

**COMING HOME TO
GREENLEIGH**

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First paperback edition January 2020

Published by Apollo Grannus Books LLC, www.apollogrannus.com

Cover design by Streetlight Graphics, www.streetlightgraphics.com

ISBN 978-1-7325158-7-1 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-7325158-6-4 (ebook)

www.cassandraaustenbooks.com

To all those who struggle for and against the past

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My weekly newsletter keeps my readers updated—almost to the day—with my latest publications, and offers lots of sneak peeks, chunks of works-in-progress, and your feedback will influence my decisions as I write. Join us and I'll send you a deleted scene from *Coming Home to Greenleigh*!

From the cozy refuge of her bed, Elisabeth could hear the sounds of the pipes clattering as the ancient boiler struggled to push heat around its network. This was the sound of the real world reminding her that it was time to deal with it.

She rolled over onto her back, squinting up into the sunlight as it filtered down through the leaves of the old oak tree next to her window. It all felt too familiar, this dread of facing whatever had to be faced on a fall day in Greenleigh.

Fall was Elisabeth's favorite time of year. Yes, it was sad. The angle of the New England sun was sad. The bare trees were sad. Even the slow-moving bugs were sad. But it had always seemed to Elisabeth that the brightness and energy of the summer weren't real anyway, and that fall was simply a return to the truth, the way things really were. Kind of like the realization after a night of drunken revelry that the world is a sober, sensible place, and that one had better take it seriously.

Elisabeth had never experienced a night of drunken revelry, but sometimes the joy of summer felt a little too breathless, a little too dizzy. Fall always felt more like the world that she knew.

She would be able to see her breath when she went outside this morning, wet leaves would be littering the lawn. It would feel normal.

Her aching muscles were telling her that she must have spent the night scrunched into a stiff, tense ball. It was cold, and the heat wasn't managing to reach the second floor. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up in one fluid motion; the ancient bed frame was so high off the floor, her feet dangled a foot above her slippers. She found herself staring blankly into the mirror over the antique oak dresser in the opposite corner of the room. Her curly brown hair was a tangled mess about her shoulders, and her face was blotched with fatigue. She smoothed her hair with her hands, gazing at the serious woman in the faded pink flowered nightgown.

Oh, my God, she thought. I look so old. I don't look like I'm thirty.

She pulled on a robe and made her way downstairs, padding barefoot through the kitchen, wincing at the cold. The radiators were hissing, but it was freezing downstairs, too. She swayed a bit as she measured out the coffee, listening to the rhythmic creaking of the wide pine floors, the sound familiar and comforting to her ears. As the coffee dripped, she wandered out of the kitchen and over to her office, a bright, south-facing room with big bay windows and a fireplace.

She peered outside through the wavy old glass. Mrs. McPherson was watering her roses next door, a bent figure in a bright yellow sun hat, wielding an ancient watering can that looked far too heavy for her. In the other direction, Elisabeth could see part of the town common and the red brick town hall, as well as the steeple of the Congregational church.

The office held dusty bookcases that had been in the same spot for at least a hundred years, jammed with an odd mix of fiction and law books, and the maple secretary in the corner was

heaped high with papers. Elisabeth tried not to look, but her gaze fell to the stack anyway.

I should save some trees and just do all of that online, she thought. She was still back in the twentieth century, with all of the household bills arriving in the mail just as they had when she was a child, most of them still in her father's name, even though he'd been dead for many years.

She went over to peer at the stack, her hands shoved into the pockets of her robe as if afraid to touch the papers. With a quick, involuntary shudder, she backed away.

I'm going to fix everything, she promised herself. *It'll all be better. After today.*

She poured her coffee, and then by habit, checked the cookie jar, where she stashed the grocery money. Twenty dollars, plus a little change. Her stomach tightened, and she pushed the jar away and headed upstairs.

Her room was the same one she'd had her entire life. She kept all the other rooms shut and rarely went into them. Once in awhile, if the wind was coming from the wrong direction, the hallway felt like a giant wind tunnel, and then she would check the windows everywhere just to make sure they were tight and caulked shut. She lived in fear of leaky ceilings and broken windows, and there was one corner pane of glass in her bedroom that she had duct-taped to within an inch of its existence rather than try to get it fixed. It was ugly, and it upset her to see it. But that was what one did in old houses like hers because replacing windows would cost an obscene amount of money.

She could just about feel a draft under her robe and it occurred to her that she should check the windows, but she knew what she really needed was to stop all of these depressing thoughts. She hurried into her bedroom, reminding herself that she was going to take action. She was going to stop the down-

ward spiral, if she could just get out the door in order to do the deed.

Elisabeth scanned her closet and pulled out a blue flowered dress with a wide, generous skirt. She held it up to herself. *I won't try to look different from the way I always look*, she thought. Everyone at Mr. Murray's law firm knew her anyway. Everyone in town, for that matter, knew her. If she turned up on the doorstep of Lawson & Lawson wearing anything other than the usual, there would be no end to the gossip.

Better to look as if she were merely paying a friendly call. And anyway, the only business suit she owned was the cheap blue thing she had worn to her graduation from law school, and it had never fit well. She didn't bother with suits for court—what would be the point, since the judge had known her since she was a baby? But after her shower, as she was acknowledging to herself that she hadn't had a haircut in about two years and needed one desperately, the energetic ringing of the doorbell sent all thoughts of grooming out of her head. Panicked, she peered out the window.

