suffering. The experience also made me take a hard look at myself and reevaluate what I wanted to do in my life that I might never have the opportunity to do if I didn't start soon. I admitted to myself that I had always wanted to write, not to achieve recognition but because there were thoughts, feelings, and conflicts for which I had to find a creative and non-destructive outlet, because I had no other way of dealing with them.

I began, like many novice writers I suppose, by writing mostly from my own personal experiences. My first story did contain a fictionalized dream and some creative departures from reality, but most of it was tied to actual events. I soon realized that I wanted feedback on my writing, to find out how I could improve it. This prompted me to join the Hudson Valley Writer's Association, where I enrolled in non-fiction courses taught by Rebecca McClanahan. The people I met in the classes inspired me to keep going. Critiquing each other's work was an eye-opening experience, and I have been a member of a writing group ever since. Rebecca lent me a folder that contained every draft of a piece she had written about her father. It was incredible to see how her ideas changed and how important distance and revision are to the finished product. It also made me realize that writing is hard work, and I had to be prepared to put my ego aside in

order to dissect myself and my work. Rebecca often used to tell us not to be afraid to cut our little darlings, but to save them because we might find a place for them in another piece down the road. To this day, I have folders full of strange bits of writing that I frequently dig out, when something I am writing brings them to mind.

I took several more courses there, including one called Border Crossings, which blended fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. That course was instrumental in freeing me from some of the confines I had placed upon myself with respect to writing and reality. It also helped me think of what I wanted to convey in terms of images and helped me pay more attention to the sounds of language. It was in this course that I wrote the poem “Obsidian,” which was published in the 2003 edition of Sunscripts.

The need to face what I wanted from life also caused me to examine my relationship with my then husband, and I admitted to myself that we hadn’t been happy with each other in years. A classical pianist by profession, he’d been totally absorbed in the New York music world, while I’d been at our home, more than an hour away, taking care of the children and volunteering in the community. Our lives weren’t related anymore. For a long time, we had stayed together solely for the sake of the children’s happiness, but then we realized our staying married wasn’t making them happy. When we decided to divorce, I moved to Florida and enrolled in the Master’s Program in Creative Writing at USF. Running, cycling, and writing saved me during this painful but liberating transition in my life. I was able to tap into some intense emotions and create something positive out of them. Instead of forgetting about my past and pretending I had never been married, I tried to reflect on what had happened and understand how to move forward through my work.

The first story I wrote at USF was called “Broken Boughs.” It was a character-driven story about two women, one based on my deceased grandmother and the other on my recently-deceased aunt. The entire story took place in one day in my grandmother’s house. The first draft contained imagined conversations, but most of what I wrote was directly related to the general dynamics of their relationship that I had witnessed firsthand. The story was pretty boring at first, until John Fleming pointed out that I needed to develop the conflict more and put in a pivotal scene. I was forced to use my imagination to create a climax that I knew had never happened but would be in keeping with what I had known about these women--something that would reflect their relationship in concrete instead of abstract terms. I learned that often fiction can tell more about the truth than facts.

My next story was also based on a real event--the break-up of my marriage. However, I manifested my struggle within the context of a character taking a 63-mile bike ride for the first time. I had learned that letting actions speak was a better way of getting my thoughts and conflicting emotions across than hitting the reader over the head by spelling everything out. That story worked much better, I think, but much of it was description and interior thoughts. I still found it difficult to write natural dialogue. The story helped me come to terms with the emotional strains of divorce, and I learned how much more powerful stories are when emotions are expressed in an understated and indirect fashion through a secondary, more symbolic conflict. After writing my novel and learning more about dialogue, I would like to go back and revise this piece.

The second semester, I took a course called The Craft of Fiction. Before I took this course, I hadn’t realized that there were so many important aspects of the craft of

writing that could be taught. Learning the basic dos and don'ts about writing, like managing point of view and time shifts, or when to use summary and direct dialogue, made my writing much more compelling. John Fleming pointed out my tendency to overwrite, and ever since I have tried to stop myself from doing this in the very first draft. I also learned that once I understood the rules that usually govern "good" writing, it would be acceptable to break them intentionally if it resulted in the desired effect. Writing is always a difficult process. There are no magic fixes. But at least I understand more clearly what the challenges are now.

After my first year, I switched to the Master's Program in English/Creative Writing, because I wanted the opportunity to work on a novel with guidance. I was also interested in taking more literature courses and analyzing the works of successful authors from a writer's and a critical perspective. I don't believe that I had ever read literature more closely before. The courses I took included Contemporary Fiction, American Literature from 1860-1910, Yeats and Hopkins, and Shakespeare's Comedies, all of which were excellent choices for me and my writing. In the Contemporary Fiction course, I fell in love with the works of Graham Greene, a major inspiration for my novel, and novels by Michael Ondaatje. The American Literature course exposed me to many great writers, some of whom were more obscure, including Harold Frederic Church. I found *The Damnation of Theron Ware* absolutely fascinating in the way it critically examined religious precepts and juxtaposed several artistic periods and media in one culminating scene. Studying Yeats was magical and made me focus on the power of imagery and language in conveying a deeper level of meaning. The Shakespeare class I took in college focused primarily on the tragedies and historical plays. Studying the

comedies has been truly rewarding since they showcase Shakespeare's genius in understanding the human psyche and gender relations. No wonder Freud used so many of Shakespeare's characters as models for his theories. Shakespeare's understanding of the walls people build and the difficulties they have in communicating with each other influenced me in writing my novel, though the connection to Shakespeare isn't explicitly drawn until the later chapters that are not included here.

In the writing workshop I took with Rita Ciresi, I wrote a story entitled "Pieces." Once again, a real experience was the springboard for my writing. In college, someone had lied and told me my boyfriend had gotten her pregnant. I believed this girl and felt sorry for her. After I broke up with my boyfriend, she got him back. They are still married. Years later, I found out from one of their friends that everything she had told me had been a lie. The implications of this situation and how it could be extended to encompass choices we make in life and missed opportunities seemed like the perfect subject for a story. The relationship between truth, lies, and fiction also interested me. In this story, I changed the setting and the characters, but the basic conflict remained the same. By altering significant aspects of the situation, I felt free to use my creativity more. I was also able to impose a structure on the story that was missing in real life and which highlighted the inherent symbolism. I did face one great challenge in writing this story, and that was managing the jump in time from when the protagonists were in college to when they were beginning to have problems in their marriages.

The last workshop I took was creative nonfiction. It was in this class that I wrote "Paths" and "Breaking up to Country Music," two short pieces that were published in the 2004 edition of *Sunscripts*. Both pieces are about my divorce. "Paths" is three connected

prose poems. The first is a poem I'd written several years earlier, about an incident in my childhood, which I reformatted and shortened to fit the context of a journey. The other two prose poems are similar in tone, being brief sketches of concrete moments that were signposts to the past and future. It is one of my favorite pieces since it encompasses much of my life in a handful of lines, a real accomplishment for someone with an overwriting problem. "Breaking up to Country Music" contains the title of a country music song in every line. In writing this piece, I managed to capture the dissolution of a marriage with humor and distance, while revealing the treasure house of malapropisms and word plays in the uniquely American genre of country music.

Taking the workshops was the most beneficial aspect of the program for me, because I could see what worked and what didn't in other people's writing and my own. Although I still have to go back and drastically revise my work after the first draft, I don't make all the mistakes I was guilty of before I studied writing. Now my revisions are more structural and content oriented, instead of focusing on fixing point of view and other technical issues. I have also learned more about the process of revision and am more capable of revising my own work. Often I revise in the process of writing the very first draft. However, I still find feedback from other people invaluable, and I always benefit from reading their work. I plan to continue sharing my work in writing groups after I leave school.

My goal in entering the master's program was to complete the first draft of an entire novel and finish a thesis quality draft of the first half. That way I knew the revisions I made in the future would be more on track. I knew that writing a novel would be an entirely different process from writing a story, and I suspected I would never have

the opportunity to receive so much critical feedback again. Writing a novel appealed to me because I thought I could get more deeply into my characters' minds and motivations. I was pretty sure that only by finishing an entire first draft would I understand the different kinds of structural problems that arise in writing a novel, including focus, chapter organization, and pacing.

Although I still need to make major revisions to the second half, which is not included here, I believe the experience of writing an entire novel helped me get to know my characters better and learn to write more natural dialogue. When I went back to revise the first half, I was able to alter much of the dialogue because I had discovered the unique voices of my characters.

The primary problem I encountered in writing the novel *Isabel Undone* was keeping the tone focused and the genre straight. There were so many things I wanted to accomplish that sometimes the novel got away from me. I also had to revise the beginning several times to make sure that the opening chapter flowed into the rest. The first chapter had to set the mood and provide enough information so that the reader would understand what was to follow, without getting bogged down in details or becoming lost in generalities. I also had to make my characters sympathetic and interesting enough to engage the reader and find a hook to draw the reader in. The hook I chose was a murder. The problem I discovered is that it is difficult to maintain the suspense when you start with something so intense.

*Isabel Undone* is a psychological examination of the aftermath of a murder, how the living sister's life changed from the guilt she experienced, how she had to discover things about the past and learn to forgive herself and become whole enough to be a good

mother to her niece and enter into a loving relationship with a man. In this sense it is also a mystery. My goal in writing the novel was to present and offer possible solutions to a psychological mystery while staying true to the tenets of literary fiction, rather than writing a book that would be categorized as a pure mystery. A major influence on my work was Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. I admired how Greene adapted the detective story and used it to get at the heart of the psychological mystery his novel attempts to solve. However, mixing genres presented many difficulties, especially in terms of maintaining a consistent balance between mystery and the deeper psychological dimension that is inherent in literary fiction.

A major problem I had to deal with, which I feel I succeeded with in the first half but still need to work on more in the second half, was making the protagonist seem sympathetic despite her character flaws. I wanted the reader to root for her to become empowered through her realization that she is valuable in spite of her imperfections. Her major flaws are jealousy, self-doubt, and an inability to enter a loving relationship with anyone because of the bad feelings she has always harbored as a result of feeling second best to her sister in her father's eyes and her own. At the same time, I did not want her to seem like a pathetic creature who was incapable of change. I had to show that she had the courage to face her flaws and try to change them. The second half of the novel still needs more work in this respect.

The biggest difficulty I had in writing the novel centered on Isabel's search for clues about what happened to her sister's life. I had to keep reminding myself to give primacy to how what Isabel found out related to her quest to understand herself, instead of focusing on the clues themselves. Isabel did not set out to learn about herself. It is

something that just happens to her in the process of going through her sister's belongings. Yet, even though self-discovery was not her intention, it is the theme of the novel. Making her realizations seem natural was difficult, as was keeping the balance between action and self-discovery. After I read the first draft, I realized certain sections were too plot-driven because I was so focused on my protagonist's finding out what she needed to discover. This took away from the psychological struggle she was going through. To deepen the intrigue of her conflict, I tried to incorporate interior monologs to let the reader in on her thoughts. But then I realized I was having Isabel wonder about things too much and that I was hitting the reader over the head with her realizations. To make the novel seem more seamless, I made her have conversations with people during which she could reveal some of her thoughts. Sometimes I found that her meetings with people seemed staged. When that happened, I would have to change accidental meetings into planned ones. When I work on future revisions of my novel, especially the second half, my major focus will be on integrating the discovery of clues and other aspects of the mystery with the psychological struggle Isabel is undergoing, while attempting to remove authorial intervention and making events unfold in a necessary but seemingly natural way. This way my fictional world and my characters will appear more believable, and the reader's expectations will be fulfilled.

The experience of writing a novel has been both challenging and rewarding. I plan to continue to work on the second half and hopefully solve my genre problems, because I care deeply about the characters I have created and feel they have enough depth to warrant further revisions. The way my characters developed taught me that only by looking back and examining feelings we'd all like to keep hidden and parts of ourselves

we'd rather pretend don't exist, can I or more characters ever fully evolve.

After I finish this novel to the point where I am satisfied enough with it to let it go, I plan to revise the stories I wrote in school, continue writing poetry and nonfiction, and write a new story or two. When I have accomplished all that, I hope to be ready to start a new novel using all the valuable lessons I've learned these past few years.

## Isabel Undone

### Chapter One

Isabel returned to the scene of the crime during the summer of the rains. No one she spoke with in Croton could recall a period of such prolonged dampness. People on the streets rarely smiled; even the children wore long faces. Bizarre growths of mold in red and orange bled from tree trunks and lichen-covered rocks. The formations looked as if they belonged on coral reefs, instead of suburban lawns. The water had altered everything, but Isabel knew that it hadn't washed away the sins that had been committed here.

Jogging along the streets in the predawn light, she watched the swollen gutters overflow their banks and felt the same despair she had felt the night she found out her sister Natalie had been murdered. The weight of all that had happened pressed down on her, as another gust of rain drenched her bare arms and legs.

At the time of her sister's death, Isabel had been traveling in Europe. When her parents called the Aster House in London to tell her, she had already missed the last flight of the day. That night she didn't sleep. Instead, she put on her raincoat and wandered the damp and blustery streets, while the rain beat down, stinging her face and hands. She didn't mind the rain or the discomfort. Instead, she viewed it as punishment she deserved for having failed to recognize the cycle of abuse and save her sister. She wished she'd forced Natalie to talk about Richard when she had the chance. But Natalie's refusal to speak about her divorce the time Isabel tried to talk to her when they were at their parents' house one weekend had stirred up Isabel's old feelings of insecurity, and she pretended to believe her sister when she said things were fine. Consumed with guilt,

Isabel walked aimlessly until she was exhausted, then sat on a bench and watched the falling rain form a torrent of water that rushed along the curb before being sucked down a drain a hundred yards away. Natalie was gone, but Isabel's body still took up space on the bench; though the physical evidence was irrefutable, Isabel thought there must be some mistake. She kept calling Natalie's name; and when her sister didn't answer, she told herself it was because they were in different countries, not worlds. Two years later, she still didn't understand why her sister was dead and she was alive.

According to the police, the case was solved. Richard Worthington, age 44, broke into 40-year-old Natalie Dupree's home on Mount Airy Road in Croton, New York. Shortly after 3 am on June 15, 2000, he repeatedly shot his ex-wife at point-blank range while she was sleeping. Their twelve-year-old daughter, Jenna, was away at camp in Pennsylvania and did not witness the murder. Neighbors heard the shots and called the police, who found Richard on the floor next to the bed with his knees curled into his chest. He appeared to be in a trance and was unable to answer any questions the police asked him. Later, his lawyer argued the condition he was found in proved he was temporarily insane and not accountable for his actions, but the jury hadn't believed him and pronounced him guilty. Now, past and present became inseparable in her mind. After a few blocks, the rain subsided and fingers of fog snaked around the trees, filling the spaces between branches. The summer Natalie died, there had been a clear delineation between the manicured gardens, illuminated by sunshine, and the unkempt greenery abutting developed property. One minute Natalie was alive; then she was dead. Now the border between the two worlds was blurred, and they threatened to infiltrate one another. The haze seemed to overtake Isabel's thoughts, as she tried to fathom how a murder

could have taken place in such a bucolic setting. Had Richard behaved differently towards Natalie when no one was watching? Why had they really gotten divorced?

Natalie had said they had just grown apart, as couples often do. But to Isabel, that didn't seem like sufficient grounds for murder, unless Richard was completely crazy. Isabel thought he was more sinister than insane, mostly because of his eyes. When he looked at people, he blinked ominously, his hooded eyelids moving slowly like a turtle's. His dark blue irises looked almost black. Instead of reflecting light from within or without, Richard's eyes absorbed and extinguished any radiance. If they were the mirror to his soul, then he didn't have one.

Isabel had been sure of this during the trial, and she still believed it now. For weeks, she sat in the courtroom waiting and watching for some sign of remorse or suffering; and for weeks, Richard didn't say a word or show any emotion. He didn't break down and sob, or cringe, or even smile smugly. Instead, he sat staring straight ahead, never once lowering his eyes. Though he looked in the judge's direction, he didn't seem to focus on what was being said. Perhaps he truly felt nothing. She wondered if it was possible for a person's heart to die and go on beating.

Natalie had always gone for the ones you couldn't quite figure out. The ones who seemed perfect but really weren't. They would promise her the moon and the stars one moment, and then pull the rug out from under her by sinking into brooding funks and blaming her for their creative blocks, financial blunders, or even the state of their sanity. The latter was one of the arguments Richard's lawyer had used in his client's defense. He claimed that Natalie drove Richard to murder her, that she undermined her husband's self-confidence to the point of fracturing his identity into separate, non-related versions

of himself. In other words, the Richard who murdered her was completely disassociated from the Richard who knew the difference between right and wrong. This Richard never bothered to consider the ramifications of his actions, because he didn't understand how he could be held responsible for anything when he knew there was nothing free about his will. But the jury hadn't bought this argument and neither had Isabel.

Every time Natalie was dumped, she told Isabel that it was her own fault, that if she could just expect less and be more self-sufficient, then her boyfriends wouldn't have felt like such failures and left her. Usually, Isabel would raise her voice and launch into a tirade about how you shouldn't let men determine your worth, but those discussions always ended with Natalie saying she didn't want to be alone like Isabel, who had never been with anyone long enough to be in what people typically referred to as a "relationship."

Isabel turned onto Route 129, beyond the village proper, and headed towards Mount Airy Road. She wanted to see her sister's house from the street before she took Jenna there. The house had been closed up for two years, ever since that fateful night; neither she nor her parents, who lived in Virginia, had stepped foot in it since. Once the investigations were over, they had hired an interior decorator to replace the carpet and repaint the walls in Natalie's bedroom. After the verdict was handed down, they put the house on the market. The realtor said there was no visible evidence of the crime, but Isabel was afraid she would be able to detect traces of blood. Natalie's house was tainted. It had witnessed too much, and though it couldn't speak to tell its tales, the house knew things that Isabel wasn't sure she wanted to learn.

She was only there now, in the summer of 2002, because the house was finally

being sold. A family from the City was buying it, after reading in the *Times* that ghosts boost property values. It must have been easy for them to imagine spirits inhabiting the closed-up house. The buyers said they felt good vibrations whenever they walked in the house, although Isabel didn't understand how any positive energy could remain in a place where someone had been brutally murdered.

She turned left on Mount Airy and continued down the road a quarter of a mile, until she came to the house, an eclectic modern structure built of wood, brick, and glass, adjacent to an older stone home that resembled a castle, turrets and all. That's how it was on Mount Airy--centuries were collapsed in a *mélange* of styles. In front of her sister's home, Isabel's heart rate began to spike and the high numbers on her Pulsar monitor wristband signaled she was entering a danger zone. She had forgotten how beautiful it was, even from the outside. Suddenly, she longed to go in and see the marble halls, Paradisio granite counters, high ceilings, bay windows, French doors, and cedar-paneled sunroom that overlooked the craggy woods in the back, but she'd left the key at the bed and breakfast where they were staying. Then she started thinking about what happened there and she wasn't sure she wanted to return to the scene of the crime with Jenna after breakfast.

Jenna's therapist had assured her that children are more resilient than people give them credit for being. She'd told Isabel that visiting the house was essential for Jenna's growth and development. Otherwise, there was a good chance that the course of her niece's adult life would be determined by fear and the need to prevent a recurrence of what happened to her mother. In other words, Jenna needed closure. Still, Isabel was certain there were no happy endings to this horrible tragedy. Sucking in air, she

wondered if she should have checked the psychologist's credentials more thoroughly. How could something that felt so wrong be the right thing to do?

Isabel and Jenna lived in Florida now, and their lives were beginning to settle down. They'd come a long way since fate threw them together under one roof, but Isabel couldn't help but fear how Jenna was going to react when she saw her old house again. At the time she agreed to be named Jenna's guardian in Richard and Natalie's will, Isabel hadn't believed anything would ever happen to her sister. Natalie had always had better luck than Isabel: winning prizes at raffles, getting the best teachers, finding a husband and building her dream house with him. Now her sister was dead, Richard was being held for murder, and Isabel was filling in as Jenna's mother, though her niece had never spent a single night in her apartment before she brought her back from camp that summer. Natalie said Richard objected to overnight family visits. Apparently he was difficult that way. Even after the divorce, Natalie and Jenna kept to themselves. Isabel thought it was just the way they were, when she wasn't being paranoid and thinking that they didn't like her. She never suspected her sister might have been frightened for her life, that she might still have been scared even after Richard moved out.

Imagining going inside and seeing the bed where Natalie was murdered made her stomach churn, a visceral reminder of how she felt when she broke the news of Natalie's death to Jenna. Two days after the murder, Isabel drove to Pennsylvania and collected her niece. She tried not to shake while she sat in the camp office, waiting for the counselors to get Jenna from her tennis lesson. A psychologist Isabel had consulted thought it best to let Jenna continue with her normal routine, until a family member could tell her in person, so she wouldn't panic alone.