She didn't have time to chat with Mrs. McPherson, even if she wanted to pass along some late-season tomatoes or basil plants—and Elisabeth was such a terrible cook, she didn't know what she would do with them anyway—but she saw that there were two women standing stiffly at the front door. The older of the two she recognized as Mrs. Miller, an elderly Greenleigh resident and widow. She was a well-known town busybody, and her client. Elisabeth occasionally pestered the social security office for her when her checks were late. The other, a good twenty years younger than Mrs. Miller, was a stranger.

"Darn!" Elisabeth muttered. Mrs. Miller was so difficult to deal with, and this had all the markings of the kind of interaction that she disliked the most: gossip, judgment, and minding someone else's business. She wanted to stay on Mrs. Miller's

good side because she did refer clients to her, but she was so pretentious, it was sometimes hard to refrain from making a sarcastic comment in return. And what was worse, this would make her late for her Lawson & Lawson appointment.

For a moment, she wavered, tempted to not answer, but in the end she knew she couldn't afford to turn away business. She didn't know the other woman, so maybe this was a potential client. She didn't have any other clients at the moment, and she needed the work.

"Beth! I thought you weren't home, you took so long to answer." Mrs. Miller's white hair was carefully coifed under a black felt hat, and she wore a heavy black wool coat. Mrs. Miller was one of those old timers who always made the big seasonal clothing switch after Labor Day, no matter what the weather did. She marched confidently into the front hall.

"I was saying to Angela, Beth is always happy to help." Mrs. Miller's companion followed a little awkwardly, murmuring hello as she passed Elisabeth, who stood helplessly holding the door open.

"Good morning, Mrs. Miller," Elisabeth said, trying not to sound desperate. "So nice to see you, but I—"

Mrs. Miller had already led her friend into the office, calling behind her, "Have you been outside yet? Frost! It feels like winter! But you need to bring those geraniums in, dear. And don't forget to have that chimney swept, Beth, before you start any fires. Beth still uses her wood stoves, Angela. It's wonderful. She keeps up all these old traditions." She had begun to unbutton her coat, but changed her mind as she realized that the office was cold and that the wood stove wasn't lit.

Elisabeth bit back a retort. She used wood stoves because the central heating worked so poorly, and she couldn't afford to heat up the entire house with oil anyway. She also had a client who

dropped off wood in lieu of payment. It had nothing whatsoever to do with tradition.

“Mrs. Miller,” she began again, but Mrs. Miller was inviting Angela to have a seat in a wingbacked chair in front of the office fireplace. She hadn’t stopped talking.

“Seventeen eighty, I believe. The Burnhams didn’t move in until the 1800s, but the house was built in 1780. Of course, these bay windows aren’t original, they’re Victorian. There were additions with every new owner. Did you see the carriage house out back?”

Elisabeth sat down. She saw Mrs. Miller’s friend smiling politely, and felt the flush creeping over her cheeks as she prayed for Mrs. Miller to stop talking.

“It’s just a big old house,” she tried to say, as Mrs. Miller talked over her.

“I wish everyone in Greenleigh took care of these old houses the way Beth does. People either knock them down or gut them and fill them with giant screen TVs and pool tables.” She grimaced in distaste.

Sometimes, Elisabeth thought, sometimes I wish this house would just burn down.

“It’s been in my family for so long,” she said, aiming the comment at Mrs. Miller’s friend. “I’m very fond of it.”

Her stomach twisted. She hated playing a role in Mrs. Miller’s fantasy, but at this point in her life it was just too hard to fight.

“Exactly,” Mrs. Miller beamed.

And if I don’t get to that meeting, I’ll be the last Burnham in this house. With this reminder, she interrupted Mrs. Miller, who was pointing out the butler’s pantry and maid’s quarters off the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Miller, but I’ve got an appointment this morning—”

“Oh! Well. This will just take a minute. This is Angela Stuart.”

Angela had taken some lip balm out of her purse and was applying it to her chapped lips. She bobbed her head politely, but Elisabeth saw that her hands were shaking as she replaced the cap and returned it to her handbag.

“I told her, Beth, that you are the best lawyer in town. I would never go to anyone else, right, Angela?” Mrs. Miller put a firm hand on her friend’s shoulder and went on without pausing for a reply. “I told her how much you’ve helped me with those dreadful social security problems and all the things you did after Bertie passed away, God rest his soul—” she raised her eyes heavenwards “—and thanks to you, I’ve been able to stay in my home.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mrs. Miller, I—” Elisabeth tried again, speaking a little louder, but Mrs. Miller continued.

“I knew her mother, you know, did I tell you that, Angela? She passed—oh, almost ten years ago, was it, Beth? It’s so nice when young people stay in Greenleigh. So many of our best leave us and go to Boston or New York or California—”

Mrs. Miller paused, and Elisabeth saw an almost-imperceptible hesitation in her bony shoulders, a shadow that crossed her face briefly. This, of course, was why she kept reaching out to help Mrs. Miller. Abandoned by her children, all of whom were sick of Greenleigh and sick of mum talking about Greenleigh, Mrs. Miller lived alone in a small, neat cottage in what used to be a modest, slightly run-down section of town. She was now surrounded by garish, newly-built faux-colonials populated by young families with lots of money and no taste, a daily reminder that the old were dying and the new didn’t care about the old. Developers eyed those old parcels of land hungrily, hoping to subdivide and create tracts of identical homes on half-acre lots.

Much money to be made, getting rid of the stale and the old, and bringing in the new.

Elisabeth understood all too well the stuff that Mrs. Miller was made of, even though she didn't want to, and often feared that she herself was made of the same stubborn stuff. Mrs. Miller would never sell. She would never leave. She exasperated her grown children and annoyed her neighbors, but she would only be pried away from Greenleigh by death itself.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Stuart?" Elisabeth took the opportunity to jump into the conversation. "Mrs. Miller and I are old friends. She's known me almost since I was born."