“What are you doing here?” Jenna asked. “Is something wrong?”

Isabel wished it was visiting day and she was just there to take her for ice cream, as she remembered her own parents doing when she was in camp.

Mrs. Robinson, the camp director, told Isabel and Jenna to go sit in her office, and Jenna’s suntan seemed to fade. Isabel placed her hand on her niece’s shoulder and began guiding her across the foyer, amazed she could still walk herself. After Isabel and Jenna were seated on an old florid couch, Mrs. Robinson shut the door.

Isabel didn’t know what to say, even though she’d practiced saying the words *your mother’s dead* a million times in the car on her way there.

“Did Dad have a car accident?” Jenna whispered. “I always tell him not to drive so fast.”

“No, honey.”

“Then why are you here? Did Grandpa have a heart attack, like before?”

Isabel shook her head. “I’m so sorry. It’s your mom. She’s dead, sweetheart.” Isabel knew she should hug Jenna, but she had this weird feeling that her niece would crumble into pieces if she did. Instead, she rested her hand lightly on Jenna’s knee, unable to stop her own tears from falling.

Jenna didn’t cry, but she stopped speaking when Isabel told her Richard was in custody. All signs of emotion left her face, which became mask-like, making it even more difficult for Isabel to know what to do. They sat on the sofa for what seemed like an eternity, while Jenna’s counselors packed up her belongings. Every time she tried but couldn’t think of something to say, Isabel found herself coughing to cover up her inability to speak. Soon her throat felt scratchy from coughing so much. Thirty minutes

later, Mrs. Robinson came back and asked Isabel for her keys, so they could load the car.

Isabel opened the passenger door, and Jenna climbed in. She looked down once, to fasten her seatbelt, then stared straight ahead, never looking back at the cabins or the lake. They drove in silence through the Poconos, until they crossed the Pennsylvania State line and entered New York.

“I thought we’d go to my apartment, if that’s okay with you,” Isabel said gently. “Do you need anything from the house?” she added, hoping that Jenna wouldn’t, since she suspected investigators were still swarming the place and she didn’t want to see the yellow tape.

Jenna seemed to come alive and began shaking her head no. Then her entire body convulsed, almost spastically. Isabel pulled off the road, to give her niece the hug she should have given her hours before. Feeling Jenna’s body tremble uncontrollably against her chest triggered a weird memory of a sign she’d seen on a gumball machine in London. Right by the slot where you were supposed to put the money, it said, “Give ’em a Whirl, Help Spastics.” Holding Jenna, Isabel became furious with herself for remembering something so inappropriate. It also made her realize that, in her case, mothering was not an instinctive form of behavior. And this frightened her. Being single and thirty-eight, with no prospects of marriage in sight, Isabel was pretty sure she’d be raising Jenna alone.

As she jogged along the road and reflected on the past two years, Isabel wondered how she rated as a guardian. She thought back to the time Jenna snuck out of the house and the police found her and some of her friends, at two in the morning, eating candy and drinking soda in a house that was under construction. Although she’d grounded her niece

for a few days, Jenna soon convinced her aunt she'd been punished enough. Isabel suspected that proper parents were more authoritative. Instead of setting down laws and strictly enforcing them, she always tried to get Jenna to see the logic of her rules and want to agree with them. She didn't understand that adolescents are supposed to be contrary and irrational. But there had been proud moments too, like when Jenna won the Tropicana Speech Contest for her essay entitled "Man Fails His Best Friend--The Proliferation of Unwanted Pets in America."

Isabel looked up and noticed the sun was beginning to rise and filter through the trees, offering a modicum of hope for better weather. As she took a deep breath and filled her lungs with the fresh morning air, it dawned on Isabel that she and her niece were finally beginning to work things out. Ever since Natalie died, Isabel had tried to anticipate Jenna's fears and pretend they were her own. That way, she hoped to comfort Jenna without forcing her niece to give up the pretense of bravery that was holding her together. When Jenna appeared in her doorway at night those first few months, Isabel said she was having trouble sleeping and asked Jenna to lie down with her so she wouldn't feel so alone. Jenna would nod and shuffle over, as if it hadn't been what she'd wanted all along but she was willing to oblige.

But would their relationship change after Jenna entered the house she'd grown up in? Would holding things that belonged to her mother trigger memories too private to share and cause her niece to succumb to a mental breakdown? Looking at her watch, she realized Jenna would be waking up soon. She picked up her pace, but only for a few minutes. It occurred to her that later she might order reality in terms of before and after opening that door, just as she already compartmentalized her life into before and after

Natalie's death.

Isabel was let in through the kitchen entrance of the bed and breakfast by the proprietors, two spinsters wearing checked smocks, wire-rimmed glasses, and Birkenstocks, who brought her fluffy towels, still warm from the dryer. They motioned for her to sit at the table and put a steaming mug of coffee and a slice of freshly baked blueberry buckle in front of her. Isabel was thankful she'd chosen this place to stay, instead of with any of Natalie's friends. If these women pitied her, they didn't show it. Instead, without speaking much, they went about the business of making all their guests feel comfortable, regardless of why they were there.

The women, Susan and Erica, reminded Isabel of Mary, the domestic at the estate her parents had rented in a village outside of Oxford when she and Natalie were young girls. Their English mother had taken them to live abroad and learn the rules of etiquette the year their father took a leave of absence to write a book on the political situation in Czechoslovakia. Natalie was quicker at picking up English phrases, like "cheers" for "goodbye" or "brilliant" for "cool," and she excelled at needlepoint. When Natalie and Helen Russell, the most popular girl in the village, told Isabel to leave them alone on the playground at school one day, she became racked with jealousy and pumped her legs so hard while she was swinging that she lost control and fell, breaking her elbow. Isabel's father scolded her for her careless behavior, but nothing was said about Natalie's being a turncoat. After Isabel fled to her room, Mary brought her a scone and cup of weak tea. For the rest of her stay in England, Isabel followed Mary around as she did her chores and talked to her about how homesick she was for America. Watching Susan and Erica

set food on the table and clear dishes soothed Isabel's nerves, just as seeing Mary put things in order had done so many years before.

While Isabel was drinking a second cup of coffee, Jenna came downstairs in search of breakfast. Her black hair, cropped short about her head, was going in several directions at once, no doubt the result of a fitful night's sleep. She had managed to pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt with the words "Dead Cheerleaders" emblazoned across the front. It was the name of the Hip Hop garage band she'd been singing in for over a year. They weren't good enough to get any gigs yet, but Jenna kept saying they would be soon. Somehow, Isabel preferred to think of them locked in the garage, with fans blowing, than up on a stage gyrating in front of live fans.

When they moved to Florida, Isabel had hoped that Jenna would gain a few more years of innocence, but it hadn't exactly worked out that way. In Westchester, Jenna was friends with the best students in her class, but after her mother's death she lost interest in her studies. Her current friends wore beads in their hair, frayed cutoffs, and midriff shirts. Isabel suspected that, for most of these children, tattoos and navel rings were only a matter of time. When Jenna brought progress reports home, Isabel tried talking to her niece about her grades; but she knew she didn't sound too convincing after her second or third glass of Chardonnay. As soon as Isabel finished lecturing her, Jenna would stomp off to her new bedroom, which they'd left painted an artificially sunny yellow, and shut herself into her walk-in closet's private chaos of strewn slip-dresses, faded and torn jeans, platform sandals, and work boots. What she did in there, Isabel wasn't sure, and truthfully, she was glad to be kept in the dark.

Isabel wondered if she would be able to get Jenna to change clothes before they

went over to the house, in case they ran into any of Natalie's neighbors. The black t-shirt with gothic graphics and bright red fake blood that her niece was wearing didn't exactly suggest childhood innocence, but she decided it wasn't worth arguing over. Susan put another mug of coffee on the table and Jenna sat down next to her aunt.

"Try the blueberry buckle. It tastes as good as it smells," Isabel said, hoping her niece wouldn't be rude and turn it down.

"Sure." Jenna said. "I'd love some."

When Susan gave her a piece, Natalie's smile spread across Jenna's face. Her niece's expression reminded Isabel of how her sister looked each summer, when she came close to touching the wild horses they ran after on the beaches of Delaware. Natalie never bragged about being faster, but it was always clear that Isabel was second best, especially in their father's eyes. Ever since they were small, he'd asked Isabel why she couldn't be more like her sister. Why did she sickle her foot in the annual ballet performances, instead of pointing her toes perfectly as Natalie did? why did she chew her food so loudly, instead of eating like a lady? why did she speak out of turn and answer only the questions she was interested in at school, which weren't very many? For the first time, Isabel saw she was better off being herself. Having no husband was better than having one who would murder you. Isabel was doing her best to raise Jenna, but her father still refused to praise her. He barely spoke to her on the telephone anymore, and she couldn't help wondering if he wished that she'd been murdered instead. And, no matter how much she tried to love Jenna, she knew she would never replace Natalie in her niece's mind. Sometimes, she fantasized about getting married and giving birth to a child of her own, one who would want only her for a mother.

After Jenna finished eating, the face of a sullen teenager reappeared. Isabel wished Natalie would send her a sign, to let her know if she approved of how Jenna was being raised, but it had been ages since she'd felt her sister's spirit trying to contact her. Would Natalie be happy that Isabel was trying to be supportive of Jenna and love her; or would she want Isabel to set the bar higher, so that Jenna would grow up to be perfect in everyone's eyes? Isabel had no idea if Natalie would be happy or dissatisfied with her performance as a mother. When Isabel got custody of Jenna, she felt like an understudy who'd been unexpectedly thrown into a starring role. Only Isabel suspected understudies usually had more training.

"Are you ready to go up to the house?" she asked her niece. Isabel had never found that procrastinating helped in dealing with difficult situations.

Jenna didn't answer.

"Do you want me to go by myself first and see if there is anything that might surprise you?" Isabel tried again.

"Did you say something?" Jenna asked.

"I was just asking if you want to go inside now," Isabel said. "Do you want to tell me what you were thinking about?"

"I was thinking about the wake," Jenna said. "Do you remember when I put the rose on top of Mom's casket?"

"How could I forget? The whole room suddenly became pitch black. It was probably only for a minute, but it seemed like forever, didn't it?"

This was the first time either of them had mentioned what went on that day. Until now, they had pretended nothing strange had happened. Isabel looked at her hands and

remembered how they shook, like branches in a wind storm, when the light bulbs in the funeral home's brass wall sconces flickered and died. As her eyes adjusted, her mind seemed to drift from her body; it was as if she was observing herself from some point on the ceiling, or from the rim of the casket. Sounds blended together in an incomprehensible low roar. In the midst of all the confusion, the lights came back on and Isabel heard someone say there must have been an electrical storm. Yet when she walked outside an hour later, she noticed there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

“What about the clock at Grandma and Grandpa's house?” Jenna continued. “Do you think that was Mom too?”

When Isabel took Jenna to her parent's house in Virginia a few days after the funeral, the grandfather clock in the living room stopped at 3:02 am - what could easily have been the precise time of Natalie's death. “I don't know,” Isabel said. “It might have been a coincidence.”

The eyes in Natalie's portrait seemed to follow her around the room when she was sitting alone in their father's study that weekend, but she hadn't said anything then and decided not to mention it now. The eyes in portraits of dead people watching the living was so common in ghost stories that it almost seemed cheesy.

“Do you think she's in the house waiting?” Jenna asked.

“It's been a long time,” Isabel said. “Her soul must be at rest by now. But going into the house will bring back lots of memories. Are you sure you're ready for this?”

“I'm as ready as I'll ever be,” Jenna said quietly. “Let's go.”

They walked out into the misty morning, with measured steps, and headed for the car. Neither of them said another word until they got to the house.

## Chapter Two

Isabel stood in the foyer and looked up at the skylight in the living room's cathedral ceiling. The light coming through cast a slight glow on the parquet floor below, despite the overcast conditions, and Isabel couldn't help wondering if this was the path Natalie's soul followed as it left the house and this world behind, though she still had her doubts as to the existence of spirits. Then she looked over at Jenna and noticed her niece was standing with her eyes closed. Isabel let her be. Part of her wished time would stop, and they could stay right there and never have to step foot in the bedroom. But she knew she needed to see the room again to be free of her nightmares, even if it made them worse for a time. Her dreams had become increasingly graphic, and she was having a harder and harder time waking herself up to make them stop. The holes in her sister's forehead had grown deeper and wider, the blood gushed out more forcibly now, and she often awoke with the vision of her sister's blank eyes and gaping mouth burned into her retina. Actually, Isabel had no idea how her sister looked after she died, since her father had gone to the morgue alone and refused to discuss what he had seen. In his usual succinct manner, he'd said, "There's no point in upsetting ourselves any more. We've all been through enough. End of story."

As soon as she had stepped inside the house, Isabel realized her sister's death hadn't been final at all, and that the end was repeating itself daily. So many things she saw and did conjured up Natalie's memory; each time she replayed an episode between Natalie and Richard in her mind, she realized there were clues that she'd failed to notice

before. She touched the Vietnamese leather hall table that was Richard and Natalie's last purchase before the divorce. She imagined Natalie standing there, proudly pointing out its features: the fluted legs, the carved garlands, the multi-layered petals set in elegant ovals, and the embossed patterns on the delicately mottled leather top. When Natalie had shown her new purchase to Isabel, Richard had said, "Your sister's a bleeding liberal. I told her we should get a nice Thomas Moore hall table, that she should be proud to own furniture manufactured in the good old USA, but no, she thinks she's too good to buy American."

At the time, Isabel hadn't understood why Richard had agreed to buy the table Natalie chose, if he hated it so much. Now she thought that he might have been afraid that the salesperson would think he was being cheap, since the Vietnamese piece was probably more expensive. How ironic that he might have cared whether someone thought he was stingy or not, when human life was clearly worth nothing to him. Isabel wanted to kick herself for not seeing how distorted Richard's values were and warning Natalie when she still had had the chance.

She waited for Jenna to do or say something that showed how she felt about being back in her house for the first time since the murder. The thought occurred to Isabel that if she could capture the sequence of events surrounding her sister's death and her own reactions on film, she could play it all back in slow motion and experience the effect of these events on her heart and mind with more distance. But the things that had happened here must have been so terrible that she feared there was a chance that knowing more might shatter her mind beyond repair. She felt her knees start to buckle as she considered Jenna's possible reactions to the things they might find when they sifted through the

contents of the house.

Isabel was never sure what to say to Jenna about her former home. Individual rooms were beautiful, but there was too much going on. The house lacked organic unity and bordered on being pompous. Isabel was dying to know what her niece thought of the architecture and décor, but she hadn't yet determined a neutral way to approach the topic. Who in their right mind would introduce castle motifs into an ascetic brick and glass building? And the ribbed ceiling in the dining room called to mind the narthex of a church, while the solarium resembled a cabin in the Adirondacks. Clearly, Richard and Natalie had wanted the best of everything, but somehow it hadn't added up. Maybe their tastes had been too different to blend.

Besides the public rooms visible from the hallway--which consisted of the living room, dining room, solarium and kitchen--there were four bedrooms, a den, a study, multiple closets and crawl spaces, and, of course, the attic. Isabel realized just how daunting a task emptying out the house would be, and it dawned on her that she might discover more skeletons than she'd bargained for. Too discouraged to move her feet and walk to the living room where she could sit comfortably, she sat down on the antique Persian rug that spanned the front hall. Then she looked up at her niece and noticed Jenna hadn't moved or opened her eyes yet.

"Do you want to leave and come back later?" Isabel asked. "We don't have to do this all at once."

"What?" Jenna said, her eyes still tightly closed.

Isabel was about to repeat her question when Jenna said no. It must have taken awhile for the sounds that entered her niece's ears to reach her brain, or maybe it had just

taken that long for Jenna's words to register in Isabel's own mind.

Then Isabel saw Jenna open her eyes and turn to face the oil painting of Natalie and Richard that Richard had commissioned in a pseudo-grand style that mimicked the overblown portraits of French kings. The painting took up almost the entire wall to the left of the door and across from the grand staircase. Jenna's eyes seemed to fix on Richard's face and her body began to sway. Isabel, thinking she might tip over like one of the uprooted trees she'd jogged past that morning, jumped up and placed a supporting hand under one of Jenna's elbows.

It was eerie feeling Richard's eyes on them, as if he was studying their reactions. It had always made Isabel nervous the way Richard stared at her whenever he asked a question. She suspected he had been constantly gauging what she was really thinking by her body language. The funny thing was that when she questioned him or tried to make eye contact first, beads of sweat formed on his brow and his eyes constantly shifted until she looked away. She'd always wondered if he'd been hiding something. Had he known from the beginning that he was capable of destroying Natalie? Perhaps he had been afraid that Isabel, being her sister, would know this too.

"Let's sit down in the living room," Isabel suggested. "I'm feeling a little shaky."

"Okay," Jenna answered softly.

Isabel glanced back over her shoulder as they left the foyer and glared at Richard. Some lord and master he'd turned out to be. She wished she could stick pins in the canvas, as if it were a voodoo doll, and cause him to convulse and die in his cell that very moment.

The living room had a two-story ceiling and a huge picture window at the far end,

which overlooked a dramatic ten-foot tall slab of rock. Richard and Natalie had installed a fountain at the crest of the rock, to create the appearance of a natural waterfall. The water had been turned off long ago, dried up like Isabel's tears; but she remembered meditating on the meandering descent of the fountain's trickling streams when Richard walked in on the one heart-to-heart conversation she'd tried to have with her sister.

"How can you sleep with Richard anymore?" Isabel had asked. "All he ever does is yell at you or put you down."

"The same way most unhappily married women do it," Natalie said. "I close my eyes and pretend he's someone else, someone who cares."

"Doesn't Richard ever whisper he loves you?" Isabel asked.

"Maybe he did in the beginning. Now, he never makes a sound, except for moaning a couple of times when he gets off. It's all business with him."

"Do you come when you're with him?"

"No, but I fake it," Natalie answered.

"You fake orgasms?" Isabel asked. "What's the point in that?"

"Lots of women do," Natalie said, looking down.

"When was the last time you had a real one?" Isabel asked.

"A few months ago. I really believed Richard was someone else for a minute. I could feel myself getting wet, and pretty soon I was trembling uncontrollably. Fortunately, Richard didn't stick around after we were finished because I ended up puking in the bathroom."

Natalie must have noticed Richard's foot peeking out from behind the dining room door because she changed subjects abruptly.

“Can you believe my friend from church said that?” Natalie asked. “Our mother raised us to think it’s a sin to believe you deserve to enjoy sex. I think she’s right, don’t you?”

Instead of going back to his study, Richard came into the living room with a dark scowl on his face. He remained there staring out the window until Isabel realized that they wouldn’t be able to continue their conversation and she decided to go back to the City. When she got up to leave, Richard escorted her to the door and said, “If I were you, I wouldn’t get too curious about Natalie’s personal life. I don’t appreciate interfering relatives, and I would advise you not to test my patience.” Natalie must have overheard Richard since she refused to ever talk about Richard again--even after the divorce.

Isabel sat on the sofa, a low-backed velvet modular unit the color of the dark patches of moss that clung to the rocks outside. She couldn’t remember ever seeing Richard sit on it; he wasn’t the kind of person who slouched. Instead, he had his special seat over in the corner by the Tiffany floor lamp. It was an 18<sup>th</sup> century high-backed chair that was off limits to everyone else, though Isabel doubted any guest had been tempted by such a stiff piece of furniture. Natalie was the one who used to sprawl across the sofa, with her feet hanging over one end, engrossed in a novel or thumbing through a catalog from the Metropolitan Museum, where she’d worked as a curatorial assistant researching obscure works in the collection until she became Richard’s wife.

The room suddenly seemed empty, and Isabel couldn’t sit still any longer. She got up and walked over to the fireplace. There were several dusty photos displayed on the mantelpiece, mostly of Jenna or of Natalie and Jenna. There was only one of Richard and Natalie, and it was their wedding portrait taken by a prominent studio photographer

from the City. Natalie once told Isabel that Richard hated informal snapshots, as well as comfortable furniture and casual clothes. Perhaps he was worried that someone might catch him off guard and discover his true nature. Richard seemed to cultivate the persona of a dark, mysterious stranger. When he was in the room, Isabel always felt as if he was there and not there. Natalie once said that when she stumbled on him unaware, he reminded her of the man behind the lute player in Caravaggio's shadowy painting *The Musicians*, with his mop of jet-black hair, thick eyebrows, parted lips, and pensive dark eyes. In their wedding photograph, Richard had assumed a formal pose. He was standing behind Natalie, with his arms resting on her shoulders, staring straight ahead, his eyes unreadable and his thin lips pursed tightly together. He appeared stern and formidable next to his innocent and languid wife.