"Angela has a problem," Mrs. Miller announced, lowering her voice dramatically. "Go ahead, Angela. Tell her." She nodded toward Elisabeth.

Suddenly, it was as if the dam had burst. Angela Stuart's face crumpled as she dissolved loudly into heaving sobs.

Elisabeth rose hastily and fetched a box of tissues. She sometimes had distraught clients cry during their meetings, so she always kept the tissues handy, but another glance at the clock confirmed her fears. She was going to be late for her meeting.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Burnham. I thought I would be able to go through with this, but—" Angela choked and pressed a wad of tissues to her mouth.

"She wants a divorce," Mrs. Miller said. She eyed Angela with displeasure. "Come on, Angela. We talked about this. You need to tell Beth your story."

Elisabeth tried to still her racing heart. Divorce? She'd never handled a divorce before.

Angela was now snuffling miserably, head bowed. In spite of her reddened eyes and puffy nose, she was quite pretty in a comfortable, round sort of way. She had dark hair pulled back in

a bun, and her skin was very fair. Her cranberry-colored sweater was elegantly styled and hand-knit.

Mrs. Miller was leaning over to squeeze her friend's hand. "Beth is the best person in the world to help you."

"I don't know," Elisabeth stammered. "I—I don't usually handle divorces." She wasn't in any kind of position to turn away business. And she never said no to anyone who begged her for help. She often went out on a limb for people, researching issues and arguing obscure points on things she'd never studied in school. But divorce? She had no idea what one was supposed to do in a divorce case. Wouldn't that involve going deep into people's private lives and personal problems?

Elisabeth thought of the many times she had tried to ignore the angry shouts of her mother floating up through the registers in her bedroom floor. Her father never raised his voice, but he often stayed away for weeks at a time, supposedly "on the road" selling cleaning products. He couldn't be counted on to bring in any kind of steady income, and he mostly just wanted to play cards with his buddies in the back room of the Athena Diner. It drove her mother crazy, especially when he managed to also spend through their tiny income on extravagant presents and fancy treats. *Why don't they just get a divorce*, she often thought. But now that she was an adult, she understood perfectly well why adults stayed in bad relationships.

It was called "being stuck" and she knew all about "being stuck." But what right did she of all people have to advise someone on how to get unstuck?

She, Elisabeth Burnham, the queen of stuck-ness. Stuck-dom? Whatever. Stuck in Greenleigh. Stuck in this old house. Stuck in failure.

Angela was saying timidly, "Sarah is right. I'm here to ask about getting a divorce."

“She’s staying with me,” Mrs. Miller added. “Because she’s left him.”

“I’ve left him,” Angela whispered. “I’ve been thinking about this for a long time—this wasn’t something I did rashly, I mean. And Sarah said she could help—”

“Beth can help you,” Mrs. Miller said. She turned to Elisabeth. “Nearly thirty years of marriage. You can’t fix something that broken.”

Angela choked, and a fresh sob escaped. This was one occasion where Mrs. Miller’s plain-spoken Yankee honesty was definitely not helpful, Elisabeth thought ruefully.

But what if she was right? Was it impossible to fix thirty years of broken?

That’s about as long as my life, Elisabeth thought. I wonder if I’m thirty years of broken.

What if my flavor of broken is not fixable?

Then she looked up at the clock and nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Oh, ladies. I’m sorry. I’m very late for an appointment. Perhaps we could meet tomorrow?”

Angela was on her feet. “I’m so s-s-sorry,” she stuttered. “Of course, don’t let us keep you—”

“Don’t run away,” Mrs. Miller said loudly, rising before Angela could scurry off. “She caught her friend’s elbow and turned to Elisabeth.

“Angela will never have the courage to come here on her own. Why don’t you come over to my house tomorrow? You can discuss everything over a nice cup of tea.”

Elisabeth reflected that Angela would never have the courage to say anything in front of Mrs. Miller, either. She would have to get her alone. But she nodded, following both ladies to the door. “Yes, of course. I’ll stop by after lunch. Maybe at around three?”

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Angela shook hands with her, the grasp tentative, her smile watery and weak. "Thank you."

Elisabeth could hear Mrs. Miller's voice, expounding on the layout of the lawn and the placement of the shrubbery, as she shut the door behind them. She raced to grab her briefcase from the front room before dashing out the door and down the sidewalk in the opposite direction from the two ladies.

First things first, she thought, panting. Save myself, then save Angela Stuart.

If I can.

“I’m supposed to see Elisabeth Burnham this morning. Do you know her? Beth Burnham.”

Richard Murray, Senior was speaking with his mouth full of jelly doughnut, coffee balanced atop a thick stack of documents. He coughed slightly, and Shawn tried not to wince, imagining what would happen if he suddenly choked on jelly doughnut and had to spit it out all over himself, as well as the red oriental carpet below.

“She knew my daughter,” Ricky Senior continued, chewing and swallowing, then swiping at his mouth with his shoulder. Shawn tried not to wince again.

“She’s a good kid, always liked her. She was supposed to come in this morning but she didn’t show—and now she’s out front. I’ve got this brief to get filed by five or this case isn’t going to trial and I’m in a lot of hot water. Will you see her for me? Tell her I’m sorry I missed her.”

“But—” Shawn stammered, suddenly panicked. Meet Beth Burnham? Now?

He wasn’t ready. He’d repressed all thoughts of Beth for years. He hadn’t arrived at his new job this morning with even

the vaguest idea that Beth would be on his agenda today, or ever.

“She knew my daughter,” Ricky Senior added again, unhelpfully. He backed carefully out of the doorway, nearly knocking over a passer-by, and cursed gently as the coffee slopped over the sides of his cup and trickled down onto the stack of papers.

“Tell her I’m sorry,” he repeated, his voice echoing down the hall. “Hey, I need someone to run to the courthouse for me,” he boomed. The sound of his footsteps quickened, then faded until it disappeared.

“Right,” Shawn muttered. He got up and shut the door.

Elisabeth Burnham. Did he know her?

Excellent question, he thought grimly. *Did I ever know her?*

He paced in front of the desk a few steps, stopped, then went to peer out the window. It was a generous corner office, with a separate sitting area some distance away from his desk, surrounded by dark wood coffee tables and oriental rugs. It was the very least that a managing partner of a venerable old New England firm deserved, never mind that it was in tiny Greenleigh.

It was also a sight better than his old office in New York, he acknowledged, turning around to admire the handsome mahogany desk and matching credenza. While he had made the cut for partner in New York, space there was at a premium, and a junior partner in a firm of 150 attorneys was not exactly a candidate for a corner office. The pay here was never going to have the possibilities that practicing in New York offered, but of course life here did not cost what it did in New York. The thought entered his mind regretfully as he contemplated the evenings at the opera and the grand art galleries he had left behind.

He shook his head. No point in being morose about it. His father needed him home, and so he had come.

And of course, the truth was that he was done with New York. He'd run out of Greenleigh as fast as he could, the moment he'd had his diploma in hand, thinking that New York would be the cure for Greenleigh. In the end, it had not been. He had loved its arts, its culture, its status as the welcoming beacon for soul searchers everywhere. But he couldn't fight it any longer. Greenleigh was calling him back, and as much as he wanted to resist it, age had made him honest.

And part of the honesty thing was admitting that he'd never stopped thinking about Elisabeth. Somewhere deep inside of him, in the back of his mind and in the depths of his heart, he had kept thinking about her. He'd wondered about her life, wondered about her well-being. He hadn't reached out to her even once since that warm August evening so many years ago. He'd visited his father faithfully every Christmas and occasionally for summer weekends, but he hadn't seen or spoken to Elisabeth. He hadn't run in to her around town, hadn't spoken of her to anyone, hadn't heard a single thing about her.

What he had done was to resent her bitterly. He'd almost hated her for what she'd done. But something inside still wondered how she was, where she was.

But never why. That was one question that had never floated into his mind. He had never once wondered why she hadn't left Greenleigh with him. Because he knew the answer. Greenleigh got its claws into you and never let go. Just look at him now—back to stay.

Shawn walked back to his desk and sat down, but on the edge of the chair. It swiveled forward, and he nearly lost his balance, because he'd been too tentative. He grabbed the edge of the desk.

Now he would have to see her, to talk to her. It was the last thing he'd expected and possibly the thing he dreaded most. He

was angry and he was bitter, and he was afraid he might say something he unforgivable.

His mother was so fond of Beth, he thought. She'd died with such regret, that she wouldn't be alive long enough to see them marry.

The pit in his stomach told him that his walk down memory lane had gone too far, so he wrenched his mind away from thoughts of his mother and the horrible year she'd spent battling leukemia, when he was in college. And now, he'd come home to make sure he didn't have any regrets. His father was getting older and starting to fail. No way in hell was he going to make things worse by mooning over Beth, his mother's last months, and past mistakes and the consequences of past mistakes.

He felt a sour taste in his mouth and took a quick swig of the lukewarm coffee on his desk. *I should be ready for this*, he said ruefully to himself. *It's been a long time. And it's been over for a long time.*

He shrugged into his suit jacket, and strode toward the door.

He walked out into the reception area, prepared to greet Elisabeth with icy formality. But no one was there. He checked with the receptionist.

"Ms. Burnham is in Conference Room A. But I thought she was waiting for Mr. Murray Senior?"

"He couldn't make it, so I'll speak to her instead. Would you pick up my phone for a few minutes? I'm sure I won't be long."

Shawn had no idea where Conference Room A was. He walked down the hallway, past the mail room, past the library. He could hear a low rumble of conversation coming from one office, a group of laughing voices in another. After a week at his new job, he still wasn't sure of everyone's names, and since he'd taken the aggressive step of banning most pointless meetings, he

hadn't yet been in a conference room. But he found it, a few steps away from the kitchen. The door was shut.

Shawn was startled to discover that his palms were sweating. He paused outside the door, wiping them surreptitiously on his pants and adjusting his tie. He knocked softly. There was no answer. He cracked the door open, then went in, closing it quietly behind him.

Her effect on him was instant, and he wondered briefly if it was because he was already nervous, or if she really still had that power over him. He knew her immediately from the angle of her head, the intensity of her concentration on something out the window. She was dressed in a drop-waisted, wide-skirted blue floral print dress, with a bit of lace collar evident. Shiny brown curls, tinged slightly gold in the morning light, were neatly caught up in a ponytail knotted with a dark blue bow. From the back, she still looked like a schoolgirl.

For one brief moment, his heart ached terribly, terribly for what might have been. It was as if time had stood still. When he left Greenleigh, she was twenty-two, he was twenty-six. They were both so young. The world was full of options. There was no reason to let Greenleigh hold them back, to let the sadness of the cycle of life and death bring them down. Go, go, his mother would have urged. Go live your life, go do new things, go see the world. Greenleigh will always be here.