Natalie looked beautiful in the picture, like one of Van Eyck's virgins she so admired, with her soft brown hair spilling out in waves across her gently sloping shoulders. On her head, glimpses of a jeweled tiara could be seen beneath her veil, thrown back to reveal the delicate features of her face, tilted so that the light struck her ivory complexion and illuminated faint, half-dollar-sized patches of rouge on each of her high-boned cheeks, while her eyes seemed to gaze serenely inward. It was before she really knew Richard and what her life would become.

Isabel recalled the moment they all met for the first time, just four months before Richard and Natalie married. She and her sister were having dinner at a Ukrainian Restaurant near St. Mark's Place when Isabel noticed Richard staring in their direction. He was eating alone at a table in the back, under a black and white mural of proletariat workers. At the time it struck Isabel that he looked as if he might have stepped out from

the painting only moments before. He was strong, like the men wielding axes. There wasn't the hint of a smile on his puppet-like face.

Isabel hadn't pointed him out to Natalie. She'd wished he would leave or meld into the background and disappear. But that's not what happened. Richard bided his time until Isabel went to the bathroom, leaving Natalie alone at the table. When Isabel returned, he snatched the piece of paper Natalie had scrawled her telephone number on, folded it and made it vanish, as deftly as a magician palming a card.

"Richard, this is Isabel," Natalie said, a perfect hostess since childhood, when she stood by her mother's side and welcomed people to their gracious home in Great Falls.

"Hello," Richard grumbled. "I have to go now. Can I call you, Natalie?"

"I'd like that," Natalie said. "If you have time to call. You must very busy."

Then she turned to Isabel. "Can you believe it?" she said. "He's a nuclear physicist at Indian Point, the nuclear power plant in Croton."

"I'm so impressed," Isabel said. Sometimes it made her sick the way Natalie acted so dumb around men, and she wasn't about to let Richard think he'd won Natalie so easily. "Did Natalie tell you about her job?" Isabel asked.

"No, she didn't." Richard said. "She'll have to tell me another time though because I really have to run."

"Good-bye," Natalie said. She tilted her head and looked up at him, letting her bangs sweep down across her eyes.

"Good-bye," he said, smiling at Natalie. His features quickly froze into more of a grimace, as he nodded in Isabel's direction.

Isabel moved her lips to say good-bye, but he was already out the door.

“Why was he in such a rush to get out of here?” Isabel asked.

But Natalie was all dreamy eyed. “He probably had something important to do,” she said.

The pins and needles in Isabel’s feet from sitting cross-legged on the couch so long brought her back from her reveries. She wondered whether Natalie, if she could come back from the dead and talk to her, would blame herself for her own murder. Or had she seen, in the last moments of her life, what a monster Richard truly was?

Isabel got up and gently slowed the rocking chair to a stop. Jenna opened her eyes and looked at her aunt as if she was seeing a ghost, but the wild look in her eyes was quickly replaced by one of recognition.

“I forgot you were here,” she said. “What time is it? How long have we been in the house?”

“Not long. Only twenty minutes or so,” Isabel said, after glancing at her watch.

“When I opened my eyes, I thought you were my mother,” Jenna said. “I was dreaming about her; she was saying something about Anna.”

“I’m not surprised you thought of your mother when you drifted off. Being here must trigger lots of memories,” Isabel said. “Was Anna a friend of Natalie’s?”

“I don’t think so,” Jenna said. “If she was, I didn’t know her.”

“Did your parents socialize much?” Isabel asked.

“No,” Jenna said. “Mostly, we did things by ourselves or stayed home. Of course Mom talked to people at church, or when she came to school for art shows and concerts, but she didn’t belong to the club and play tennis like most of my friends’ mothers.” Jenna stopped talking, and a worried look crossed her face.

“What’s the matter?” Isabel asked.

“I should have worried more about Mom not having many friends,” Jenna said, digging her nails into the palms of her clenched hands. “I should have asked her why she and Dad fought so much, but I was afraid of what she might tell me. Whenever they started arguing, I locked myself in my room. I put on headphones and turned the volume up, so I couldn’t hear them. But sometimes I couldn’t stop imagining what they were yelling at each other, so I would draw to drown out the voices in my head. Oh God, what if Mom’s death was my fault? Why didn’t I tell anyone?”

“Come here,” Isabel said extending her arm in Jenna’s direction.

Jenna got up and walked over to the couch, crying in front of her aunt for the first time since the funeral.

“If it’s your fault, then it’s my fault too. I never asked you what was wrong. When I tried to talk to Natalie about your dad, she told me everything was fine. I believed her when I suspected she was lying because it was easier that way. After the divorce, she still wouldn’t tell me anything about her personal life. She said you were all that mattered to her. I thought she’d stopped caring about me, so I rarely called or visited after that.” Isabel stopped talking and hugged Jenna close to her, as she tried to shut out her thoughts.

Jenna rested her head on Isabel’s shoulder and let her body go limp for a moment.

“Let’s go back to the bed and breakfast,” Isabel said a few minutes later. “I think I’ve had enough of this house for one day.”

“First I want to go get my drawings,” Jenna said. “Maybe looking at them will make me feel better, or at least feel something.”

“Do you think you’re up for that?” Isabel asked.

“Listen, I know you’re trying to help me, but what could possibly hurt me more than knowing my dad murdered my mom? And they proved that in court, didn’t they? And I’m still standing here. You don’t need to save me from anything. I’m not a baby anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Isabel said. “You’re right. You can look for the sketches. Maybe I’m the one who’s afraid of what we might find.”

Isabel followed Jenna upstairs. The drawings were neatly rolled up in Jenna’s closet, just as Jenna left them. Isabel was shocked by how many of them there were, especially since she hadn’t seen Jenna draw once since in Florida. The first one Isabel unrolled was a drawing of a unicorn done in colored pencil. The lines of the unicorn’s body were perfectly placed, creating a sense of organic unity. Her niece clearly understood how a horse’s body functions and was sensitive to the graceful manner in which it pranced and galloped. Isabel was impressed by the fancifully-drawn horn, with a myriad of colors filling patterns that remind her of tracery in a medieval stained-glass window. She realized mother and daughter must have spent hours pouring over art books and vowed to take Jenna to the Met before they left New York.

“These are wonderful. How did you learn to draw horses so well?” Isabel asked.

“Mom got me a few sketchbooks, and at first I just followed the steps,” Jenna said. “Then I started copying pictures from other books.”

“Did you copy this one?” Isabel asked.

“No,” Jenna said. “I read somewhere that you can reduce all the parts of a horse’s body to a series of triangles. That’s when I started experimenting and coming up with

my own compositions.”

“You really seem to understand horses,” Isabel said. “Did you ever ride?”

“I took riding lessons for two years,” Jenna said. “Don’t you remember?”

“That’s right. Of course you did,” Isabel said, not really sure if she ever knew that or not.

“The last year I lived here, I started helping out at the stable on Baptist Church Road. Once a week I spent a couple of hours grooming the horses. At first I didn’t want to do it, but then I realized how much I enjoyed brushing their soft coats. Sometimes they’d nuzzle me, and that made me feel sad. I never could figure out why...”

“Do you want to ride sometime?” Isabel asked.

“I don’t know,” Jenna said. “It’s been forever since I’ve been on a horse.”

“Was there a special horse you used to ride, or did you ride a different one every time?”

“My favorite was Luther. He was all black, except for a small patch of white on his nose.”

“That’s a weird name for a horse.”

“I always thought he was named after Martin Luther King,” Jenna said.

“Or maybe he was named after Martin Luther, the religious reformer.”

“Who’s he, and why would someone name a black horse after him?”

“Most people who don’t swallow religion hook line and sinker are thought of as dark horses,” Isabel answered. “But that’s irrelevant to the real question.”

“And what’s that?”

“Would you like to ride Luther while we’re here?” Isabel said.

“I’m not so sure,” Jenna said, wrinkling her nose as she reached for the next unicorn sketch in the pile.

Isabel picked up another drawing, this one a charcoal sketch of Jenna’s room, while she waited for her niece to decide what she wanted to do. She could tell the composition had artistic merit, but she found it quite disturbing. It reminded her of Van Gogh’s painting of his room at Arles, with its sloped floor, which seemed to fall out of the picture and skewed perspective. In Jenna’s drawing the relationship between objects was also ambiguous and shifting, and it exhibited a similar nervous energy. But her niece’s picture was drawn even more savagely, and Isabel could see where she’d probably worn her pencil down to a nub. The repeated rubbing of the charcoal made the drawing appear dark and claustrophobic. Isabel didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes. She wasn’t sure if Jenna wanted her to respond on an emotional or an artistic level, and her understanding of form and technique paled in comparison with Natalie’s.

“Were you angry when you did this drawing?” Isabel finally asked.

“It’s not very good,” Jenna said, hanging her head.

“I didn’t say that,” Isabel said. “It’s just different from your unicorn pictures, not so fanciful and light. But you don’t always have to be happy to create art. Some critics claim the best writers have the most unhappy childhoods.”

“Maybe I should give up drawing and start writing,” Jenna said. “My childhood hasn’t been all cookies and ice cream, and you can forget about the cherries on top.”

“That sounds like a country music title,” Isabel said. “You should write lyrics for the band.”

“Yeah, it might be fun,” Jenna said, smiling for the first time since she’d walked

in the house. “I could make up a new genre - Hillbilly Hip Hop.”

“Are you making fun of me now?” Isabel teased.

“Who, me?”

“You ready for lunch yet?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m dying for some of those curly French fries at Elmer Suds.”

Isabel feigned mock horror. “You can’t just eat French fries for lunch.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll consider having a burger to go with them.”

When they got to the restaurant, Isabel realized Jenna had picked a great place. The crowd was lively and there was a tri-partite beer menu, with entries on all sides. After downing a Pilsner Urquell faster than she should have, Isabel felt much better.

When she finished eating, she called information on her cell phone to get the number for the stable. Jenna told her the owner’s name was Sam Huntington, and the stable was called The Four Leaf Clover. When Sam answered the telephone, Isabel was immediately struck by the husky tone of his voice. He sounded as if he’d been mellowed and aged, like a fine wine. She realized he was waiting for her to say something, so she began talking a little too fast. She told him how Jenna used to ride there, and asked if he remembered her. Then, she said they were in town, clearing out the house so the new owners could move in. After several minutes of disjointed chatter, Isabel asked if Jenna could come out and ride.

Sam Huntington said, “Of course she can. I’d love to see her.”

Then Isabel asked him if Jenna had to wear jodhpurs and boots, or if she needed to bring her own helmet, because Isabel was sure the boots wouldn’t fit and she didn’t

feel like rummaging through the house again today. Sam said he didn't blame her. He told her Jenna should come at four o'clock, that she could wear jeans and boots or shoes with low heels, and that he had an extra riding helmet.

It was settled. Isabel flipped her phone closed and took a deep breath.

"What's the matter with you?" Jenna asked.

"Nothing, it must be the beer. I don't usually drink during the day."

"Do you want to go to the Black Cow? Mom used to love their coffee and they have awesome hot chocolate. It's weird wanting hot chocolate in the summer, but it's been so cold and damp since we've been here."

While they were in the Black Cow waiting for their drinks, an older lady wearing a purple headband to keep her curly gray hair off her face walked over to Jenna. She had on a fringed vest, tie-dyed blouse, and gathered jean skirt. Isabel couldn't help thinking that she looked as if she'd stepped out of the audience of a Janis Joplin concert, especially because of her large round-framed metal-rimmed glasses.

"So, how do you like Florida?" the woman asked Jenna.

"It's okay," Jenna said.

"Are you still riding?"

"No, my aunt and I were just talking about that," Jenna said. "She called the stable and I'm going to ride later this afternoon."

"I'm sure Bradley would love to see you again," the woman said smiling.

Jenna blushed. "Mrs. Chapman, this is my aunt Isabel."

"Nice to meet you," Mrs. Chapman said, extending her hand towards Isabel.

"What brings you two to Croton?"

“My sister’s house was finally sold, and we’re here to clear it out so the new owners can move in.”

“It must be a difficult time for both of you,” Mrs. Chapman said gravely.

Isabel and Jenna nodded, and Jenna looked out the window.

Mrs. Chapman put her arm around Jenna and gave her a little hug. “Come by the shop anytime. I usually have some snacks lying around, and your aunt might like a cup of tea.”

“Where’s your shop?” Isabel asked.

Mrs. Chapman handed Isabel a business card, and Isabel saw that she owned the antique shop on Grand Street.

“We’re having a fish dinner at the Holy Name of Mary Church this Friday,” Mrs. Chapman said. “If you’re not busy, you should come.”

Isabel wanted to say Jenna probably wasn’t ready to face crowds yet, especially if people were going to gawk at them, but she thought Jenna might be embarrassed if she said that. Instead, she told Mrs. Chapman they’d think about it.

Jenna handed her cup of coffee to Isabel and set off for the bathroom down the hall. When she was out of earshot, Mrs. Chapman stepped closer to Isabel.

“I don’t want to pressure you or anything, but if you aren’t planning on taking all the furniture with you, I might be able to take some on consignment,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Natalie told me about some interesting pieces they bought and I’d love to take them off your hands. The modern pieces you’ll have to advertise in the newspaper.”

“Thank you,” Isabel said. I hadn’t even thought about the furniture, but I will have to do something with it. Can you stop by the house later in the week?”

“Please call me Laura. Let me know when you’re ready. If there’s anything else I can do for you while you’re here, you have my number. I’m in the shop every day but Monday.”

Mrs. Chapman gave Jenna a hug on her way out the door. Isabel was glad they’d run into her. She knew she could use professional advice, and Laura Chapman seemed like a person she could trust.

### Chapter Three

At three thirty Isabel and Jenna set off for the Four Leaf Clover Ranch. The mist rose from the water as they crossed the bridge over the reservoir. The windshield got so fogged up that Isabel had to turn on the air conditioner to get rid of the moisture.

“I hope you and the horses don’t mind getting wet,” Isabel said.

“The horses are usually fine, as long as it doesn’t pour,” Jenna said.

“That’s the way it was with our ponies in England,” Isabel said. “But I thought all English horses must be used to rain.”

“When I lived here, I loved riding when it was drizzling,” Jenna said. “I imagined I was in England. Mom said living there was like a fairy tale.”

“We did have a cook, a maid, and a gardener,” Isabel recalled, “and the estate had a stable with ponies we rode to school.”

“I think that’s why Mom got me started on horseback riding lessons,” Jenna said. “I wish we could have gone to England together. She always said she wanted to see that house again...”

Isabel glanced over at Jenna but couldn’t see her niece’s face since she had turned her head toward the side window. Isabel gripped the steering wheel tighter and was about to ask Jenna what street she should be looking for when her niece told her to take the next left onto Hunterbrook Road. It was a winding street with huge trees that obscured the already dim light. Isabel couldn’t get over how unnaturally dark it was for the middle of summer. Her right front tire struck a pothole, jolting them in their seats.

“Did you and your family go on any trips?” Isabel asked. “Natalie never told me about any family vacations.”

“We took the train once to Washington, D.C., but Dad said he would never leave the country. He wouldn’t even go to Canada. And he never let Mom and me go anywhere by ourselves,” Jenna said.

“I noticed,” Isabel said. “Natalie rode the train into the City to visit me right after they got married, but then Richard found out. She said he got very angry and threatened to lock her out of the house.”

Given how overprotective Richard was of Natalie, Isabel had to wonder how he’d felt about boys showing interest in Jenna. “Who’s Bradley?” Isabel asked, trying to sound offhand.

“He’s just some kid I took riding lessons with,” Jenna mumbled.

“Was he your boyfriend?”

“No, I wasn’t allowed to hang around with boys,” Jenna said. “Once my dad saw me and Bradley together in the tack room when he came to pick me up from my riding lesson. Luther had been spooked by a car that sped past us when we were practicing riding on the road, and he’d taken off with me and jumped a fence. I got him back under control, but I was feeling pretty shaky. Bradley said he would help me get the bit out of Luther’s mouth. When my dad walked in, Bradley was reaching for the bridle. I guess his arm accidentally brushed my hair. We were standing pretty close together.”

“It doesn’t sound as if you were doing anything inappropriate,” Isabel said.

“Your dad couldn’t have gotten too upset.”

“It was horrible,” Jenna said. “He stared right between Bradley’s eyes and said,

‘Don’t touch her,’ his words like bullets. Then Dad told me to get in the car.’

Even though Isabel hated Richard, she knew better than to let Jenna think it was okay not to dismiss the advice of adults out of hand. “Did he tell you why you couldn’t talk to him?” Isabel asked. “Perhaps he knew something about Bradley.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Jenna said.

“Why?” Isabel asked.

Jenna started to shake, and after a few moments, her teeth began to chatter.

“What’s the matter, honey. Does it bother you to talk about your dad?”

“No. It’s just that I never told anyone about the things he did. After he acted badly, he’d make me sit on the floor in front of him while he sat in his high backed chair. Then, he’d grip the armrests and tell me how he’d kill me if I said anything.”

“What? He said he’d kill you? Oh, Jenna.” Isabel pulled the car over to the side of the road and shut the engine off. A gust of wind blew, shaking the branches of the giant elms flanking the street. Large drops of water splattered the windshield, and Isabel blinked her eyes several times. Then she turned the wipers on and off. When they came to rest at the base of the windshield, she clasped Jenna’s hand and said, “You can tell me. He’s in jail now.”

Jenna didn’t say anything for a minute. Then her words came spilling out, as if a damn inside her had suddenly burst.

“I asked him why I couldn’t talk to Bradley, and he said, ‘Why? I’ll show you why?’ Then he grabbed my pinky and bent it all the way back, crushing it against the back of my palm. It dislocated and when he let go, it swelled up and stuck out so far that it didn’t look as if it belonged to the rest of my hand. He said if I told Mom he would

break my arm, so I told her I fell on the jungle gym at school and landed on my hand.”

Isabel hugged Jenna. “Did he ever hurt you again?”

“Yes,” Jenna said. “Once I ate the last of his ice cream, and he beat me.”

“Did your mom ever find out about that?”

“A few days later she opened the door to my bedroom when I was getting dressed,” Jenna said. “When she saw the red welts on my back, she closed the door and walked over to my bed. She told me to button my shirt and come sit next to her.”

“What did she do? Did she report him?”

“No. She hugged me for a minute before she said anything, and then she told me we were going to get away from him. She said she had a plan, but we couldn’t tell anyone what he’d done. It was very important that we keep quiet. I asked her why, but she wouldn’t answer me. She told me not to do anything to upset Dad. He was working too hard, she said, and that was making his temper even worse. She said maybe he was acting so crazy from being around all that radiation at the power plant. I tried to believe her. They were always reporting leaks at Indian Point in the paper, so it could have been true.”

“Did he do anything else to you?” Isabel asked, afraid to hear what Jenna might say.

“No. But I was always afraid of him after that.”

“No wonder your mom divorced him,” Isabel said.

Jenna turned her back to Isabel and rested her cheek against the seat. Her niece’s crumpled spine suddenly seemed so delicate, and Isabel realized Jenna must have appeared even more fragile to Natalie that day in her bedroom since Jenna must have

been smaller then. It was worse than Isabel had imagined. She always suspected that Richard might have hit or threatened Natalie, but she never dreamed that he would hurt Jenna. No wonder her niece had been so polite and quiet whenever Isabel had come to visit them. She must have been scared to death. Isabel used to think she was just shy, like she'd been when she was younger. How could she have been so blind?

Isabel noticed Jenna shifting around in her seat and started the engine. She was amazed how quickly her niece appeared to have regained her composure. Jenna's face wasn't blotchy and her eyes weren't puffy. There was a slight flush to her cheeks, but nothing more than what a brisk walk would do to a person's complexion.

"Do you still feel like riding?" Isabel asked, after a few minutes.

Jenna nodded, so Isabel put the car in drive. "Where to next?" Isabel asked.

"Keep going until you get to a white church on the corner of Baptist Church Road. You're going to take a right there."

After they rounded a bend in the road, Isabel saw a small, immaculately painted wooden church, with a simple unassuming spire. It was odd finding a Baptist church this far out from the village center, nestled among so many trees.

"Aren't Baptists a southern denomination?" Isabel asked.

"I don't know," Jenna said. "I never knew anyone who went to this church, but people must have come here because it always looked so inviting."

"Do you think it's open?" Isabel asked.

"I doubt it," Jenna said. "Mom and I tried to get in once, but it was locked."

Isabel decided that if she were Natalie, she would have come here every Sunday, even though she'd stopped believing in God long ago.

The car followed the dips and bends of the road as they progressed through the hilly terrain. Finally they saw the sign for the horse farm, and Isabel turned down the long, pebbled driveway. She noticed Jenna was drumming her fingers on her leg and wondered if her niece was nervous. Isabel vowed to settle the business with her sister's house as quickly as possible, so she and Jenna could go back to Florida before too many painful old memories were stirred up.

Jenna told her to park by a clump of sugar maples. Isabel thought how beautiful the ranch must be in the fall, when the dusty patches on the ground would be cloaked in a blanket of rust and gold. They got out of the car and walked over to a white, wooden fence. Jenna unlatched the gate and told Isabel to come along, so she could introduce her to Sam.

They found Sam in the tack room. He was only five foot ten, but he seemed much larger standing there, with a tan, ten-gallon hat perched on top of his curly, blond hair. Sam had a silent, modest strength that instantly appealed to Isabel. Although he wasn't built like a weight lifter, Isabel sensed that he was confident of his physical prowess from the way he casually folded his arms across his broad chest. She couldn't believe how ruggedly handsome he looked in his jeans and plaid flannel shirt, rolled up at the sleeves to reveal hairy, well-defined forearms. She was sure such arms could reign in any wild horses and bring them willingly under submission. What would it feel like to be held by a man like that, she wondered? Most of the men she'd slept with had been pale, lanky intellectuals, who slouched and rounded their shoulders, probably to hide their hearts from women like her.

Sam was talking in a low voice that made Isabel involuntarily tremble. He was

giving a boy, who turned out to be Bradley, pointers about how to handle his horse going into the jump. Apparently, Bradley was nervous because he had been thrown from his horse the week before, and this was his first time back in the saddle. Sam was saying how important it was to keep the horse's head up as they approached the jump. That way he couldn't stop short or buck Bradley again. Isabel could see the boy relax as Sam spoke to him. Watching Bradley loosen his grip on the reins, Isabel felt the fear of what she might encounter in her sister's house drain from her body. Perhaps it was okay that there was so much she didn't know. She stopped listening to the litany of questions about Natalie's death that had been plaguing her all day and focused her attention on the deep, melodious sound of Sam's voice. The rhythms of his speech had a calming effect on her. Suddenly, Isabel felt Jenna's hand gently shake her elbow, and she feared she'd been caught staring at Sam.

"It's great meeting you," Sam said. "You're as beautiful as your sister."

Isabel blushed and looked away. Most men pretended they didn't care about your looks until they thought they knew you well enough to get you in bed. Isabel's mother had taught her the importance of graciously accepting compliments, but she was tongue tied now.

Sam didn't appear to expect Isabel to say anything in return because he shifted his attention to Jenna. He asked her how she was doing and if she'd kept up her riding. Jenna's voice was light and easy, as she fastened her helmet and tacked Luther. She alternated between whispering to Luther and answering Sam's questions.

Then Sam turned back to Isabel. "There's a bench over there where you can sit and watch Jenna ride," he said, pointing it out to Isabel. "After I work with the class in

the ring, I'll come join you."

Isabel walked over to the cedar bench beside a Japanese maple and watched Jenna take Luther through his paces. At first, he seemed to try to go off to investigate things around the periphery of the ring, but Jenna firmly pulled his head up and gave him a well-placed jab in his sides. He responded by trotting around the circle with perfect precision. Jenna moved up and down in the saddle, and a rhythm was established between horse and rider. Her niece wore a stern expression on her face but she held her body proudly, and Isabel suspected Jenna enjoyed being in control like that when her life had followed such a wild and unpredictable course. Then Bradley and another girl joined the circle, and they all began moving in a synchronized fashion. After fifteen minutes, Sam opened the back gate and the riders took off in a canter across the field.

He came over and sat at the other end of the bench. His shoulders were hunched and he rested his chin in the palms of his hands. When he didn't say anything, Isabel crossed and re-crossed her legs.

"I'm sorry about Natalie," he said finally. "I was so worried about Jenna when I heard what happened. How has she been taking it?"

"When we were living in the City, she kept to herself most of the time," Isabel said. "I was worried about her and took her to a psychologist, but what really seemed to help was moving to Florida. At first, she didn't hang out with anyone after school, but now she's playing the guitar in a band. I think she's starting to get settled."

"Well, she looks a lot better than I expected, but then she has to be relieved knowing the man's in jail," Sam said.

Isabel stared at him hard.

“I’ve said too much,” he said, bowing his head.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Isabel said.

“Natalie was so special. When she came around here, she always had a smile on her face. All the kids loved her.” Sam turned and held up his hand. “Sorry,” he said.

Isabel touched his arm. She thought it a bit odd that she was the one doing the comforting. After all, it was her sister who had died. But she found it endearing that someone who looked like the Marlboro Man could be so emotional and restrained at the same time. He clearly loved children and animals, and perhaps he had sensed a kindred gentleness of spirit in Natalie.

“I know,” Isabel said. “It’s hard to believe she’s gone. They were divorced. They should have gone their separate ways. Why couldn’t he leave her alone and move on with his life?”

“It’s hard to say,” Sam said. “I suppose lots of people find it hard to let go of someone they once loved.”

Isabel wanted to agree with him, but her sister’s case seemed more unusual than that. Natalie wasn’t stupid. How could she have married someone who turned out to be so completely evil? Isabel wondered if it’s possible to love someone and think you know him, and later find out that nothing you believed about him was true - that everything he ever did or told you was done out of calculating hate.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked, when Isabel didn’t say anything.

“Yes,” Isabel said. “I was just thinking.”

“About what?” Sam said.

“Whether it’s possible that some relationships are built on the need for revenge

from the very beginning,” Isabel said.

“I suppose it could happen,” Sam said. “If one person reminds the other of someone who refused to give him the love he deserved.”

“Do you think expectations trivialize love?” Isabel asked.

“I think expectations are essential in teaching us how to survive?”

Suddenly the realization hit her that she was damn tired of being strong for everyone else. She shook her head.

“You don’t agree?” Sam asked.

“No, you’re probably right. It’s just that I really can’t understand what makes some people behave the way they do.”

Sam turned and gave her a sympathetic look. “Can I get you a glass of water or anything?”

“No thanks. I’m okay.”

Sam reached over and gently patted her on the back.

“The kids are coming back,” Isabel said.

They got up and walked over to the fence.

“Call me. I mean bring Jenna back anytime,” Sam said. “Just call me first, so I can make sure no one takes Luther out. Those two have something special between them,” he said, looking at Jenna and Bradley. Isabel wondered if he was talking about Jenna and Luther, or Jenna and Bradley.

“This place is special,” Isabel said. “Thanks for letting Jenna ride.”

Sam took Isabel’s hand in his and gave it a little squeeze. For the second time that afternoon, she blushed.

## Chapter Four

The next morning, Isabel and Jenna sat down for a leisurely breakfast of fresh fruit, cinnamon rolls, oatmeal with brown sugar, and hazelnut coffee. Neither of them seemed to be in any rush to leave the cozy dining room at the bed and breakfast for the cool, damp outside. The pink and green stripes of the Victorian wallpaper set off the warm cherry wood of the china cabinet, dining table, and sideboard. Susan and Erica had put two vases filled with pastel phlox blossoms and hollyhocks at either end of the table. Isabel heard one of the guests say the rain must have made the plants thrive and Erica agreed that the blossoms were more plentiful than usual. Then an English woman asked if they wanted to establish a partnership and import galoshes, and Isabel half-wished she still lived in New York so she could take the woman up on her offer if Susan and Erica weren't interested. A few minutes later, Isabel noticed the proprietors had stopped conversing with their guests and were clearing off the china and scraping away crumbs from the white linen tablecloth. Their two dogs, old mutts with quizzical expressions, were standing just inside the kitchen doorway, waiting patiently for the morning's leftovers.

Thinking about discarded scraps of food reminded Isabel of all the memorabilia she and Jenna would have to contend with in Natalie's house--only they couldn't just feed it to the animals or toss it into the trash. They would have to look at everything first, even if that meant they would discover things they didn't want to know. What if Natalie kept a diary and wrote about how she really felt about them? Isabel knew she was guilty

of frequently resenting her sister's favored status with their father and men in general, and she had to admit Natalie might have resented her independence and success in the business world.

"Hey Jenna, what do you think about tackling the furniture first?" Isabel said. "It might take some time to sell, and we can always take boxes of your mom's personal papers to Florida and go through them later if we don't have time to get to them now."

"That's okay with me," Jenna said, a look of relief flashing across her face.

Having a specific task in mind that didn't delve too deeply into Natalie's past made Isabel feel more at ease about going back to the house. "We better get moving and get out of Susan and Erica's way," Isabel said, "or they might not bake us any more of their delicious chocolate chip cookies."

Jenna jumped up and dashed for the door. "Hurry up, Aunt Isabel," she said. "Nothing is going to come between me and those cookies."

When Isabel opened the door to the car, she saw they'd tracked in mud and leaves from walking on the damp ground at the ranch. "I'm glad it's a rental," she said. "This is one mess we don't need to worry about."

Jenna laughed. "It will only get dirty again anyway, especially if we keep going to the ranch."

Isabel hoped they would go back soon, so she could see Sam again.

"Do you think it bothers Bradley that Sam is letting you ride Luther again?" she asked, trying to bring up Sam's name casually.

"He's not the type to be bothered by something like that," Jenna said. "And I'm sure he knows that once I leave, he'll have Luther all to himself again."

Isabel wanted to say he seemed like a nice boy, so polite and with such clean good looks, but she knew that might turn Jenna off. Isabel had always dumped the boys her parents recommended. “You should ask him to the movies the next time you see him,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What if he says no?” Jenna asked. “I’ve never asked anyone out on a date before.”

So she did like him, Isabel thought. “Don’t think of it as a date,” she said. “Just tell him you need a break from working at the house and you’d appreciate the company.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jenna said. “It depends how he acts around me. I’m not sure he likes me that way.”

“What about Sam?” Isabel said. “Is he a good riding instructor?”

“He’s the best,” Jenna said. “He never yells or gets angry at us--even when we don’t follow directions. Once I fell on a jump because I hadn’t heard him say that we should relax our arms as much as possible during the take off. Instead, I gripped the reins tighter when I got to the end of the approach. This made Luther stop short, and he almost pitched me.”

“That must have been scary,” Isabel said. “How did you manage not to fall?”

“Luckily, I remembered to grab hold of his mane, like we’re supposed to during the flight phase, but one of my legs slipped from the stirrup and I was half out of the saddle. I guess my mind was wandering when Sam was explaining the four phases of the jump the week before. I thought for sure he’d yell at me, but he didn’t.”

“He sounds like an excellent teacher,” Isabel said.

“Maybe he saw I was scared. He checked to see if I was okay first. Then he told

me what I'd done wrong and reminded me to always remember which phase I'm in."

"Would you like to go back and ride again later today?" Isabel asked.

"I'm a little sore," Jenna said. "Maybe tomorrow."

Isabel pulled into the driveway and shut the motor off. She was disappointed Jenna hadn't wanted to go back to the horse farm right away, but at the same time she felt relieved. Although she hadn't been able to get Sam off her mind, she didn't want to appear too interested. Things always went wrong when she pursued men. The year before Natalie had died, she met an introspective but handsome man in the New York Public Library when she was doing stock research. They had coffee together and talked about takeovers and initial public offerings after she purposely dropped some file folders in front of his cubicle. She thought things were promising when he gave her his telephone number, so she could call and let him know when she would be at the library again. Later, she realized he was only interested in finding an investment partner because he changed his telephone number a month later, after she kept calling him about pedestrian things like how many inches of snow the next storm was supposed to dump on the City. The men she ended up attracting, like the guy she hired to re-wallpaper her bedroom who wore his thinning, gray hair in a pony tail, she realized she wasn't interested in. How could she care about someone who claimed the way he painted glue on the wall exhibited more talent than most modern artists ever had? He couldn't find the woman in the deKooning lithograph on her wall, so how could he ever understand her needs? When she thought about it, she didn't know whether Sam would be able to satisfy her either.

Before getting out of the car, she grabbed the pad and pencil she brought with her

so they could inventory the antiques and check off which ones they wanted to consign to Mrs. Chapman. Once they were inside the house, they decided to start in the rooms they'd already visited. Isabel wrote down the hall table in the "keep" column, since Natalie was the one who'd wanted it. The 18<sup>th</sup> century high-backed chair in the living room would definitely go in the "Mrs. Chapman" row. They would have to put an ad in the paper for the green velvet modular couch, but Jenna asked if they could take the rocking chair back to Florida.

"I met the old Amish man who made it," Jenna said. "He gave me a wooden whistle and a piece of shoofly pie while Mom was trying to decide which one she wanted."

"The rocking chair must be special to you, knowing its history like that," Isabel said. "The 'keep' column it is."

The antique end tables Mrs. Chapman could have, Jenna agreed, but the coffee table was a modern three-tiered marble piece they'd sell themselves. The dining room set was also modern. It was an Italian black lacquered piece, with inlaid geometric shapes of varying colors that resembled a painting by Mondrian. Natalie had written a catalogue entry for when she'd worked at the Met, only more angular and with secondary as well as primary colors. All the pieces in the solarium were modern, so Mrs. Chapman wouldn't be interested in any of them.

Then they went to Jenna's room, where they spent more time.

"Most of this, we'll have to sell. It's probably too new," Isabel said. "But Mrs. Chapman might be interested in your desk."

The desk was a light maple secretary with tapered legs, thin drawers, and simple

brass drawer pulls. It seemed modest and unassuming in comparison to the expensive white hardwood bedroom set, especially the dresser with its embossed wood rosettes in the corners and delicate ring pulls. Both the headboard and the face of the bureau were hand painted with rose blossoms, bows and swags, by an artist who'd done the tromp l'oeil decorations for a room they'd added to the decorative arts collection at the Met. Isabel remembered Natalie mentioning how impressed she'd been watching the guy work. Apparently he'd walked in off the street, fresh from the hinterlands of North Carolina, with only a portfolio, but he'd been hired on the spot.

"I remember when I came home from school and saw this new furniture for the first time. Mom and Dad bought it for me when I turned six," Jenna said. "My eyes almost fell out of my head."

"Do you want to ship it to Florida?" Isabel asked, seeing the wistful expression on Jenna's face. "It would be expensive to move, but if we sold the new furniture we bought you in Florida that would more than cover the cost."

"No," Jenna said. "It would clash with my posters and the kids in the band would think I'd lost my mind if I got all flowery and feminine on them. Besides, I don't think I could sleep in it anymore. It would make me think about Mom too much."

"I know what you mean," Isabel said. Being in the presence of Natalie's things was kind of disconcerting. Even though she and her sister always used to swap outfits when they were teenagers, Isabel knew that she would never feel comfortable wearing Natalie's clothes now. She made a mental note to consign Natalie's evening wear and furniture. If she couldn't find a shop to take it all, she knew the Salvation Army would take what they couldn't sell. Isabel felt a twinge of guilt about taking all Natalie's

clothes to secondhand shops or charities, but she couldn't think of anyone her sister's size who would wear the kinds of clothes Natalie bought.

"I hope we can find a good home for my furniture," Jenna said. "I would hate to think of it getting broken or spoiled."

"I'm sure whoever buys your furniture will love it and take good care of it," Isabel said. "It's so pretty."

"Maybe I could just take the desk," Jenna said. She sat down and fingered the rounded end of the old-fashioned key, before turning it slowly in the keyhole.

"Did you use your desk a lot?" Isabel asked.

"I used to sketch there," Jenna said. "Sometimes I wrote stuff too, but I usually tore up my poems and journals when I was done. I didn't want anyone else to read them --especially my dad." Jenna started feeling around behind the partitions of the cubby holes and in the backs of the drawers. "I must have saved something," she muttered to herself.

"If you really want the desk, we might be able to find a way to get it to Florida," Isabel said. "I guess we could always rent a U-haul."

After a few minutes, Jenna found a wadded-up piece of paper caught on the top of a drawer.

Isabel snuck around behind her chair, curious to see what it said. Jenna glanced at the piece of paper and folded it back up. "It was from Bradley," Jenna said.

Isabel stared at her, trying to figure out what kind of relationship her niece had with Bradley.

"It wasn't a love letter, if that's what you're thinking," Jenna said, her face

turning a shade of crimson that reminded Isabel of the hollyhocks on the breakfast table.

“Okay,” Isabel said, unconvinced.

Jenna unfolded it again. “See. It’s just a note he sent congratulating me when I won my first horseback riding ribbon.”

“Do you still have it?” Isabel asked.

“It’s up there,” Jenna said, pointing to the shelf mounted on the wall above her desk.

Lots of ribbons were draped over the edge, in front of a display of Breyer horses.

“Are all those ribbons from horse back riding?” she asked.

“No,” Jenna said. “I won a couple for my drawings too. Mom used to take me to classes at the art center in Mount Kisco, but then Dad made her stop. He said I should learn to do something more practical, or else I’d have a hard time finding a job later. When I mentioned that Mom once had a good job in a museum, he said she’d been lucky to get it.”

Lucky wasn’t the word that came to mind when Isabel thought of Natalie, at least not now. And what her sister had done for a living had never caused anyone harm. Richard worked at a nearby nuclear power plant that was always covering up leaks.

Jenna got up and walked over to her closet. “I wonder what else is in here,” she said, opening the louvered door. She rifled through the shirts, skirts, and dresses that were hanging there, pausing to finger certain fabrics. When she got to a burgundy velvet dress, she grabbed the sleeve and brushed it against her cheek. Isabel saw her niece shut her eyes and hold her breath.

“Are you okay?” Isabel asked.

“This is the dress I wore on our last Christmas together,” she said. “Dad always made us put up an artificial tree, but since he was gone Mom and I got a real one. It smelled so good. We strung popcorn and cranberries and made paper chains with hearts, because so many of our ornaments got broken the year before.” Jenna dropped the sleeve and stopped talking. Then she closed the closet door, her face almost as blank as when she first heard about the murder.

Isabel took her niece’s hand and pressed it between her palms. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s see about the furniture in the spare bedrooms. I bet we’ll find some more antiques Mrs. Chapman might be interested in.”

This time Jenna didn’t argue that she wanted to stay in her room longer. “Can I write the list?” Jenna asked.

“Sure,” Isabel said. “That would be very helpful.” Together, they walked across the hall to the guestroom and quickly inventoried its contents.

Isabel thought how isolated Jenna must have felt, alone on this part of the L-shaped corridor. Why had Richard and Natalie bought such a big house when they never had people come stay with them? Isabel knew Natalie had always wanted a bigger family, but they stopped having children after Jenna. Natalie never said why.

The only way to get through this job was to break it into specific tasks and complete them on schedule. If she didn’t keep her wits about her, she might end up conversing with ghosts as Jenna had before. Then where would they be? “If we only look at the furniture and don’t go through anything else, we could finish up the list,” Isabel said. “We still have your dad’s study and your mom’s bedroom left.”

They turned right, down a long corridor to the study and master bedroom suite.

These rooms opened onto a deck which abutted a grassy knoll, the architect's brilliant solution to making maximum use of a steeply sloped lot. Beyond this patch of greenery were woods, and Isabel remembered being told an old stone wall dating back to Revolutionary times could be spotted by sharp eyes. Jenna followed Isabel inside the study, but she didn't stop to look around. Instead, she handed the pad and pencil to Isabel, opened the sliding door, and walked out on the deck.

Isabel wished she could torch Richard's possessions, which he'd been forced to leave behind after threatening Natalie the first time he came back for his belongings. She decided to let Mrs. Chapman take the massively heavy walnut furniture and donate the rest to the kidney foundation. In Florida they were always calling to see if they could pick up clothes or cars. Isabel made a mental note to check his desk for papers before it left the house, but she wasn't ready to face that task yet. She went outside and joined her niece.

"Do you want to come with me to Natalie's room?" Isabel asked.

"Okay," Jenna said flatly. She let Isabel take her hand and lead her back into the house.

When Isabel opened the bedroom door, she felt as if she was peering into a chamber too sacred for her to enter. This is where it had all happened. It was eerily quiet, and the silence made the gunshots she imagined echo louder in her mind.

Isabel looked at her and noticed her niece's eyes were rapidly scanning the room. Was she searching for traces of blood? Isabel gingerly placed one foot on the pale green carpet and entered the hallowed space. Jenna, still holding her hand, stepped forward too. Isabel realized they both seemed to have stopped breathing, and she exhaled loudly,

hoping her niece would do the same. It was hard to believe that the innocent looking white-washed country French bed before them, with the peach floral comforter, was where Natalie was lying when she was shot.

“Mom’s bed wasn’t white before,” Jenna said softly. “And where’s her Amish quilt?”

“I don’t know what became of the quilt,” Isabel said, trying not to think about what might have happened to it. “But someone must have refinished the bed. Maybe the realtor told Grandma and Grandpa that white would make the room seem airier.” She tried not to shudder, as she imagined bloodstains covering the old natural wood finish. Though she and Jenna both kept their eyes on the bed, they didn’t walk directly towards it. Instead, they walked around the perimeter of the room.

Suddenly looking at the bed began to overwhelm Isabel. She started rambling on about little things--even though Isabel suspected that she was getting on her niece’s nerves. “I always loved the vines your mom stenciled along the tops of the walls,” Isabel said. “And the colors in this room. Lavender and green are such soothing complements.”