He could see now that this last sentence was the nail in the coffin for Beth. *Greenleigh will always be here.* That had been the problem all along.

And he hadn't been enough for her to break through that barrier. Greenleigh was much older, stronger, and wiser than he was.

Almost as quickly as the thoughts had passed through his mind, he felt the searing pain of rejection and disappointment, and the intense emotion in his gut registered in his brain as

resentment and contempt. He refused to let her imagine that he had cared beyond that one moment, all those years ago, when he had realized that she was not going to go with him to New York. Damn her, he would not give her the satisfaction of supposing that she had wounded him so profoundly, to have been held more cheaply than her nag of a mother and her stupid library clerk job.

“Elisabeth.” What the hell? He never called her by her full name. She’d always been Beth to him.

When she heard him speak her name, she turned around in surprise. For an instant, she looked shocked, but then her clear, brown-eyed gaze settled on him in dismay.

So she has the grace to be upset, does she, he thought. He evaluated her coldly, as if he were picking over produce at the supermarket, but his chest felt as if it would explode with tension and stress.

She didn’t look well. Her color wasn’t very good, and there were shadows below her eyes. She was thin, too thin. He felt instinctive fear, the way he always did ever since those days of his mother’s illness. He and illness would never have an easy relationship.

Shawn tamped down his fear with ugliness. *She’s probably still doing the fetch-and-carry routine for mom,* he thought sardonically. Working double shifts at that clerk job. Being the model dutiful daughter and throwing her life away. Doing exactly what she had been doing all those years ago. A life she had preferred to a life with him.

He couldn’t stop his biting tongue. “You look surprised,” he said.

“I am—” she stammered. “I—I didn’t expect to see you here.”

I’ll bet you didn’t, he thought. *I’ll bet you didn’t expect to ever see me again.*

“So sorry to disappoint you,” he snapped. “I didn’t expect to

see you here, either. This isn't any more pleasant for me than I'm sure it is for you."

"I didn't suppose that it was. I must have the wrong room. I'm supposed to be meeting Mr. Murray." There was a frosty edge to Elisabeth's words.

"I'm sorry. But I'm the one you'll be dealing with."

To his surprise, his words caused more distress than he'd expected. Sure, he wasn't eager to have this meeting, and he knew she wouldn't be, either. But he hadn't expected her to look as if she were about to faint.

"What do you mean?" she gasped. Her face had blanched, and the fingers of one hand grasped the edge of the conference table. He moved involuntarily toward her, concerned for a moment that she might actually pass out.

But she did not faint; she merely continued to stare up at him, knuckles whitening as she gripped the table.

"Does Mr. Murray know I'm here?" There was a choked quality to her words, but her voice was under careful control.

"He does. He said you had an appointment this morning." Elisabeth's cheeks reddened. She had put her briefcase on the shiny conference table, a worn, sad leather thing with a tarnished brass buckle. It looked like it had sat in an attic for fifty years, which Shawn realized it probably had. He knew exactly what her attic looked like, and that it was filled with old Burnham hand-me-downs.

He could see her reflection slanted across the surface of the table, the troubled bent of her head. What was wrong with him? It was as if he was outside of himself, able to evaluate her every gesture, as if he wasn't the one she had dumped so easily.

"I apologize for being so late," she said. "I had a visit from a client just as I was walking out the door."

Client? Shawn suddenly felt odd, as if the ground beneath him had buckled. Stupid as it was, he couldn't think of Beth as

having gone on with her life without him. In his mind, she was still the Beth of so many years ago. Was it possible that she had gone on with her life, had indeed created a new life without him over the past years?

He'd assumed that the problem was with her, that she'd preferred the dullness of her safe, small town existence over the adventures she would have at his side. It had wounded him badly to imagine that her passion for him took second place to being a clerk at the library and running errands for her shrewish mother, but it had also justified his anger, and his dropping all thought of her from his existence.

He hadn't thought at all that perhaps she had altered her own life, that she might be able to achieve that on her own, without him.

He suddenly realized that she was speaking.

"I'll just call Mr. Murray again for a new appointment. Please tell him how sorry I am for being late." Elisabeth was drawing herself up to leave. She reached for the worn-out briefcase, took a step back from the table.

"Actually, Ricky Senior asked me to speak to you today. About whatever it was you were going to talk to him about." Shawn did not give up his place in front of the door. He watched curiously as she looked up at him in obvious panic.

"What?" she exclaimed.

Shawn shrugged. "He said he had some idea of why you were here, and that you were better off speaking to me about it. Something like that." He itched to pull out his phone to check the time. His impatience was growing. This encounter was both unpleasant and mystifying. Spit it out, Beth, he wanted to say. Is this some kind of stupid errand for your mother?

"Oh." Elisabeth slowly put her briefcase back down on the table. She looked tentative, as if she were reorganizing her

thoughts. Just as Shawn was about to give in to the urge to make an excuse and flee, she spoke.

“Shawn. I—I wonder if we can sit down. If you don’t mind.”

She spoke quickly, but quietly, and Shawn saw her press her lips together in that brave mannerism that he knew so well. Life had been so hard for her, he thought involuntarily. Damn it, why hadn’t she let him just take her away from it all?

She was looking up at him, almost desperately.

He caved. But angrily.

He hadn’t asked for this. It wasn’t fair. He wasn’t a saint. And he didn’t want any part of whatever this was. He wanted her to go away and let him get back to his life. The life where he made smart decisions, not dumb ones like hers.

“All right,” he replied. “But I haven’t got a lot of time. Is this an errand for your mother?”

“My mother died a few years ago,” Elisabeth said.

Shawn stood where he was, staring at her and feeling foolish.

“But it’s okay. Of course you wouldn’t have known that,” she continued.

Shawn bit back the automatic words that sprang to his lips. Why had he not known? Dead? He couldn’t imagine Beth without that albatross of a family.

So she was alone, then. All alone, presumably in that gigantic old house. He wanted to apologize for his cruelty, but he didn’t know how.

Actually, he did know how. He needed to start this meeting over. This meeting, thrust upon him unexpectedly, had gone all wrong. He was too busy feeling sorry for himself, and he hadn’t been paying attention to what was going on in the actual moment. That was poor behavior on his part, and he knew it. He also knew why he was feeling so angry and so cruel, and he was ashamed. She hadn’t loved him enough to escape the Green-

leigh trap, and he was humiliated. Well, he could be the bigger person. He could be generous.

They needed to start over. At least right now.

“I’m really sorry, Beth. I didn’t know. And yes. Let’s sit down. And talk,” he agreed.

Only the fact of a mere twenty dollars left in the grocery jar and the scary pile of bills on her desk could have persuaded Elisabeth to sit down with Shawn Waterstone for any reason.

She couldn't believe what was happening to her. It was all she could do not to just pick up her briefcase and leave, but Shawn stood between her and the door, preventing any kind of dignified exit. It had taken her a lot of courage to come to this decision at all, and she had been tempted half a dozen times during her walk to the Lawson & Lawson offices to just cut and run, but she'd stuck it out. If she pushed past Shawn and fled, she'd be wasting all that anguish, all that effort.

Shawn looked great. She had to admit it to herself. He even looked like he had a tan, a suggestion of a summer on Cape Cod, his ash-blond hair cut briskly in almost a crew cut to frame the angular lines of his face. Eyes somewhere between gray and hazel and brown glared down at her from way above her own five-feet-two-inches.

She had no idea what he was doing here in Greenleigh, here at Lawson & Lawson. Was he visiting? No, that couldn't be right.

He must work here. But why? He'd been so eager to get the hell out of Greenleigh—so eager, in fact, that he'd argued her into going with him. She had nothing going for her in Greenleigh, he'd said. If she'd just leave Greenleigh, he would take her to New York with him and she could do anything she wanted. She could finish that college degree that was taking her so long to pay for, credit by credit. She could study something interesting, like English or art history, instead of the practical accounting and finance that her mother pestered her into studying. He could take care of her, and they would be happy.

But when the appointed time came, she'd been watching the old grandfather clock in the front hall, watching the hands tick past, watching her opportunity go by. She could hear her mother coughing upstairs, she could see the bills on the kitchen table, her father's name still on them, the pay stubs from her job and the empty jar of grocery money, and she knew she wasn't going anywhere.

And she knew she should have told Shawn this, but she couldn't explain why she wasn't able to do what was clearly the smart thing to do. Who kept living with their mother at the age of twenty-two? Who turned away an offer of help that was based in love and trust? What kind of person did that?

This kind of person, she thought miserably. I'm that person.

And now look at me. She almost laughed. It's like I've come full circle. I can't run away from it, and poor Shawn can't run away from me.

She looked up at Shawn and decided to feel sorry for him. He was about to have the most uncomfortable business meeting of his lifetime. She could see his discomfort, and none of this was his fault, unless it lay in his desire to fix other people's problems.

"Ricky Senior didn't tell me what this was about," he was saying. "Can I do something for you?"

"I'm not sure," Elisabeth said. She took a deep breath. "Last year, Mr. Murray said that—" She stopped. Could she say it?

She would have to.

She started again. "Mr. Murray said that if I ever needed help, I shouldn't hesitate to talk to him. I didn't actually think I would need the help, but I think I do."

Another pause. Shawn was visibly perplexed. He leaned back in his chair and motioned for her to go on.

"I need work," she said, finally.

"Work," Shawn said. He frowned in confusion. "You wanted to ask Ricky Senior for work?"

"Yes," Elisabeth said. "I didn't want to ask. But—I need another source of income." Her voice was hoarse, so she cleared her throat. "It's been difficult. Trying to keep that house going."

At that moment, she saw Shawn's expression change, and she wished she hadn't.

The house. Even though she'd never told him why she couldn't go with him to New York, why she couldn't leave Greenleigh, he had to know that her attachment to the Burnham home was at the bottom of it. The house represented everything that the Burnhams had ever worked for, stood for, and been trapped by. To let it go was unthinkable.

It had meant more to her than Shawn did, was the unspoken accusation.

"I'm sure there's enough work around here for an army of assistants," Shawn said. A cool mask had replaced his initial expression of confusion. "But I've only just started working here. I don't know why Ricky Senior thought I would know anything about hiring you."

"I'll do whatever you need to have done." Elisabeth brought out a notepad from her briefcase, a cheap ballpoint pen clipped neatly to the spiral binding. "Athena Diner," the lettering on the pen read. Elisabeth saw Shawn's gaze drop to the pen for a

moment, then go back to her face. Embarrassed, she unhooked the pen from the notebook.

“Maybe you should be talking to his admin assistant,” Shawn said. “That’s where all the temp clerical help would be —” He stopped, something registering on his face.

Elisabeth had looked up from her notebook. Temp clerical help? She tried to tamp down the little bubble of fury that began to rise in her belly, in her chest. She knew she couldn’t blame him. When he’d left Greenleigh, she was a library clerk. She was working her painful way through a bachelor’s degree in accounting. There was no reason why he would think that she had changed.