“Stop it,” Jenna said, turning to glare at Isabel and accidentally knocking a perfume bottle off Natalie’s cherry serpentine dresser. “I don’t want to hear about what a great decorator Mom was.”

Isabel’s jaw dropped, as she looked down at the broken shards of glass and the stain that had already formed. When she knelt to the ground and began picking up the pieces, she realized this was one of the glass bottles their mother brought back from Venice. Isabel had one on her dresser in Florida. She covered her face with her hands and inhaled. The perfume was L’air du Temps, the only scent Natalie had ever worn.

Isabel wrinkled her nose, trying to catch a final whiff as the remnants of the perfume evaporated and became dispersed in the room.

“I’m sorry,” Jenna said, looking over at Isabel. “I know Mom was awesome at decorating, but how can that matter anymore?”

Of course Jenna was right, but Isabel had to remember and appreciate something positive about her sister’s life or her existence would seem pointless and as unreal as the stenciled vines above her. Kneeling there, Isabel wondered if Natalie would have forgotten where the perfume bottle came from, since she was only four when their mother had given it to her. It dawned on Isabel it was likely that there were things Natalie might have remembered that she’d forgotten, and if that was true, then parts of Isabel had died with her sister.

“Anyway, I don’t think Dad liked everything she did to the house. Once, when he still lived here, I heard him say their bedroom was starting to look like a bower in some eighteenth century painting, whatever that means, and I don’t think he was too happy about it.”

Isabel thought anyone who imagined himself as a Louis XV figure had no room to talk about taste and wondered how Richard decorated the apartment he moved into after he got kicked out. “Did you ever see your dad’s apartment?” she asked.

“No,” Jenna said. “The judge only gave him supervised visitation, in the presence of the law guardian. He wouldn’t see me after that.”

The bastard, Isabel thought. But it was better he hadn’t seen her.

Jenna walked past the bed to the sitting room. She picked up a hand-sewn German teddy bear from the chest at the foot of the bed, stroked its soft fur, and carried it

over to her mother's pillow, touching the embroidered pillowcase with the tips of her fingers as she carefully laid it down. Then Jenna ran her palms up and down the length of the purple eyelet comforter, even though Isabel hadn't noticed any creases. Watching her, Isabel wondered if Jenna still believed Natalie had visited this house after she died. Was Jenna trying to straighten out the wrinkles Natalie's ghostly self might have formed, if she'd rested there awhile after she died?

Isabel sat down on the stool in front of Natalie's vanity. As she studied her reflection in the mirror, she remembered Sam saying she was beautiful like Natalie. Had he been telling the truth?: she asked herself. Because frankly, she didn't see the resemblance. There was a strip of pictures of Natalie and Jenna taken at a mall photo booth tucked into the glass, which made it easy for Isabel to compare her sister's features with her own. She could detect a certain similarity in their mouths; their lower lips were slightly fuller than the upper gently arched ones, each rounded in the center tapering to thin lines at the edges, creating the effect of a perpetual smile even when their lips were absolutely horizontal. And it was true they both had high cheekbones, but Natalie's face was a soft oval while Isabel's pronounced jaw line made hers seem almost triangular. Isabel noticed that her own forehead seemed broader than it ideally should have been, while Natalie's was perfectly proportioned. And then there was Isabel's nose, which was slightly crooked ever since a metal serving platter crashed down on it from an overhead cabinet when she pulled another plate out too quickly. Their hair was different too; Natalie's auburn tresses were so thick and wavy that they looked impossible to pin up and restrain, while Isabel's hair, though golden, was limp and straight and easily pulled back.

Isabel picked up a boar's bristle brush and began pulling it through her hair, hoping to impart some more luster to it. She decided to see if Natalie had any decorative combs or hair clips and opened one of the vanity's drawers. It was filled with lipsticks and makeup, not hair accessories. Isabel tried to shut the drawer, but it wouldn't close all the way. Then, she tried using her hands to flatten out the contents, thinking that maybe something was sticking up in the rear of the drawer, but that didn't work either. When she opened the drawer all the way, she noticed something wedged in the back. It was an envelope. She lifted the flap and saw it contained two ticket stubs from Belmont. That's odd, Isabel thought. She'd never thought of her sister as the betting type. Maybe she only went there to please Jenna.

"I bet you dreamed about being a jockey after your mom took you to Belmont," Isabel said.

"I never went to Belmont," Jenna said.

"You didn't?"

"No," Jenna said.

"Did you ever ask to go? Or want to?" Isabel asked, thinking that Jenna's interest might have piqued Natalie's curiosity.

"Of course not," Jenna said. "Racetracks aren't places kids belong. I heard my Dad say that once."

"Did he and your mom argue about going?" Isabel asked.

"One time Mom suggested taking me, but Dad wouldn't let us since he thought it was nothing but glorified gambling. Even after he moved out, she still wouldn't take me."

“Where’d these ticket stubs come from then?” Isabel asked.

Jenna shrugged and walked over to the vanity.

There were two more drawers, and they each chose one to look through. Isabel’s contained emery boards, nail polishes, pumices and lotions. Thinking that she wouldn’t find any more unusual items in this piece of furniture, Isabel stood up and accidentally jarred the removable seat cushion. She lifted it the rest of the way off, and her niece closed her drawer and turned to see what was inside the seat’s storage compartment. Jenna picked up some pictures of hairstyles her mother had saved.

“This is weird,” Jenna said. “Mom only got her hair cut a couple of times a year, and I never saw her take pictures with her to the hair dressers. She usually told them to cut it however they thought it would look best. Why did she save these clippings?”

“I don’t know,” Isabel said, thinking that her sister might have been considering more than a new look. Perhaps she felt she needed a new identity, after the divorce.

Isabel picked up a Steuben Glass ad and showed it to Jenna, who didn’t seem too interested. “Did your mom ever take you to see their shop on Fifth Avenue when you were in the City?”

“No,” Jenna said. “We went to the Met sometimes, but Dad didn’t want us wandering around New York. What’s Steuben glass?”

“Very valuable, hand-blown glass that wealthy people collect,” Isabel told her. “I saw this piece of a person ice fishing in a museum once. A miniature man, pole and fish made of metal, were inside the glass somehow. You could even see the slightly wider hole around the pole. It was amazing.”

“That sounds cool,” Jenna said.

Isabel wondered why Natalie kept the ad since as far as she knew Natalie wasn't a glass collector.

"Look, more tickets," Jenna said.

"What are they to?" Isabel asked.

"Saratoga Springs," Jenna said. "I wonder when she went there."

Isabel took them from her niece and examined them closely. Isabel realized they both had the same date, so her sister hadn't gone alone. "The date on the stubs says August 28, 1999," she said. Then it hit her that that was ten months before Natalie served Richard with divorce papers.

"I'm surprised Dad let her go," Jenna said.

Maybe he didn't, Isabel thought to herself.

"Wait. Mom went to see Grandpa in August, after he had his second heart attack," Jenna said. "Maybe she went to Saratoga then too."

Isabel didn't say anything. Saratoga wasn't en route from Great Falls, and no one had ever mentioned a second heart attack to her. She didn't think her father would keep something like that from her, but why would Natalie say that he'd had another one if he hadn't? Did she want no one to know where she was? Nothing made sense. It seemed inconceivable that Natalie could have gone there without Richard finding out. He'd always watched over her like a hawk. Maybe Natalie had had a secret life and Richard had found out about it.

"Aunt Isabel, what's wrong?" Jenna asked, locking eyes with her.

"Do you think your dad could have discovered your mom went there?" Isabel asked.

“I don’t know,” Jenna said. “They never said anything in front of me. Whenever they got into arguments, they sent me to my room.”

“Well,” Isabel said, “if we keep looking, we might find some answers.”

“I never thought we’d be trying to solve a mystery,” Jenna said. “I just thought we’d be putting things in boxes and moving stuff around.”

“I think we’ve done enough for one morning though,” Isabel said. “Are you ready for lunch?”

“I could go for a slice of pizza,” Jenna said.

“Let’s go to that place across from Mrs. Chapman’s,” Isabel said. “And then we could stop by and talk to her. I forgot to ask her how many pieces she can fit in her showroom.” Isabel realized talking to people in the village might help her find out more about Natalie’s life. It was such a small town that someone must have seen or heard something that might shed some light on what she and Jenna had found at the house.

Isabel had just finished her slice of spinach pizza, and Jenna was polishing off her second pepperoni slice, when Sam walked in the door. Isabel couldn’t help admiring his muscular build, clearly visible beneath the gray v-neck sweater and boot-leg jeans he was wearing. His gaze was pensive, but his brow wasn’t furrowed and she could detect soft, parenthetical smile lines beyond the corners of his mouth.

“Hello ladies,” he said when he noticed them sitting there. He tipped his black baseball cap in their direction before going up to the counter and ordering two slices to go. Then he walked over to their table.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“We’d love the company, wouldn’t we?” Isabel said, smiling at Sam and Jenna.

“It’s good to see you again, Sam.”

Jenna waved hello.

“Hey, Jenna.” Sam said. “Where’s your sidekick?”

“My what?”

“Your pal Bradley,” Sam said. “I thought you two were becoming an item.”

“Sam,” Jenna said blushing, “Bradley and I are just friends. You know that.”

“Sure, friends, I get it,” Sam said, smiling.

“I’m going to go play a video game until our pizza’s ready. You guys are boring,” Jenna said, jumping up and pushing her chair into the table before Sam or Isabel had a chance to say anything more.

“How are you doing with the house?” Sam asked Isabel. “Brings back a lot of memories, I’m sure.”

“And raises so many questions,” Isabel added, wondering if Sam had heard what Jenna said.

“That’s probably true,” Sam agreed.

“What’s going on at the horse farm?” Isabel asked.

“Well, I’m thinking of buying a new horse,” Sam told her. “More and more people are signing up for lessons, but I can’t make the classes bigger unless I have enough horses.”

“What kind of horse are you looking at?”

“A Morgan,” Sam answered. “But it has to have the right personality.”

Oh God, he’s probably one of those people who think dogs or, in his case, horses, are people too, Isabel thought. “What makes for the right kind of personality in a

horse?” she asked.

“It depends on what you plan on doing with the horse. If I was looking to buy a race horse, I’d want a nervous and high-strung animal that would be more apt to charge out of the gate and gallop its heart out. But since I need a horse that kids can learn to ride on, those aren’t the personality traits I’m looking for. I want a horse that is calm and placid, but energetic enough to be willing to trot, canter, and jump. In general, most horses are more agreeable than the people I meet, but some are obstinate and unpleasant. Of course those animals usually have a history of abuse.”

When Sam said the word “abuse,” Isabel looked over at Jenna. She remembered reading a study somewhere that claimed children who were abused were more likely to grow up and abuse their children. Was this true for females as well as males? And what about spouses who were victimized? What happened to their personalities if they didn’t end up dead like Natalie?

“You’re not saying anything,” Sam said. “Does that mean you think I’m crazy?” he teased.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about Jenna and Natalie. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this...”

“If you’re worried about me repeating what you say, I won’t.”

“Yesterday morning Jenna told me she was physically abused by her father twice. Not sexually,” Isabel added quickly. “He broke her finger once and beat her another time.”

“That’s terrible,” Sam said. “Jenna never said anything to me, but she was probably afraid or embarrassed to tell anyone.”

“Did Natalie ever talk to the other parents when she brought Jenna for her lessons?”

“Sure, Natalie seemed real polite and always had something to say about the horses or the weather we were having. I don’t know that she was close enough with any of the moms to tell them something like that though. Lots of times I saw her sitting by herself reading.”

“I’m dying to meet people who might have spoken with her. I used to think I knew my sister, but after going through her things this morning I’m not so sure.”

“I bet that happens all the time,” Sam said. “People die, their friends and relatives start looking through their things, and suddenly they find out all kinds of strange things. Everyone has a secret life, don’t you think?”

Isabel wasn’t altogether convinced.

“We all have dreams or secrets that we don’t tell people about,” Sam said. “Heck, sometimes we probably don’t even acknowledge them ourselves.”

“I suppose that’s why we end up doing things that make us miserable,” Isabel said. “Being in the business world isn’t as great as I sometimes make it out to be. There are a lot of opportunities I’ve missed, like having my own children. Having Jenna with me has opened my eyes to so much.”

Jenna’s game was over, so she came back to the table and sat down. The woman behind the counter signaled Sam that his pizza was ready.

“Well, I’ve got to run. Do you mind if I call you sometime?” he asked. “People tell me I’m a good listener.”

“That would be great. Maybe we could go for coffee.”

“Well, where are you staying?” he asked. “So I’ll know where to call.”

“We’re at Hamilton House.”

“Nice place,” Sam said. “Jenna, hope to see you for another lesson tomorrow.”

He tipped his cap again and said, “Later, ladies.” Then he turned and walked out the door.

“Ready to go?” Isabel asked.

“Sure,” Jenna said, winking at Isabel.

“What did you do that for?”

“Looks like someone’s found a new friend. But I have to warn you, all the moms think he’s cute.”

“Oh really. And what about you, do you like him too? Or do you prefer Bradley?”

It was Jenna’s turn to blush. “Let’s go,” she said.

When they walked outside, they saw it was pouring again. The people here were right when they said rain had become a fact of life.

“Do you mind if we stop by Mrs. Chapman’s before we go back to the bed and breakfast?” Isabel asked. “Maybe the rain will let up while we’re in there.”

Jenna said she didn’t mind going there. Thankfully the shop was close by, because the wind was blowing so hard the rain seemed to come at them horizontally. Isabel and Jenna ran across the street and ducked under the striped awning. The door was locked but the lights were on and a sign said “Please Ring,” so Isabel rang the bell.

“Come in,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Looks like you got caught again.

Unfortunately there’s no avoiding it lately. Pretty soon it won’t matter that all our shoes

are soaked through since we'll all have webbed feet."

Isabel laughed. Then she carefully wiped her feet on the doormat before she ventured any further. "Jenna, you better wipe your feet too."

"Can I get you some tea?" Mrs. Chapman asked. "I was just finishing up my lunch in the back room."

"Sure," Isabel said. "I'm sure Jenna could use something hot to drink too."

"Great," Mrs. Chapman said, locking the door again. "I don't expect many customers right now - it's raining even harder than usual."

As they walked through the shop, Isabel looked down to make sure they weren't tracking in any mud. Fortunately, all she could see were small patches of moisture from their shoes.

"It's wonderful in here," she said. "I feel as if I'm in another world with all these treasures." When she inhaled, she detected a slight musty smell in the air - even though the furniture wasn't at all dusty and the floors were well-swept. Maybe the moisture was releasing natural odors from the wood, she thought, remembering the smell of English forests. As she walked through the shop, she was surprised by the quality of the antiques she saw. Although they weren't the same caliber as some of Richard and Natalie's antiques, there was an exquisite walnut burl desk, as well as a beautiful cherry dining table and matching sideboard with brass filigree drawer pulls.

"Most of the pieces look as if they're in excellent condition," Isabel observed. "I'm impressed."

"My husband is a genius at matching the original finishes when he has to touch up blemishes," Mrs. Chapman said. "We always buy a few of the antiques outright, and he

works on those before we put them on the floor. Having quality work on display draws the customers with the most money to spend, but we sell reasonably priced pieces to families just starting out as well.”

“Do you get customers from all over, or mostly local people?” Isabel asked.

“Cold Spring, Bedford, and Mount Kisco are where lots of folks from the City go to shop, but this area is becoming more upscale all the time, and we get many more customers through word-of-mouth advertising.”

“I used to drive all the way to North Carolina when I lived in the City. I never knew I only needed to drive an hour,” Isabel said.

Mrs. Chapman smiled. “I’ve got English Breakfast tea and an assortment of herbal ones. What would you like?” she asked.

“English Breakfast tea would be great,” Isabel said. “All this rain is making me drowsy, and I could use a little caffeine.”

“You seemed pretty awake in the pizza place, especially after Sam came in,” Jenna said, playfully punching her aunt in the arm.

Mrs. Chapman looked at her quizzically, but Isabel just blushed. Had her attraction to Sam been that obvious? And what would Mrs. Chapman think of her now? Did she think Isabel should be focusing on raising Jenna instead of flirting with horsemen?

“No need to get embarrassed around me, dear,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Sometimes I think I’m as old as the furniture in here. I’m not nosey, and I can keep a secret as well as a locked drawer.”

They sat down on steel chairs with yellow cushions at a chipped Formica table, all

antiques but of the junk heap variety. When Isabel shifted her body, the vinyl seat cushion emitted a slight squeak.

“Funny you should say that about furniture and secrets,” Isabel said. “Have you found lots of mysterious things?”

“Well, probably not as many as book dealers do,” Mrs. Chapman said, “because stuffing things in the middle of books for safe-keeping was a common practice for centuries. But sometimes I’ve found things hidden under cushions or stuffed behind wood partitions. When we get things at auctions, the drawers haven’t always been emptied out. I’ve found love letters, poems, and financial records. It can be pretty interesting.”

“What’s the most unusual thing you’ve ever found?” Isabel asked.

“Yeah, tell us,” Jenna chimed in.

“Let me think,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Well, one time someone brought in a side table, and when I was cleaning it out I happened to lift up the felt lining. There was a piece of paper with all kinds of strange hieroglyphs on it.”

“What do you think it was?” Isabel asked.

“When I found it, I decided it was a secret message,” Mrs. Chapman said.

“Maybe it was written by a spy or a double agent,” Jenna said, her eyes lighting up.

“It could be dangerous for something like that to come into your possession,” Isabel said, pretending to look gravely at Mrs. Chapman. “We promise to take everything out of the pieces we give you.”

“Have you found anything interesting yet?” Mrs. Chapman asked.

“Well...” Isabel began.

“No need to tell me,” Mrs. Chapman said. “Unless you want to. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Just some tickets to horse races,” Jenna said. “Isn’t that right, Aunt Isabel?”

“Jenna’s right,” Isabel said. “We did find a couple of tickets to Belmont and two to Saratoga. Neither of us knew Natalie ever went to those places, but it’s impossible to know everything about people--even relatives.”

“I know what you mean,” Mrs. Chapman said, nodding her head.

“Oh no,” Isabel said suddenly. “I just realized I left the list we’ve been making in the car. How many pieces do you think you have room for?”

“As many good quality antiques as you want to give me, though I might have to put some of the less valuable pieces in storage until we move some of this inventory.”

“That’s good to know,” Isabel said. “I wonder if the rain has let up. We should probably get going.”

“Will I see you at the fish dinner tomorrow?” Mrs. Chapman asked.

A church social was the last thing Isabel wanted to attend when she woke up that morning, being a borderline atheist, but now she couldn’t imagine not going.

“We’ll go,” Isabel said, taking a stand. They could always change their minds if Jenna didn’t feel like going. “Do we need tickets, or can we pay at the door?”

“I’ll be glad to pick some tickets up for you,” Mrs. Chapman offered. “Call it a professional write-off. If you stop by here around five o’clock, we can all go together.”

## Chapter Five

At breakfast the following morning, Isabel suggested they spend the day checking out consignment shops to see which ones sold furniture.

“You mean those places that sell smelly old clothes and used baby swings?” Jenna asked. “Don’t take our furniture somewhere like that. Who knows where it will end up.”

“Not all consignment shops are like that,” Isabel said. “Selling all the furniture through the local newspaper or the Penny Saver would take too long. I have a job to get back to in Florida. The other brokers can’t cover my clients forever. If we lived here, it would be different.”

“I still don’t like the idea,” Jenna said.

“Let’s go check a few out,” Isabel said. “Then you’ll see they’re not so bad.”

“Okay,” Jenna said. “But I’m not promising I’ll change my mind.”

“Thanks honey,” Isabel said. “I know this is hard for you. It’s hard for me too.”

When they finished eating, Isabel asked Susan and Erica if they could borrow a telephone book. They went back to their room, and Jenna began writing down numbers. Isabel called the stores to see which ones took furniture. Soon they had a list of places, but none of them were local. They were in Yorktown, Cold Spring, Mount Kisco, Hawthorne, and White Plains, all twenty to forty minute drives from Croton.

“Should we just pick the closest one?” Isabel asked.

“Maybe we should keep the furniture, after all,” Jenna said. “What if the people

who buy it don't really like it? Mom cared about everything in the house so much, and it would be strange to think I could never see her bed or favorite couch again."

"Honey, you know it would cost way too much to ship," Isabel said. "Besides, we don't have room for everything in Florida."

"Well, can we at least visit the stores before we decide?" Jenna asked. "I want to be sure the one we pick is a nice store, so our things find good homes."

Isabel didn't argue, since she figured she could check out the prices and get an idea of which stores attracted the wealthiest clientele.

The one in Yorktown wasn't upscale enough. It really did have used baby swings, broken wicker bassinets, and rickety changing tables. Most of the other furniture was chipped and scratched and was only made of particle board. The floor of the shop had yellow, cheesy wall-to-wall carpeting with stains and marks all over it. They were in and out of that store in five minutes.

"I told you so," Jenna said, as soon as they got in the car. "Those places are horrible."

"If they're all like that, we'll try to arrange an estate sale. But before we give up, I'd like to try one more place."

"Sure," Jenna said. "Let's try the one in Mount Kisco. I don't think it's very far from here. My pediatrician was in Mount Kisco, and Mom and Dad used to take me to a really good Spanish restaurant there. Can we go there for lunch first?"

"Sounds good to me," Isabel said, starting the engine. "Speaking of food, do you want to go to the fish dinner tonight?"

"I don't know," Jenna said. "There will be a lot of people there, and what if they

all talk about my mom and say they're sorry?"

"Is that what happened when you went to the stable?" Isabel asked.

"No," Jenna said. "They mostly asked me how I liked Florida and about school and my friends there."

"That's probably what will happen at the dinner," Isabel assured her. "No one likes to bring up uncomfortable subjects, so if you don't talk about your mother they probably won't either."

Soon they arrived at the restaurant. It was called La Camelia, and Isabel was glad to see that it was still in business. After a five minute wait, they were seated at a table in the back.

"We always got the paella," Jenna said. "It was one dish Mom and Dad both liked. Whenever we came here, I felt like we had a normal family."

"We'll order the paella then," Isabel said. "Speaking of seafood, you still haven't told me whether you'll go to the fish dinner."

"Why do you want to go so much anyway? Do you think you might see Sam there?"

"Stop it already about Sam," Isabel said. "And is there some reason you don't want to go? Are you afraid of seeing Bradley again?"

"All right, I'll go," Jenna said. "Just to prove to you that I'm not afraid of a boy."

The waitress came over and Isabel ordered a large dish of paella for them to share and a glass of Sangria for herself and a coke for Jenna.

"Maybe you should like Sam," Jenna said.

"I do like Sam. He seems like a great riding instructor."

“No, I mean *like* Sam,” Jenna shot back.

“What would be the sense in that?” Isabel said. “He lives here and we live in Florida. When you grow up, you’ll see that long-distance relationships rarely work out.”

“But when Sam’s around, you’re always smiling,” Jenna said, as soon as the waitress was out of earshot. “I think he’d be perfect for you, honest.”

“I admit he’s easy to be around and makes me smile,” Isabel said. “But I bet you don’t want to date all the boys in school who are nice to you and say funny things.”

“Most teenage boys I laugh at,” Jenna conceded. “But some of them are cool, and I’m starting to think I’d like to have a real boyfriend one day. Don’t you ever want one too?”

The waitress fortuitously appeared with their drinks. Right away, Isabel stabbed an apple with her fork and began sucking on an orange. When she had eaten all the fruit in her glass, the mariachi players appeared and, for once, Isabel was thankful to hear them sing. A few minutes later the waitress reappeared and put a steaming bowl of shrimp, sausage, peppers, and rice on the table. Steam wafted up, carrying a heady aroma of spices that Isabel hoped would make Jenna forget what she’d been talking about.

“Thanks,” Isabel said to the waitress. “Let’s dig in,” she told Jenna, dishing out heaping servings onto their plates.

They made it across town and arrived at the local Episcopal church’s consignment shop about three o’clock. It was mostly empty, except for a few mothers and some elderly shoppers. As soon as they walked in the door, Jenna said maybe this one was okay. It smelled a little like bottled air freshener, but it was clean and they didn’t see any

baby furniture. There was an assortment of end tables, bureaus, small dining tables, lamps, and desks, many of which were made of hardwoods, like maple and pine. There was even a standing mirror with a cherry frame, which was strategically placed to show off a white lacquer lingerie chest with delicate gold knobs.

“Can I help you?” an elderly woman asked.

Isabel studied her carefully before answering because she wanted to ascertain whether this was someone she could establish a business relationship with. The woman was probably in her late fifties to early sixties, though it was difficult to tell. Her hair was streaked with gray or had the gray been low-lighted with black? The skin on her thin face was translucent, but there weren't too many wrinkles. It was possible she'd had a face lift or at least Botox injections. But it was her physique that made Isabel most uncertain about her age. She had well-toned arms and legs and looked strong enough to move the lighter pieces of furniture by herself. There was none of Mrs. Chapman's softness in this woman, yet she seemed competent enough. In her neatly pressed calf-length khaki skirt and button-down blue oxford shirt, she looked as if she could have stepped right out of a Lands End catalog. Isabel decided this woman wouldn't lie, nor would there be any funny business with her.

Isabel extended her hand. “I'm Isabel Dupree.”

“Thank you for visiting our store today, Ms. Dupree. My name is Connie Brumby. Is there something I can help you find?”

“Actually, we're not interested in buying anything; we'd like you to take some furniture on consignment.” Isabel started telling her all about Natalie, the recent sale of her sister's home, and the fact that all the furniture had to be out of the house before the

closing in three weeks.

“We don’t have room for all the furniture,” Mrs. Brumby said.

“Of course not,” Isabel said. “I never thought you would.” Then she described the pieces they wanted to consign.

“What was your sister’s name again?” Mrs. Brumby asked.

“My sister was Natalie Dupree,” Isabel said. “You might have known her by her married name, which was Worthington. She took back her maiden name after her divorce. I guess which name you knew her by probably depends on when she first visited your store. Anyway, this is her daughter, Jenna.”

“Hello, Jenna. It’s nice to meet you. Would you like to sit in the back room and watch television while your aunt and I take care of some arrangements?”

“Sure,” Jenna said.

Mrs. Brumby led Jenna to the back and gave her a coke. Then she returned to the showroom.

“I remember reading about your sister in the paper,” Mrs. Brumby said.

“Oh,” Isabel said.

“I don’t know if I should be telling you this...”

“Telling me what, Mrs. Brumby.”

“Call me Connie. Anyway, I met your sister. She came into the shop.”

“That’s interesting,” Isabel said, hoping Connie wasn’t about to launch into some irrelevant story about how her sister bought a cedar chest from her. “How did you know it was her?”

While they were talking, Jenna reappeared. “There’s nothing good on television,”

she said. "Do you sell computer games or videotapes?"

"They're in the bookcase along the back wall," Mrs. Brumby said.

Isabel wondered if Jenna was trying to eavesdrop and began listing items they wanted to consign.

"I recognized her right away when I saw the picture in the paper," Mrs. Brumby continued, as soon as Jenna was far enough away. "She came in here several times--with a man."

"I never knew her husband was interested in second-hand furniture," Isabel said.

"She wasn't here with her husband," Connie said. "I saw her husband's picture in the paper too, and the man she came in here with definitely wasn't him."

"Did you get his name?" Isabel asked. She knew she had to find out who her sister had been having an affair with because, in the back of her mind, Isabel held that person partially responsible for her sister's death. Whoever it was should have protected Natalie from Richard.

"No," Connie said, "they paid for the things they bought in cash."

"What did the man look like?" Isabel asked.

"He was about five nine," Mrs. Brumby said. "And whenever I saw him, he was casually dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. Your sister always came in wearing a skirt or slacks and a freshly pressed blouse."

"What color hair did he have?" Isabel asked.

"He always wore a cap," Mrs. Brumby said. "It might have be sandy, or it could have been dark brown. I'm not exactly sure."

"Was it wavy or straight?" Isabel asked. She was starting to feel like a detective.

“Curly, I think,” Mrs. Brumby said. “But I could be mistaken about that. You’ll have to forgive me for being so forgetful. It’s been a long time since they were in.”

“Did they tell you what they were looking for?” Isabel asked.

“Your sister seemed to be helping him pick out furniture. They bought a love seat once and a trio of nesting tables--you know the kind you eat t.v. dinners on. Sorry I can’t tell you much more than that. I never thought much about them coming in here, until after I found out she was murdered by her husband.”

“Did you tell anyone this before?”

“I wanted to,” Connie said, “but my husband told me it was none of our business.”

Isabel was half-tempted to ask Mrs. Brumby to double-check her records, in case Natalie had purchased anything else she was forgetting or had given a different address, but she didn’t want to give Mrs. Brumby the opportunity to say anything more.

“Anyway, thanks for the information,” Isabel said, hoping that Jenna hadn’t been able to hear Mrs. Brumby from where she was standing in the back of the store. “I don’t mean to rush you, but Jenna and I have things to do this afternoon, so if you’re interested in taking the pieces I mentioned, we need to make those arrangements.”

Mrs. Brumby excused herself and went in search of a pad and pencil, giving Isabel time to think about what she’d said. Who could this man have been? Why had Isabel been furniture shopping with him? Had they just been friends? But somehow Isabel doubted whether Richard would have approved of Natalie having any male friends. Isabel was pretty certain these visits had been secret assignments and wondered how she could find out more without bringing her sister’s character under scrutiny in the public

eye.

At five o'clock, Isabel and Jenna walked over to Mrs. Chapman's shop. After her peculiar encounter with Mrs. Brumby, Isabel was relieved to see Mrs. Chapman again. She was looking out the shop window and smiled as soon as she saw them.

When Mrs. Chapman joined them on the street, she looked up at the sky and said, "Must be some sort of divine intervention."

"I think you're right, Laura," Isabel said, forcing herself to use Mrs. Chapman's given name. "It's funny how the rain stopped just in time for the church picnic."

"Well, are you ready to set off?" Mrs. Chapman asked. When they had crossed the road, she put her hand on Jenna's shoulder. "Your Aunt told me you're a little nervous about going," she said. "Don't worry dear, everything will be fine."

They walked past the toy shop and deli before turning into a parking lot that opened onto a park behind the church. The fish dinner was taking place in a large hall near the back entrance. People were milling around on the steps, and no one seemed to be in a hurry to go inside.

Mrs. Chapman handed their tickets to two women sitting at a table by the door. Inside, there was a sea of large round tables. Since it was only a Friday night dinner, and not a gala, the decorations were fairly restrained. There were inexpensive blue checked table clothes on the tables, but no flowers or candles. Isabel looked at the ceiling and noticed two basketball hoops had been hoisted up out of the way. Clearly this was not going to be a glamorous night out. But as she stood in line for her food, she saw more and more people stream into the hall, so she knew she was at the right place for people

watching. She kept turning her head and searching the crowd for men that might match Mrs. Brumby's description. Though many men had sandy-colored or brown hair, she only saw a couple of males with curls, and their hair was black. Maybe she'd meant to say wavy. Isabel looked around again but didn't see any likely candidates. Perhaps the man wasn't from Croton. But where would Natalie have met him?

When Isabel noticed Jenna looking around nervously, she scanned the room for Bradley or one of the other boys and girls she'd seen at the horse farm. Not recognizing a soul, she was about to tell Jenna they could leave as soon as they finished eating when Mrs. Chapman put a hand on Isabel's shoulder and directed her towards a woman with bright red hair, who was dressed in a bold geometric pantsuit that looked totally out of place in a sea of denim and khaki.

"Robin, this is Isabel, Natalie's sister," Mrs. Chapman said. She turned to Isabel and explained that Robin had been one of Natalie's neighbors.

"We live in the expanded cape to the left of your sister's house," Robin said. "I saw the sold sign on the lawn. That's great news. It was too nice a house to remain empty for so long."

"I'll be relieved when the closing is over," Isabel said. "Jenna and I came up so we could clear everything out for the new owners."

"Hi, Jenna," Robin said. She turned back to Isabel before Jenna had a chance to say hello back. "That must be quite a job. I was only in the house a couple of times, but I was amazed by all the furniture and collectibles your sister and her husband owned, not to mention the usual clutter that every house accumulates over time. Feel free to stop by for coffee anytime, if you need a break."

“Thanks,” Isabel said. “Don’t be surprised if we take you up on your offer.”

Bradley came up behind Jenna and tapped her on the shoulder.

“How’s it going Mrs. Dupree?” Bradley asked.

“Pretty well,” Isabel said. “Want to introduce me to your parents while we’re all standing around?”

Bradley introduced Isabel to his mom, Cynthia, and his dad, Derrick. Everyone shook hands, and Mrs. Chapman suggested they get their food and sit together. Jenna smiled at Bradley and Isabel knew she didn’t need to worry about her niece any longer.

“The fish smells great,” Isabel said to Robin and her husband, Gary, who were in line in front of her.

“It’s always pretty good,” Robin said. “We get the cod from a wholesaler in Ossining, and it’s fresh off the boat. That’s why so many people show up.”

“Did Natalie ever come to these dinners?”

“I saw her at some. She didn’t come regularly though, and Richard only came once or twice, but he didn’t seem to enjoy the dinners much and Jenna didn’t look too happy either. Of course, I don’t have kids, so it could be that all children Jenna’s age think church suppers are boring.”

She looks pretty happy right now, Isabel thought, turning in Jenna and Bradley’s direction. “It’s hard to say,” she said. “I never was around children much before Jenna, so I’m always trying to figure out what’s normal and what I should be worried about.”

Isabel grabbed a Styrofoam plate and some plastic silverware wrapped in a paper napkin. She gave her plate to a young man behind the serving table, who loaded it up with two pieces of breaded fish, sautéed new potatoes, and green beans with almonds.

Isabel grabbed a roll and a can of diet coke. Even though it wasn't a fancy meal, it did look good. The ingredients were all fresh and nothing was swimming in grease.

When she had everything she wanted, she looked to see where she should sit and noticed Mrs. Chapman waving to her. She'd found a large table in the back of the hall. Isabel told Jenna and Bradley, who were still getting their food, where the empty table was located. She was glad Mrs. Chapman had chosen that table because it was far away from the crowd and she knew she would be able to see the entire room from there, and Sam - if he should walk in. As she walked through the room, Isabel suddenly felt as if everyone was staring at her. She couldn't get to her chair fast enough and prayed Sam would show up, even though she doubted he was Catholic.

Halfway through her dinner, when Isabel had given up thinking he would come, she noticed Sam at the end of the food line.

"Is that your riding instructor?" Isabel asked Bradley.

"You know his name is Sam," Jenna teased.

"Bradley, go get him," his mother said. Cynthia turned to Isabel and explained that they'd asked Sam to come, but he'd said he might be a little late.

"Don't go away," Bradley said to Jenna. "I'll be right back."

Isabel pretended to be lost in conversation with Mrs. Chapman, but every few seconds she stole a glance at Sam. Bradley stayed and talked to Sam while he got his food. Then the two of them started walking to the back of the hall. Sam was wearing a blue cotton shirt and khaki chinos, instead of his regulation t-shirts and jeans, and Isabel realized he was much handsomer than she'd thought. She could feel her pulse start to quicken and was fearful that her face showed signs of her increased circulation, so she

tilted her head and gazed down in her lap.

Bradley sat back in his seat, and Jenna got up and sat on the other side of Bradley --leaving the seat next to Isabel open.

“Mind if I join you?” Sam asked.

“We’d love it if you did,” Isabel said. “I mean if you want to.”

“So, did you buy that horse?” Isabel asked. “What kind was it anyway?”

“It was a Morgan, and, yes, I did buy it,” Sam said. “The guy didn’t come back until late this afternoon, and I had to stay at the farm to wait for the vet to come out and take a look at it.”

“So I guess the horse had a good personality for you to get this serious about it.”

“He’s a real gem. Intelligent, responsive, with strong legs and a beautiful back.”

To Isabel, it almost sounded as if he was talking about a woman. For a moment, she imagined that she was that woman, and she felt something like electricity run up and down her arms, creating goose bumps on her exposed forearms.

“Are you guys excited to see the horse?” she asked Jenna and Bradley, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Sure,” Bradley said. “When will we get to ride him?”

“In about a week,” Sam said. “I have to take him around the ring a few times and make sure he listens to commands well.”

“If you want, I’ll ride him,” Jenna said, “and you can have Luther back.”

“Okay,” Bradley said.

“Or I’ll ride Luther and you can have the new horse. Whatever you want to do is fine with me.”

“We could always share, if the horses don’t get too confused,” Bradley said, obviously reaching for Jenna’s hand under the table.

After dinner, Isabel, Jenna, Bradley, his parents, Mrs. Chapman, and Sam all walked to the Blue Pig ice cream shop around the corner on route 129. They got cones and ate them on the benches outside. It was the first clear night since Isabel and Jenna had been in New York.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful the stars are around here,” Isabel said. “When I lived in the City, there were so many lights that it was impossible to see much in the sky. Of course, most New Yorkers will tell you it’s not a problem since Manhattan is the center of the universe, so you don’t need to see anything else.”

Sam laughed. “Coming from Kentucky, being in the City makes me feel as if I’m experiencing sensory overload. It’s exciting, but I can’t stay too long. Sometimes I feel as if I can’t breathe there.”

“I know what you mean,” Isabel said. “Natalie and I grew up in Great Falls, Virginia. I had a hard time sleeping the first two years I lived in the City, but eventually I got used to the noise and lights. I still missed the trees and horse farms I grew up around though.”

Isabel gazed up at the sky, letting her hair fall back and touched her shoulders.

“Do you know any of the constellations?” Sam asked.

“Only the well-known ones like Orion,” Isabel said.

“When I was a boy in Kentucky, I had a telescope and I used to go out in the backyard and look at the sky every night. Do you want me to point out some more

unusual ones?" he asked.

"That would be great," Isabel said, thinking that she would be fascinated by just about anything he wanted to teach her, even if it was the best way to clean a horse's hooves.

Bradley's mother said she was cold, and Mrs. Chapman offered to go sit at a table inside the shop until everyone was ready to go home. Jenna and Bradley got up and walked inside with the adults, leaving Sam and Isabel alone on the bench.

Sam looked up to the sky and described how to find Cassiopeia. Isabel was fairly certain she'd identified that constellation, but when he began to talk about Gemini she told him she was having a difficult time finding all the stars. He reached for her hand and pointed it towards Pollux and Castor. The back of her arm brushed the inside of his elbow, and she shivered as his strong hand closed around her fingers.

Fifteen minutes later Bradley's parents, Mrs. Chapman, Jenna, and Bradley came back outside and said they were ready to leave. Mrs. Chapman must have noticed how interested Isabel was in Sam, because she offered to walk Jenna back to the bed and breakfast. When everyone was gone, Sam asked Isabel if she wanted to join him in a walk. Jenna nodded and they set off, winding their way through the streets south of the village center. As soon as they crossed Route 129, they passed the high school. Gazing up the wide driveway that led to the old brick building, Isabel remembered making out with her first boyfriend on a school athletic field back in Great Falls, after a school concert one night. Her whole future had seemed so full of hope then. She hadn't worried about whether he would like her in five years, because she suspected that she and her friends would all head for different colleges. Relationships weren't something they

hoped would last forever; it was enough that each one was exciting and new. They were too young to desire the illusion of permanence to compensate for their awareness of their own mortality.

“You look so serious,” Sam said. “What are you thinking?”

“It’s nothing,” Isabel said. The last psychologist she went to about her problems with men, before Natalie died and when she was still hoping to find someone suitable to marry, had told her never to reveal all her baggage on the first or second date.

“You sure something isn’t wrong?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Isabel said. “Which way do we go next?”

“If we keep going this way for a couple more blocks, we’ll get to a small park,” Sam said. “I was thinking we could sit there and talk for a few minutes. That is, if that’s okay with you?”

“Sure,” Isabel said, vowing to discuss Sam’s job on the horse farm, Jenna and Bradley, or even Natalie--anything besides her own desires and feelings.

Isabel thought the houses, though modest compared with the ones on Mount Airy Road, were picturesque in the moonlight. House lights punctuated the darkness, and Isabel envisioned happy couples in their living rooms snuggling on the couch watching television or reading together. She looked up at Sam and then quickly looked away.

“Something is bugging you,” Sam said. “If you don’t feel comfortable walking with me at night like this, we can always walk back to town. It’s not a problem.”

“No,” Isabel said, answering him faster than she wanted to. “I was just thinking about how much work we still have to do on the house.”

“I wish I could help you,” Sam said. “Maybe I could move some of the heavier

furniture, but only you can go through your sister's personal things. I'm sorry you have to do this. It must be so hard for you."

"I'll manage," Isabel said. "The first day was the hardest. Now I'm over the shock of being in the house again. I just keep finding out little things about Natalie that I never knew."

"Let's turn here," Sam said. "The park's just around the corner."

A few minutes later, they arrived at a fenced area with swings and slides. During the day, mothers must come here with their children, Isabel thought, recognizing a void in her life. Yes, Jenna was hers to care for now, but she would never be her own flesh and blood.

"There's a table we can sit at over here," Sam said, walking across the sand to a steel mesh picnic table.