But she was angry. She’d worked so hard to get that degree, and then she’d worked doubly hard to get through law school. She was short, she was plain, she was ordinary—she knew all of this—but she resented it when people assumed she had no education and skills, just because she was a mousy little thing in a flowery dress. Like when those big insurance companies kicked her clients around because they were poor and barely literate, unable to comprehend the fine print on their policies. It made her mad.

She took a deep breath. She was desperate. She needed the work. She’d done the math, looked at the number of hours she had available in a week, and at the bills she had to pay. If he wanted to give her secretarial work, she would take it. At least it was in a law firm, and maybe they would eventually give her something else to do, something that matched her experience and abilities.

“I’ll do whatever you need to have done,” she repeated. She realized that she had been nervously clicking her pen, so she put it down. “But I’m actually a lawyer. I’ve been in solo practice here in Greenleigh for a few years. I’m just having a hard time right now.”

There were so many other things she could say. She could tell him that she'd inherited the money for law school when her mother died—she discovered her mother's hidden nest egg that she'd inherited from her own family decades back, which made complete sense. She had to have been raiding that fund for years and years, because there couldn't have been enough money from the Burnhams alone to keep the house going. She could tell him that she'd tried to get a job at some of the lower-tier firms in town, but that no one wanted a general practitioner who wasn't going to bring lucrative clients into the practice with her. She could tell him that she was sometimes flooded with business but that her clients often couldn't pay her, and that the local natural foods store sent groceries every week because they were paying off a legal bill from the previous year.

She could tell him that her beloved leather briefcase was her grandfather's, and that Judge Burnham had presided in the old white frame courthouse for over fifty years. But wait, he already knew that. Of course. When you almost marry someone, he knew all of these sorts of things. He just didn't know who she'd become in his absence.

And what I've become, she thought, is broke and a failure.

She began again. "I'm sorry I didn't make myself clear. But it's probably a waste to have me doing clerical work. I can do a lot more."

"If you don't mind working at a paralegal's wage, we have all the research work you could want," Shawn said. "I'm sorry that I misunderstood. And we could probably get you on some cases, it's just that it would depend on the individual attorney—"

"I understand," Elisabeth said.

"—and as long as there isn't any conflict of interest, of course. You'll have to check with the attorneys in charge of the projects to make sure you aren't representing anyone at odds with our clients."

“Yes, obviously,” Elisabeth said, a little tersely.

“I’m sorry, I had to make that clear,” Shawn said. His voice had turned chilly, professional. He was looking distracted, as if his mind were drifting elsewhere.

No, no, thought Elisabeth. Come back, Shawn. I’m not done with this horrible conversation.

“I have something else I need to ask,” she said. She paused, then said in a rush, “I need to ask for an advance. I’m afraid that things have—things have gotten that bad.”

Shawn’s gaze snapped back, and his eyes, which had been glazing over, sharpened. For a moment, he looked at her, almost as if he were trying to figure her out. Then he nodded. “All right. Come in later this afternoon. I’ll leave a contract with the receptionist, and a check. You can sign the contract when you pick up the check.”

“Thank you.” Elisabeth rose. Shawn stood up automatically, but his attention was on his phone, which he had pulled out of his pocket. He appeared to be scrolling rapidly through a text chat.

At the door, she stopped for a moment to put on her coat, and turned just in time to see Shawn turn to watch her go. She felt herself flush, just as she saw him avert his eyes. So he hadn’t wanted her to know that he was watching her.

“Shawn,” she said, then in a rush, “Shawn, why did you come home?”

“My father needed me,” he said.

She nodded, twisted the handle, and walked out without another word.

Once outside, Elisabeth felt the resolve that had kept her back up and the tears down dissolve. She felt the blood rush into her face as she recalled the humiliation of having to ask Shawn Waterstone of all people for a job. And the humiliation of the moment where he revealed what he thought of her abili-

ties—that she was never going to be anything more than that library clerk he'd once known.

She wondered if her knees would buckle under her. She stopped outside the entrance, steadied herself with one hand against the sun-warmed brick of Lawson & Lawson. She gasped, choking on a painful knot of tears in her throat. She couldn't stay there—it was a busy entrance and she might run into someone she knew—so she hurried blindly down the street toward home.

She went to sit on a bench in the shaded garden of the old Congregational church, not knowing where else to go in a town so small that she had practically walked the entire length of the downtown merely by walking from home to the offices of Lawson & Lawson. The branches of an ancient black walnut tree dwarfed the tiny courtyard, and it was cold here despite the beautiful warm fall day. The stone of the bench seeped right through her coat and into her bones. The blue sky above seemed to be overlooking another planet entirely.

How on earth had she ended up in this situation?

It was clear that she should have gone with him to New York. If she had, this wouldn't be happening. What could be worse than having to beg Shawn Waterstone for a job? If she had planned it herself, she could not imagine a more devastating turn of events. Obviously, she'd never forgotten him. She'd loved him so much, the only source of sunshine in her colorless life in those days. They'd fallen in love during the summers when he'd come back to Greenleigh from college and borrow stacks of books from the library where she worked as a clerk. He would chat with her as she shelved books, and he'd ask her out for coffee and take her out for drives.

She'd often teased him to tell her why he'd fallen in love with her, because she couldn't believe it. He was handsome, smart, and had so many exciting things to look forward to. She

was so ordinary, just a Greenleigh girl from an old Greenleigh family. He told her that he loved her patient goodness and dedication to doing the right thing, and that she reminded him of all the good things about home.