Isabel tried to imagine the laughter of children's voices filling the air, but the only sound she heard was the wind whistling through the leaves. It seemed eerie sitting there in the dark, with only a streetlamp across the road and the moon to see things by. Isabel wished she could huddle closer to Sam, but she wasn't sure how he'd respond. Instead, she started running her fingers across the surface of the table.

"What's this?" Isabel asked, picking at a strange thing with her fingers. "It seems as if it's stuck to the table."

Sam lit a match and they saw it was a burned up Barbie. The hair was all singed and its body parts were unrecognizable melted blobs of black, plastic goop.

"How disgusting," Isabel said, rubbing her hands off. "Who would do something like that?"

“Some high school students must have been here,” Sam said.

“The body looks deformed,” Isabel said, “although I have to say, intact Barbie dolls don’t look a whole lot better.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I’ve yet to meet a woman who looks like a Barbie, and I’m not sure I want to.”

“But Mattel wouldn’t sell nearly as many dolls if they’d made them look like real people.”

Sam laughed, a throaty laugh that made his voice vibrate and the curls on his head seem to shake and dance beneath the moonlight.

Isabel wanted to run her fingers through his hair and make him laugh like that in her ear, but she was petrified and couldn’t move a muscle.

“So do you have a boyfriend back home?” Sam asked.

“No,” Isabel said, “I’ve been focusing all my attention on Jenna.”

“It’s hard to imagine someone as pretty and intelligent as you are being alone.”

Isabel was glad it was dark and that Sam couldn’t see her red face, or how her eyes were watering and threatening to tear. But he must have sensed how distraught his words made her by her silence since he got up and walked to her side of the bench. He sat down and put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to him.

Isabel was afraid to look at him, terrified that he might kiss her. But he didn’t.

“It’s okay to let go,” he said. “You don’t always have to be so strong.”

“Natalie was the same way,” Isabel said. “That’s probably why she never asked for help after the divorce.”

Isabel put her hands over her face and cried. Sam stroked her hair, and she felt

some of the tension leave her body.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. Then he quickly added, “I don’t mean it’s okay that she died. I mean it’s okay to cry.”

Isabel cried harder and began to shake. Sam put his arms around her and held her close. He didn’t say anything, but Isabel felt soothed by his gentle strength. No wonder he was able to calm wild horses. After a few minutes, she removed her hands from her face and looked at him.

“Feeling a little better?” he asked.

“Yeah. I haven’t cried since the day I found out Natalie was dead. Ever since I got Jenna from camp, I’ve felt it was my duty to be strong for her.”

“She’s lucky she has you,” Sam said. “But sometimes you have to take care of yourself too.”

Isabel looked up at Sam, her eyes filled with gratitude for his kindness. She couldn’t help wondering if he would ever be willing to take care of her. Then she dropped her gaze. It was too much to hope for. If there was anything she’d learned in the course of her life it was that she had to be able to take care of herself.

Sam leaned over and kissed Isabel’s hair. She was afraid to move a muscle because she didn’t want him to move away.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said, standing up. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay,” Isabel said, angry with herself for not having shown him how much she appreciated his tenderness. “Why don’t you sit down again?”

“You’ve been through a lot,” Sam said, looking away. “Maybe we should get going, so you can check on Jenna.”

“Let’s stay for a few more minutes,” Isabel said. “The air is so still and it’s quiet here. So much has happened that sometimes I wish I could stop the world from spinning so fast and slow time down, maybe even make it go backwards.”

“I know what you mean,” Sam said, turning toward Isabel again.

She sidled closer to him on the bench and he rested his hand on her knee. Isabel felt peaceful sitting there like that, under the stars with the night breeze ruffling the hair on her arms, giving her goose bumps and making her feel sexually alive for the first time in years.

## Chapter Six

When Isabel got back to Hamilton House, she found Jenna already asleep in the room they were sharing. She got undressed by the light of the moon and crawled into bed. As she was lying there in the darkness, thoughts of Sam filled her mind. She imagined his chest, cut like a piece of polished marble, beneath a thin t-shirt. Then she pictured him caught in a downpour, the fabric clinging to his pectorals, streams of water following the tendons in his arms, and him smiling, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Even though he was so muscular, Sam was medium-boned and only about four inches taller than Isabel, so she never felt physically intimidated by him even though she still felt awkward in his presence. She wondered where her cheek would rest if they embraced, which part of his neck her nose would rub against. Fantasizing about being with Sam that way made her think of Madonna. It began to worry her a little, the direction this fantasy was taking, but she couldn't block out the picture of herself prancing before him in a pair of stiletto heels, her hair swishing across her shoulders.

She thought back to her senior year in high school, when she'd fallen in love with Jeremy Kingfisher. He was the first boy she'd trusted enough to have sex with; and she was pretty sure she'd decided she wanted to have sex before he did, although she let him take the initiative. Like Sam, he was a gentle soul -- soft-spoken, with curly blond hair, and bright blue eyes that grew large with wonder every time she let him move on to another base. But as far as she knew, he never boasted to his friends. Jeremy and Isabel promised each other they would never tell anyone about their physical explorations, and

keeping their actions secret made what they did seem pure even though she knew her parents would have been angry if they'd found out what went on in the garden shed out back.

Isabel felt the men she was with after Jeremy took sexual forays for granted, since the pill made sex easier and less complicated than it must have been for her parents. This kind of free love cheapened the cost of affection, Isabel thought, because you could get it from anyone. Just that first time with Jeremy had been special to her. The more men she slept with, the worse she felt about herself; even though she'd told herself it was okay that it was all about sex. Really, it hadn't been. She'd wanted someone to hold her and make her safe, even then; but she knew if she told any man that he'd run. And so she continued having sex and feeling guilty, until she decided she was better off alone. But she had to admit that she missed being touched by a man -- especially since all the sexual harassment suits at her office had made casual, friendly physical contact, like an innocent pat on the shoulder, a thing of the past. In the past two years, Isabel hadn't been kissed once, except on the head, by Sam, earlier that evening. She wished she'd thrown her arms around him, so he would have gone on to kiss her other places. Her body ached for his, and she wondered if it would show in her eyes the next time they met.

Thinking about what sex with him would be like made her palms clammy and her heart beat faster. Beads of perspiration formed on her brow, and she got up and went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. When she shut off the water and looked up, her eyes met the gaze of someone starved for love in the mirror. If her desires were not satisfied soon, she thought they might drive her mad. She shut and locked the door, took off her nightgown and lay down on the cold, tile floor and began to touch herself--softly

at first and then with more pressure. She made circular motions on her clitoris that she imagined would be like his tongue on her. Just as she was about to have an orgasm, she started thinking, what if he didn't want to touch her? Or if she froze when he did and couldn't feel anything? She had no idea whether Sam would be able to awaken the woman who'd been shriveling up inside her every since she left Great Falls and Jeremy behind.

The urge to come left her and she began trembling from the cold. She decided to get up and search for another comforter on the way back to bed. Jenna wouldn't need one because she was always complaining about being too hot. Isabel was afraid she was becoming like her parents, turning the heater up too high and stifling all the young people until they were forced outside in search of cooler air. She found a crocheted blanket in the bottom drawer of the dresser, which reminded her of one her grandmother had made that was in her parents' bedroom. It crossed her mind that she hadn't called her mother and father since she'd been in Croton and that they might be worried. But then again, they wouldn't want to hear about what was troubling her. Isabel got back in bed and pulled the extra blanket and layers of bed linens up to her chin. After making a warm cocoon for herself, she became lost in bittersweet memories of her youth. When they were growing up, Isabel and Natalie's parents insisted their family was perfect and they constantly reminded their children that they were living in a house most people could only dream of owning. Their house was in a perpetual state of renovation and immaculately kept, despite the constant presence of workmen. Personal problems weren't recognized: Isabel and Natalie had to be the best students; they were supposed to grow up and lead enviable lives that their parents could brag about to their friends; and they were

supposed to think their parents had an ideal marriage, despite the fact that they slept in separate bedrooms. If her father knew that she was searching for more clues about Natalie's life instead of closing up the house, she suspected he would insist they leave Croton immediately and have Natalie's things given to charity without further inspection. Isabel decided to have Jenna call them in the morning, since her niece was more likely to make it sound as if things were fine.

After breakfast the next day, Isabel gave Jenna her cell phone and told her to call her grandparents. Just as she expected, Jenna talked mostly about riding, the fish dinner, and seeing Bradley again. Isabel realized her parents must have asked about the house since Jenna mentioned how Mrs. Chapman and Mrs. Brumby were going to take care of selling the furniture. That must have been all they wanted to know and all Jenna wanted to tell them because after mentioning the unbelievable amounts of rain they'd had, Jenna handed the phone to Isabel.

"Hello," Isabel's father said. "Jenna told me things are going well."

"Sure, Dad," Isabel said. "We're lucky to have found a trustworthy antique dealer and a reputable consignment shop. Natalie had good quality furniture, so hopefully it won't take too long to sell."

"That's good," her dad said. "I'm sure you have things to get back to in Florida. No use spending more time there than you have to."

"There's still a lot of Natalie's personal belongings to sort through though," Isabel added.

"Why don't you just give her clothes to the Salvation Army and toss everything else you find in her desk and junk drawers--unless you come across any important

financial papers,” her father suggested. “Although I think we probably know about her accounts from the mail that was forwarded to us after Natalie died.”

Isabel wanted to say there were more important things than money, but she doubted whether her father would understand such a concept. “I think I can spend another ten days to two weeks here, before my boss will get upset. The summer’s a slow time for us. Are you sure you and Mom don’t want to come up?” Isabel asked, fairly confident that he would say no. Her father never went anywhere, but he always got angry if she didn’t ask him to visit soon.

“It would be too upsetting for your mother,” her dad said. “And for Jenna’s sake, I hope you two don’t stay there much longer.”

“I’ll call again in a few days and let you know how things are coming along,” Isabel said, glad to have more uninterrupted time to explore. “Love you. Bye.”

“Good-bye,” her father said, and the line went dead.

Why couldn’t he ever say that he loved her, Isabel wondered. What would be the harm in that -- even if it was a lie? She hated herself for caring whether he loved her or not. He wasn’t going to change, so it was stupid of her to hope he would suddenly act differently; yet each time he hung up like that, all business-like and cold, it got to her. But she couldn’t help thinking that the odds were more in her favor now. Natalie was gone, so it wasn’t unreasonable of her to hope that her father might reconsider his affection for his only living child.

“Come on,” Isabel said to Jenna. “Let’s get going. The sooner we start working, the sooner you can go riding.”

“You mean, the sooner you can see Sam,” Jenna teased.

“What if I am starting to like him?” Isabel asked. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I knew it!” Jenna said.

Isabel took the sweatshirt she was about to tie around her waist and swatted Jenna’s behind.

“Bradley said he wants me to be his girlfriend,” Jenna blurted out, “even though we’re moving.”

“I knew it too,” Isabel said. “When did he tell you that?”

“Last night, when his parents were in the ice cream shop and you and Sam were all lovey-dovey.”

Isabel gave Jenna a little squeeze. “It sure makes being here easier, doesn’t it?”

“Yup,” Jenna said, but right away her eyes lost their brightness.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “I know this is hard. We could take the whole day off if you want.”

“No,” Jenna said. “I just feel a little guilty thinking about Bradley so much, when I should be remembering my mom and all she did for me.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but your mom would want you to be happy and carry on with your life,” Isabel said.

“Right after Mom died, I kept seeing signs of her everywhere,” Jenna said. “I used to think I heard her voice whenever I was in crowded places, or a car would go by and I’d think I saw her.”

“It was the same for me,” Isabel said. “I kept thinking she’d walk around the corner, or that the phone would ring and it would be her. Her death was so sudden, it

didn't seem real."

Neither of them said anything more. Isabel tied the sweatshirt around her waist, and Jenna walked into the bathroom, leaving the door open while she brushed her hair.

"Look at the time," Isabel said, a few minutes later. "It will be noon before we get started. Are you sure you still want to go?"

"I'm fine," Jenna said, picking up her backpack. "We need to do this."

In the car, Isabel decided they should come up with a strategy for what they hoped to accomplish. "Do you want to go through your things, and I'll work on your mom's room? Or will it bother you to be in a room by yourself?"

"I'll be fine," Jenna said. "That way I can take my time looking at stuff."

"Good," Isabel said. "Then that's what we'll do." She was relieved she could go through Natalie's things by herself. Isabel wanted to make sure she could comb through everything so she wouldn't miss any special keepsakes, and she was beginning to think that she was going to have to censor what she let Jenna see.

Ten minutes later, Isabel opened the front door of Natalie's house and they went inside, each armed with a couple of cardboard boxes. Isabel had picked them up from the liquor shop on Grand Street, so they would have somewhere to store any memorabilia they wanted to save. Inside one of her boxes and one of Jenna's, Isabel had put a roll of black plastic garbage bags. These they would use to sort clothes into groups of items for the Salvation Army, consignment shops, or the dump; but she realized those distinctions were too difficult for Jenna to make on her own. Isabel she didn't want to keep any of Natalie's clothes for herself, even though they wore the same size. She thought it would

be creepy to inherit the wardrobe of someone who was gone, especially if that person were a sister. Yet she conceded it might be nice to choose one or two special things to give to Jenna later, even if they never made it out of her closet. Isabel walked Jenna to her bedroom and made sure her niece felt comfortable, before proceeding to Natalie's room upstairs.

She decided to look through Natalie's jewelry box first, which she found on top of her sister's dresser. When she opened the lid, she noticed there was mostly costume jewelry inside--cubic zirconia earrings, enamel pendants, glass beads, and fake pearls. Isabel knew her sister had better jewelry than this; she'd seen Natalie wearing necklaces and bracelets with amethysts, emeralds and other precious stones, all set in 14-karat gold and some studded with diamonds. Perhaps the realtors had put her jewelry away for safekeeping, while they were showing the house to clients. Then she remembered the stunning engagement ring Richard had given Natalie. Isabel had always dreamed of receiving a ring like that. It had a full karat, diamond-shaped stone in the center and two similarly shaped half-karat stones on either side. Isabel was pretty sure they hadn't buried her sister with it on and tried to remember what Natalie had done with it after the divorce. Had she put it in her safety deposit box? Or was it still in the house? People were funny about wedding rings after it was all over. One of Isabel's divorced friends kept her ring in an empty shoe box, while another left hers rattling around in the glove compartment of her car. She made a mental note to call her parents later since they had collected the contents of her sister's safety deposit box.

Next she decided to tackle the secretary desk. There were new checks and old registers, note cards, envelopes, stamps, and a couple of packages of photos she must not

have gotten around to putting in albums. Isabel opened the first bunch and saw pictures of Jenna playing the flute in the school band, Jenna getting her elementary school diploma, and Jenna at the Four Leaf Clover Ranch. Most of the photographs taken there were of Jenna riding Luther, but one was of her and Sam and Bradley. Isabel put that one aside before putting the rest of the package in the box. The other group included photographs Natalie had taken on a hike in the Adirondacks and some pictures from a Dale Chihuly glass exhibition, although her sister's notations on the back didn't mention where the exhibit was held or when Isabel tossed them in the box too. Then she looked in the two thin drawers under the desktop. One had pens, pencils, tape, scissors, and other office supplies. The other had a large address book with a horse on the cover and some newspaper clippings tucked inside. One clipping had reviews of glass shows and listings of dealers, and the other contained horse-racing information and a couple of newspaper articles about kids from the Four Leaf Clover Ranch in local and regional horse shows. The one on the bottom was titled "Sam Huntington to Take Over the Four Leaf Clover Ranch." It was dated five years earlier, when he first moved to the area and bought the horse farm. Isabel let the address book and other clippings slip to the floor as she grabbed the article about Sam with both hands and brought it closer to her face. Although she didn't want to miss a word, she paused and looked up after reading the first two lines. So Sam had trained famous horses in Kentucky. What else had he done? Isabel wasn't sure she wanted to know everything about him just yet. She kind of liked the sense of mystery that surrounded him. It made him more intriguing.

Still, Isabel couldn't help wondering why he'd given up such an illustrious past to live in this small town. True, it was in close proximity to New York, but he certainly

wasn't dealing with top quality animals here. Nevertheless, his past explained why he was so confident that he could understand the personality of any horse he encountered. Did he leave some unfinished business behind? Was he here in Croton to avoid something unpleasant in Kentucky? Why did he pick this town? Isabel read on, hoping to uncover more clues. Nowhere was it mentioned why he left Kentucky, but she was pretty sure you didn't wake up one day and just leave one of the best stables in the country--which is what Sam had done.

This got Isabel wondering if everyone here in Croton had a secret life, or was it just the small town atmosphere that made it seem that way? Isabel suspected that all the villagers knew everybody else's business, or at least pretended to know. As Isabel put that article in the box, along with the photo of Sam and his students, she couldn't help asking herself why Natalie had kept it. Perhaps her sister was merely amassing all the information she could about the equestrian world in case Jenna became a well-known rider some day and someone asked her the name of her daughter's first teacher.

Having gone through the contents of the desk so quickly, Isabel moved on to her sister's bedside table before starting on Natalie's closet--a job she knew would take more than one morning. There were only two drawers in the night table. The bottom one had an embroidered satin eye pillow, a set of earplugs, some moisturizing cream, and a box of tissues. Isabel kept the unopened moisturizing cream and tossed the rest. In the top drawer, there was a gold Cross pen, a pad of floral note paper, and two books: a collection of poems by Gerard Manly Hopkins and *Anna Karenina*. All these items were worth saving in Isabel's opinion, especially since she'd never finished reading *Anna Karenina* and had lost her own copy of the novel. Isabel couldn't wait to start rereading

it. She pictured her sister stretched out on the living room sofa reading the Russian classic for hours at a time, and wondered if Natalie had made notes in the margins. Perhaps her sister had written something in the margins that might shed some light on who she was involved with, or perhaps she'd even hidden some clues between the pages. Isabel cracked the spine and the book fell open to Chapter XVI, which was marked by a folded page corner. Her eyes scanned the first few paragraphs, until she came to the sixth. What she read there caused her to suck air through her teeth and emit a rasping sound. Did Natalie devour this passage hungrily? Did it provide justification for her secret life, if she'd had one? Isabel could almost feel the pent-up drama that must have spilled out when her sister came across the following words: *They don't know how he has crushed my life for eight years, crushed everything that was living in me--he has not once even thought that I'm a live woman who must have love. They don't know how at every step he's humiliated me, and been just as pleased with himself. Haven't I striven, striven with all my strength, to find something to give meaning to my life? Haven't I struggled to love him, to love my son when I could not love my husband? But the time came when I knew that I couldn't cheat myself any longer, that I was alive, that I was not to blame, that God has made me so that I must love and live.* Perhaps Natalie, like Anna, had found true love, and she too had realized she couldn't live without it. Isabel wrapped her arms around her chest and bent forward, swaying back and forth to some mysterious rhythm. Love. What a powerful emotion it was. Isabel knew she had to shed her shell. If she kept her heart locked up for ever, such profound feelings would be something that existed only in her imagination or the novels of great writers. Isabel read on, hoping to discover what love was and how people behaved when they were in the throes of it.

What was this? Anna's husband was demanding that their life must go on as it was before, that she continue untenable pattern of lies and deceit. Why couldn't he just accept the fact that her heart belonged to someone else? How could he bear to wake up next to her every morning if he knew she no longer cared?

Isabel thought the only way she could remain in a loveless marriage would be if she was too afraid that her future might be even emptier. Perhaps Anna's husband wasn't able to let go of the past and accept the dissolution of his wife's love for him. Isabel was raised to believe that marriage was forever, a continuum of sorts, so she understood how it might be difficult to separate phases of a marriage into the past, present, and future.

All these thoughts of time reminded her she had no idea how much time had passed since she'd entered her sister's room. She looked at her watch. It was only 11:30, and since Jenna hadn't appeared to tell her she needed a break yet, Isabel decided she had time to at least examine the layout of the closet. It was a nicely designed walk-in closet, with many space saving features. Isabel's closet in Florida looked nothing like her sister's. It was true that there were a few shelves and two rows of rods in Isabel's closet. There were even shoe racks. But many of her belonging were heaped in the middle of the floor. Isabel was almost sorry to start working on her sister's because she didn't want to mess up the pristine neatness.

In the center of one wall was a drawer bank that extended from the floor three quarters of the way up to the ceiling. It looked as good a place as any to start. Isabel worked her way down the drawers, from top to bottom. The top drawer had gym clothes, which she dumped in the Salvation Army bag. The one beneath it had winter tights and woolen socks. As Isabel was scooping out the contents of this drawer for the trash bag,

she came across a couple of envelopes buried beneath her sister's things. Isabel sat down on the floor of the closet and opened them, but not before arguing with herself about whether it was right to read someone else's private correspondence--especially when that someone was her sister and dead at that.

Yet it was precisely this fact, that her sister was gone, that prompted her to unfold the papers and begin reading. If she didn't, how would she ever find out what had happened? Natalie couldn't tell her anything anymore, and no one in the village had said anything that would reveal the identity of Natalie's lover. First, Isabel glanced at the salutations and closings. She was disappointed that they didn't say *Dear Natalie* or *Love, Matthew* or *Steve*. Instead, they were addressed merely to *My Sweetheart* and signed *Your Love* in the same bold handwriting. One was dated August 30, 1999, and the second was written on January 10, 2000--before Natalie and Richard divorced.

The August letter opened by thanking Natalie for agreeing to sneak away to Saratoga Springs for the weekend. Isabel stopped reading for a moment, then lowered her gaze and read on. *I'm not used to putting my feelings into words, but I don't think I've ever desired anyone as much as I wanted you at the races last weekend. When Lemon Drop Kid pulled out of fifth to take the lead, I was ready to burst. He knew what he was after and nothing was going to get in his way. Back at our hotel, our attraction seemed mutual. It must be that we're meant for each other. Don't you agree? When are you going to leave your husband, so we can be together all the time? Having you again is all I think about.* Isabel read the rest of the letter, engrossed in every word, folded it neatly, and put it back in the envelope.

Why were people always meant for Natalie, when no one seemed to think Isabel

deserved their time and attention? It didn't seem fair. She closed her eyes, still clutching the letter, and took several deep, cleansing breaths in a futile attempt to rid herself of jealousy. The last time she spent the weekend with a man was the year before Natalie died. She'd met a guy in a bar and brought him back to her apartment. She thought things were going well when he didn't leave as soon as he woke up in the morning, but two days later he was gone and she never heard from him again. Reading Natalie's love letter made her realize how lonely she was, how much she wanted to receive such a missive--even if it was poorly written and brimming with tired sentiments.

She picked up the second letter. This one opened by describing the exquisite Steuben Glass pieces in the Carder Gallery at the Corning Museum, and how romantic it was kissing in a room where the only light came from spotlights in cases. *When we stood in front of Atlantica, I wanted to run my hands along your sides and snake my fingers through your hair. If I hadn't been afraid of setting off an alarm, I would have pressed you against the blue glass and taken you right there.* Isabel was hit with a pang of envy that she couldn't ignore. No man had ever wanted her that way, and she realized that Natalie hadn't just been a better daughter and student, she'd probably been a better lover too. Isabel wished she could ask Natalie why she was always excelled at everything. Had it been important to her to outdo Isabel, or had her successes come naturally?

Isabel jumped up and put the letters with the photos and newspaper clippings, under the books in the box. She couldn't bear to think about Natalie any longer, especially since she suspected it was sinful to feel jealous of someone who was deceased and no longer able to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. She went downstairs to find Jenna. On the way to her niece's room, she decided they should take Robin Olsen up on her

offer for a cup of coffee. Jenna had made a lot more progress in her room than Isabel had in Natalie's, since her niece had started with her clothes and most of them she'd outgrown. Half her plastic bags were filled.

"How are you doing?" Isabel asked.

"I got a lot done," Jenna answered. "Most of the stuff I'm giving or throwing away. But I kept some of my old t-shirts since Mom used to buy them big for me, so I could sleep in them. How's it going in Mom's room?"

"I got through her desk and a couple of drawers in the closet, but I'm ready for a break. Want to go to Robin's with me for coffee?"

"Sure," Jenna said.

Isabel wished it were appropriate to ask Jenna if she'd ever seen her mom with another man, so she could figure out who had written those letters. Instead she said, "I found some newspaper clippings your mom saved about horse shows around here. You and Bradley are in a couple."

"Where are they?" Jenna asked.

"They're still upstairs," Isabel said. "Want me to go get them?"

"Yeah," Jenna said. "I'd like to see them."

Isabel brought the box downstairs and found Jenna in the hallway. "Can I read them in the living room?" Jenna asked.

"Okay, but can you look at them quickly?" Isabel asked. "I could really use a cup of coffee."

When they got to the living room, Isabel put the box on the floor next to the couch.

“That’s the book Mom was always reading,” Jenna said when she saw *Anna Karenina*. “I wonder if she ever finished it.”

“I started it once in college,” Isabel said. “But I never made it to the end. That’s why I decided to keep it.”

“What’s it about?” Jenna asked.

“A Russian woman, and her family, and a nineteenth century landowner’s search for spiritual fulfillment.”

“That sounds pretty heavy,” Jenna said. “No wonder it took her so long to get through it.”

“You should read it some day,” Isabel said, though she hoped her niece would wait awhile.

“I was just thinking,” Isabel said. “Wasn’t Anna the name you thought you heard your mom say in the living room the first time we came back to the house?”

“Yeah,” Jenna said. “I think it was.”

“Maybe being in here again triggered a memory of your mom on the couch reading that book,” Isabel said, sounding more cheerful than she had all morning. Rational explanations always reaffirmed her faith in a purposeful world.

“That could be,” Jenna said, looking relieved. “And I’ve been thinking that the lights might have gone out in the funeral home because the bulbs weren’t screwed into the sockets all the way. That could explain why they went out all of a sudden after I touched the casket.”

“And maybe dust had been building up inside my parents’ grandfather clock for a long time,” Isabel joined in. Ever since Natalie died, Isabel had worried that all the stress

might be causing her niece to lose her grip on reality. Now it seemed as if things were returning to normal, whatever that was.

“Can I see the pictures in the paper of me and Bradley?” Jenna asked.

“Of course,” Isabel said, rifling through the paper-clipped stack. Then she handed a couple to Jenna, who studied them for several minutes before speaking.

“Bradley looks so much younger in these pictures, doesn’t he?” Jenna said.

“So do you,” Isabel said.

“They were taken five years ago,” Jenna said, looking at the dates. “No wonder we look so different.”

“Ready to go?” Isabel said. “You can take them with you to the Bed and Breakfast and study them more carefully later tonight.”

It didn’t take them long to walk to Robin’s house, an expanded cape with cute dormer windows on the second floor, with additions on both sides and, they later learned, the back as well. It was an eclectic home painted in bright blue with white gingerbread molding on the oldest sections. Isabel wondered why they didn’t get rid of the molding when they put on the additions or else carry it through, but she liked the house nevertheless.

“Hi,” Robin said, when she opened the door and saw Jenna and Isabel standing there.

“Are you busy,” Isabel asked. “Because if you’re not, I could sure use that cup of coffee you offered earlier.”

“Come in. I don’t have to be anywhere for an hour. You can go sit in the living

room,” Robin said, pointing to a modest-sized room to the right of the foyer. “Or come with me to the kitchen to put on another pot of coffee. It won’t take a minute.”

Isabel and Jenna decided to accompany Robin to the kitchen.

“Do you mind if I turn on the T.V.?” Jenna asked.

Robin told her to go right ahead. When the coffee was ready, Robin suggested they go sit in the dining room.

“I’ll stay here, if that’s okay,” Jenna said, when Isabel looked in her direction.

“I haven’t watched MTV all week. At the consignment shop yesterday, I had to watch Nickelodeon and *SpongeBob* wasn’t even on.”

“You poor thing,” Isabel said.

“Can I get you a coke or a brownie?” Robin asked Jenna. “You’ll find the conditions much better here, by the way. You can watch anything you want.”

“I’d love a coke,” Jenna said. “I’m not really hungry right now.”

When Robin opened the refrigerator to get the coke, Isabel noticed how neat and orderly it was. There were no spills, all the leftovers were in Tupperware containers, and everything was arranged in size order along the shelves on the door. “Do you have children?” she asked, hoping the answer was no, since her kitchen was a disaster area compared to this. And Isabel had only Jenna to take care of.

“Two,” Robin said. “My girls have graduated from college already. They babysat for Jenna a few times, when they still lived at home.”

Isabel looked at Jenna, who nodded.

“Let’s go sit down,” Robin said.

They walked back through the hall and turned into the dining room on their left,

just before they reached the front door. Robin put some mats on the cherry dining table, a beautiful piece with an inlaid diamond pattern. The chairs were also cherry and carved in the Queen Anne style. It was a very formal room, one which Isabel's grandmother would have felt at home in.

"So," Robin said. "Are you making a lot of progress at the house?"

"It's not going quite as fast as I'd hoped. It's hard to stay on task, because so many of Natalie's things make me wonder about her life; I keep finding out things I never knew about her, which makes me stop and think."

"Natalie was a little mysterious," Robin said. "Before Richard and Natalie divorced, your sister seemed preoccupied with something, though I'm not sure what. Several times she asked me to meet Jenna's bus and bring her over here for half an hour or so until she got home. But she never told me where she was or what she was doing."

"She might just have been running late with her errands," Isabel said, trying to weigh whether Robin was a helpful neighbor or a gossip. "You know how sometimes the line in the supermarket is longer than you expect."

"But she never had groceries in the car, at least I never saw any, when she came to pick Jenna up. Then she started coming and going from the house at strange hours when Richard was out of town. I don't know whether she left Jenna at home, or if she sent her to a friend's house."

"Really," Isabel said flatly, trying to disguise a disturbing feeling of excitement. Could it be that Natalie wasn't the great mother Isabel had always thought of her as being? And what if Robin thought Natalie's behavior had been unChristian? After all, Mrs. Chapman had said Robin was instrumental in planning church functions. But then

again, what about those Catholic priests who were being let go for inappropriate behavior towards their youthful parishioners? Isabel remembered hearing that the newly appointed Father at the Holy Name of Mary Church had been sent there following the last priest's removal due to such allegations. They had probably wanted to avoid lawsuits and negative publicity. Pondering possible issues of litigation made Isabel wonder when Natalie first sought legal counsel in her divorce proceedings and whether a further search of the house would reveal documentation of those meetings.

“Could I get you another cup of coffee?” Robin asked.

“That would be great,” Isabel answered, glad to be left alone with her thoughts for a few minutes. After weighing all her impressions, Isabel still didn't know how she felt about Robin. Her hostess appeared to be thoughtful and considerate on the surface, but there was something a little forced about her smile. She decided to ask Mrs. Chapman about Robin's reputation before she divulged any information she wouldn't want broadcasted.

When Robin returned, Isabel asked her about the history of the house and garden, how long she had lived in Croton, and whether she liked village life. Robin, a natural ambassador for the area, said it was great being in a small community so close to New York. Then she told Isabel about all the interesting people she'd met: activists, composers, musicians, artists, scientists, and writers.

Listening to Robin talk, Isabel decided there were probably several men Natalie might have found interesting enough to become involved with, though she wondered how many single men there were in such a sleepy town. Isabel looked at her watch and noticed they'd been there for almost an hour. “Don't you have to go somewhere?” she

asked Robin.

“Oh God,” Robin said. “It’s a good thing you reminded me. I have to be at the beauty parlor in fifteen minutes.”

Isabel wished she could be a fly on the wall while Robin got her hair done. She was sure hearing Robin’s conversations with her hairdresser would tell her whether or not she could trust this woman. “I’ll tell Jenna we’re leaving,” she said.

“I’m sure there’s a lot more we could talk about,” Robin said, reaching for her purse. “Come back anytime.”

“Thanks,” Isabel said.

On the way back to Natalie’s house, Jenna said she’d stuffed thirteen bags that morning, three with things to keep and ten with things for the Salvation Army.

“That sounds like enough for today,” Isabel said. “Let’s carry the bags of stuff you want to keep out to the car and put the rest in the sunroom. Then we can go get some lunch.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jenna said.

When they were finished, they went to Grandma’s restaurant for a slice of pie. Jenna had always loved going there. It was summer, so no decorations were up, but she told Isabel how at Christmas and around other holidays like Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Easter, the owners always displayed moving figures by the entrance way to entertain the children. Grandma’s had the best home-baked cookies and pies too.

“Can we get a chocolate chip cookie for Bradley?” Jenna asked.

“Sure,” Isabel said. “Since Sam’s going to be there too, do you want to get one for him as well?”

“That’s a great idea,” Jenna said. “Mom gave Sam cookies for Christmas every year, and Sam always said how much he liked them.”

The woman behind the counter put each of the cookies in a cellophane bag and tied them with ribbons, before handing them to Jenna. Isabel was touched by how happy Jenna looked holding the cookies. Clearly, Isabel’s father had no idea what was best for Jenna. This trip had done wonders for her niece already. The therapist had been right.

Ten minutes later, they were at the stable. As soon as she parked the car, Jenna was out the door and running up the path to the barn towards Bradley and Sam. She obviously couldn’t wait to give them their cookies. It took Isabel a few minutes longer to get moving, but she could feel her pace pick up when she saw Sam in the ring. When she noticed him looking in her direction, she gave him a big wave.

“Hey,” he called to her. “Thanks for the cookie.”

“Hi,” she said, when she got a little closer. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” he said, after swallowing another bite. “This is delicious. Want a bite?”

Isabel shook her head no. “I can’t believe what a beautiful day it is,” she said.

“I bet you thought you’d never see the sun shine again,” Sam, said laughing.

“Want to take a walk with me? One of the students didn’t show up and I have to get the saddle off the horse she was supposed to ride.”

“Sure,” Isabel said. “It’s too nice to sit down.”

When they got to the horse, Sam grabbed the reins with his left hand and went to unbuckle the saddle with his right hand. But then he stopped. “Have you ever ridden before?” he asked.

“When Natalie and I were younger, we lived in an English manor for a year,” Isabel said. “We rode ponies to school every day. Maybe Natalie or Jenna told you that.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I think one of them might have mentioned it.”

“And our family usually went to Asseteague in the summers. Natalie and I used to try to catch the wild horses,” Isabel said. “They must have liked Natalie better since they always let her get closer.”

“I’m sure they liked you just as well,” Sam said. “Anyway, I want to know how comfortable you are with horses, not how well Natalie got along with them.”

“I guess going through all Natalie’s stuff makes me think about her a lot,” Isabel said. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No, I’m an only child,” Sam answered.

“Do your parents expect you to visit a lot, since you’re all they’ve got?”

“They used to, but not anymore,” Sam said. “They’re in their mid-eighties now, and not altogether there mentally. I only see them a couple of times a year. They live in West Virginia.”

“My parents live in the other Virginia,” Isabel said. “In Great Falls.”

“There are lots of nice horse farms down there,” Sam said.

“Yeah, there sure are,” Isabel said, thinking that there were nice horse farms in Kentucky too. Just as she was about to ask Sam about Kentucky, Jenna, Bradley, and another boy walked their horses inside the fence.

“When I’m finished giving the kids their lesson, do you want to ride the trails in the fields with us?” Sam asked. “This horse is really good-natured and calm, so she

shouldn't give you any trouble."

"I have tennis shoes on," Isabel said. "Don't I need boots?"

"That's what I make the kids wear, but they're doing more difficult maneuvers. You'll be fine in jeans and tennis shoes. We don't have to ride fast."

"Well..." Isabel said, weighing the pros and cons of riding with Sam in her mind. Of course she wanted to spend time with him, and she had enjoyed riding when she was younger. But it had been such a long time, and she was a little nervous about making a fool of herself.

"Come on," Sam said. "I promise it'll be fun."

"You won't laugh at me?" Isabel asked.

"Don't worry," Sam said. "I've taught plenty of people with less experience than you."

"Okay then," Isabel said.

Sam smiled at her, and Isabel was glad she'd said yes. "Why don't you get to know the horse, while I make sure the kids are okay. Her name's Tilly."

The horse was a beautiful chestnut mare with a white streak on her muzzle. Her ears perked up as soon as she noticed Isabel walking in her direction, and she seemed happy when Isabel stroked her. Right away, she saw what Sam had meant about the mare. Her big brown eyes had such a sweet expression, and she did seem gentle because of the tentative, undemanding way she nuzzled against Isabel. What a beautiful horse she was. Isabel pat her with the palm of her hand and found herself lost in the tactile sensations of stroking her coat. The fact that Sam had matched her with this fine, calm to the point of being regal, horse made her feel special, and it made her think Sam was a

good judge of character. Luther, the horse her niece liked so well, had scared Isabel a little. He'd seemed a bit too spirited, but then Jenna was that way too. She'd be all mellow one minute, and the next minute she'd shoot off somewhere and change directions, no matter what they were doing.

After fifteen minutes or so, Bradley appeared.

"Sam told me to come out here and give you a hand," Bradley said. He's saddling up his own horse right now and should be here any minute."

"Thanks," Isabel said.

Bradley held the horse for her while she got on. Isabel bit her lip and grabbed the horn of the saddle. Then she swung her right leg over the saddle, her fingers whitening from holding on so tight. The mare shifted her legs and Isabel gripped the saddle with her thighs to compensate for the unintentional swaying of her upper body. She frowned and wrinkled her nose, as if she'd just smelled something unpleasant.

"You'll do fine. There's nothing to worry about with this horse. Tilly's the most even-tempered mare in the stable, aren't you girl?" Bradley said, patting her flanks, before walking off to see what Sam wanted him to do next.

But Isabel didn't relax until Sam appeared, leading a large, jet-black stallion.

"Are you sure that horse won't mind going slowly?" Isabel asked.

"He'll do whatever I tell him to do," Sam said, and Isabel was sure that was true. Secretly, she suspected she'd do the same.

Isabel held on tightly to her horse. She hadn't ridden in a long time and wasn't used to the rocking motion.

"Relax a little," Sam said. "If you hold the reins too tight and grab the horse's

flanks too hard with your knees, you're going to make her nervous. She won't go fast before we get to the gate, and I'll tell you how to keep her under control."

"I'll try," Isabel said. "It might just take some getting used to."

"You're doing fine," Sam reassured her again.

When they got out into the field, she started to feel more confident. Sam went in front for awhile, so Tilly would follow his pace. After a few minutes, he called back and asked Isabel how she was doing. When she answered him her voice must have sounded more relaxed, because he brought his horse alongside Isabel and Tilly.

"Isn't this great?" Sam asked.

"It's beautiful," Isabel agreed. "Did my sister ever ride out here?"

"A couple of times," Sam said. "Let's go this way. There's a beautiful elm I want you to see."

"I bet Natalie was a great rider," Isabel said. "She was good at everything."

"You're doing it again," Sam observed.

"What?" Isabel asked.

"Shifting the conversation to Natalie, instead of talking about yourself."

"It just seems natural to talk to you about her. I don't know many people who knew Natalie. Does it bother you?"

Sam didn't say anything for a minute. "I guess I thought asking you to go for a ride might take your mind off all you've been going through."

"Thanks," Isabel said. "You know I'm really glad you talked me into doing this. I forgot how much fun riding is, even if I'm not controlling Tilly quite as smoothly as I could be."

“You’re doing just fine for not having been on a horse in years,” Sam said.

For the rest of the ride, Isabel didn’t mention Natalie again. She and Sam laughed a lot, and Isabel thought they both seemed more relaxed. Then Sam looked at his watch and said they better head back in, since he was sure the children would be done soon.

Back in the ring, Isabel handed Sam the reins after she dismounted.

“How about dinner tomorrow night?” he asked.

“I’d really enjoy that,” Isabel said.

“I could pick you up at 7:30,” he said.

“Perfect,” Isabel said.

“See you tomorrow then,” Sam said. “I better make sure everyone is doing okay in the tackroom. We don’t want any monkey business going on there, if you know what I mean.”

Isabel laughed. “Bradley and Jenna are going to the movies tonight.”

“The movies already?” Sam asked, smiling.

“I’m pretty sure my niece has a crush on that boy,” Isabel said.

“Well, from watching the two of them out here, I’d say it’s mutual.”

Sure enough, when they walked in the barn, Isabel and Sam saw Bradley standing next to Luther while Jenna brushed him.

“Have you brushed your own horse?” Sam asked Bradley.

“I will in a minute,” Bradley said, looking a little guilty. “Jenna just asked me a question.”

“Were you able to answer it?” Sam asked.

“Sure,” Bradley said.

“I better be going,” Jenna said, blushing a little. “Right, Aunt Isabel?”

Isabel nodded. “See you next time, Bradley.”

Sam walked them part way to the car and gave Isabel’s elbow a little squeeze before she got in. “I enjoyed riding with you,” he said.

“Thanks,” Isabel said. “See you tomorrow.”

“What about tomorrow?” Jenna asked Isabel, as soon as Sam had shut the car door.

“We’re having dinner,” Isabel told her niece as she put the car into drive and hit the gas pedal a little heavier than she’d meant to, causing the car to spray dirt which she prayed hadn’t hit Sam. “He thinks I could use a break.”

“Nice,” Jenna said. “He sounds like a McDonald’s commercial.”

“I’m sure he’ll take me somewhere a lot nicer than that,” Isabel said. “At least I hope so.”

Jenna laughed. “He better, or you won’t be seeing him again.”

“Do you want me to see if Mrs. Chapman’s busy? Maybe she could take you to the movies.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jenna said. “But Bradley told me he’d ask his parents if we could get together.”

“That’s great,” Isabel said. “I hope it works out.”