Once he'd said to her that he loved her because his mother loved her, and he always trusted his mother. She hadn't known what to make of that, because she was fairly certain that her own mother did not love her, at least not in that all-encompassing, uncomplicated way. Of course, she couldn't say that, but she often felt he knew it as well as she did.

She'd grown close to his mother, and when the leukemia took her, the hole in her life was vast, and she wasn't sure it could ever be fixed. Certainly, she knew that Shawn would never be the same again. For a long time, he didn't say much, and she didn't ask him to. There were a lot of silent dates that summer.

But he'd changed irreversibly. He couldn't bear to be in Greenleigh anymore, which she found mystifying. His mother had loved Greenleigh, so why wouldn't he stay in Greenleigh? But he was done with small town living, he'd said. Done, and ready to move on. And he argued that it was bad for her, too. They would get out of Greenleigh and that would fix everything that was wrong and bring the light back into their lives.

Unspoken was his opinion that her mother and the old house were bad for her. Elisabeth knew it was true, and she listened eagerly at first. But when the time came to actually leave, she found herself unable to get out the door. It wasn't her head that wouldn't get in the game. It was her body. It just wouldn't go.

He had been right all along. I just couldn't do it, she thought. And now he'll get to see how right he was to leave Greenleigh, and how mistaken I was to have not gone with him.

Later that afternoon, Elisabeth returned to Lawson & Lawson. She was terrified that she would see Shawn again, but she needn't have worried. The promised packet of paperwork was there, as well as the promised check. In addition, there was a sheaf of documents with a sticky note on it from Richard Murray, Junior. She remembered him from high school, a chubby, red-faced guy with his father's trademark good humor.

"Hey Beth! HELP!" Ricky Junior had scribbled, along with a googly-eyed smiley face.

So Shawn had found her some lawyer work to do after all. Elisabeth thanked him silently, but also felt herself shrink into a ball of shame. This was no way to live, she thought, constantly afraid of small kindnesses.

Elisabeth was at Lawson & Lawson early the next morning, making use of their library and legal databases. Ricky Junior's paralegal obtained a logon for her and showed her how to get into the computer system. She seemed relieved that Elisabeth would have the authority to handle aspects of Ricky Junior's cases that she herself could not.

“Here,” she said, plunking a stack of folders in front of her. “I’ve been stuck on these for a week, and Ricky Junior doesn’t have time get into them. Maybe you can take them off my desk?”

“Sure,” Elisabeth said gratefully. She still felt the sting of yesterday’s humiliating conversation with Shawn acutely, but this work was going to take care of her past-due electric bill and put some heating oil in the tank. She would be able to pay the Nutley boys for their yard work. She wouldn’t be able to think about a new roof or a paint job, but that was something to worry about in the spring. For now, this pile of folders and her willingness to beg would take care of things.

She stopped by Ricky Junior’s office to leave off the initial results of her work. She hadn’t known him well, but he appeared to remember her in all kinds of surprising detail. In fact, his gaze was admiring as he listened to her explain where she had decided to take the arguments in his case.

“Am I getting this completely wrong?” she asked, hesitant, when she noticed that his attention appeared to be wandering.

He jumped and turned red. “I’m so sorry, Beth. No, I was just thinking about how both of us are lawyers and we’re sitting here in my office discussing a case. Isn’t it weird? I remember back when you and my sister were friends at school, but I just never imagined—are you joining the firm? Is that why Shawn hired you?”

Elisabeth didn’t know what to say. So Shawn, at least, hadn’t said anything to anyone about the truth.

“No,” she said. She didn’t want to lie, but she also didn’t want to sabotage her own private practice reputation by sounding like she was desperate. “I have some space in my calendar, and I wanted to learn some new things. I’ve never done one of these corporate cases before.” She winced inwardly. Actually, her personal calendar right now was empty, but for Angela Stuart.

“I’m glad to see you around here. It would be awesome if you

came aboard, but I get it if you like your freedom.” Ricky nodded in the direction of his closed door and lowered his voice. “It can get stuffy around here. And stressful.”

Elisabeth gathered up her notes, thinking that Ricky Junior had no idea what stress was like. “Is Shawn around this morning?” she asked casually.

“No, he’s not,” Ricky Junior replied. “He takes a lot of mornings off to manage things at his dad’s factory. You know about his dad’s heart attack, right?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t. That’s terrible. Is he all right?” *So that’s what he meant by his father needing him home*, she thought.

“He’s getting better, but he’s not allowed to do anything stressful. I guess that company puts a lot of demands on him,” Ricky replied. “Shawn left a really amazing firm on Wall Street to come home and look after the company. At least if he works here, he can step out and do stuff at home.” He shook his head. “He’s such a good guy. Who would give up that kind of life in order to come back to a boring little town like Greenleigh?”

He stood up and reached for his jacket. “Let me take you to lunch, Beth. We’ll celebrate your new job.”

“Oh, I can’t,” Elisabeth objected. She looked at her watch. It was past noon, and she had that three o’clock appointment at Mrs. Miller’s to talk to Angela Stuart. She had thought to read up on divorce law in the meantime.

“It’ll be fun,” Ricky Junior said. They walked down the hall together until Ricky remembered that he had promised to pick up his father’s car from the repair shop, and went off to get the keys from him. Elisabeth stood waiting in the reception area, marveling at Ricky Junior’s ease of life. How nice to be so stable, so boring, and to have done exactly what one’s parents expected. No risk, no turmoil.

“You’ve had a lot of calls from Stuart Construction.” Elisabeth turned around to see the receptionist handing a sheaf of

notes to Shawn. He'd apparently just walked into the building and was shaking raindrops off his dark gray trench coat.

"Thanks," he was saying, when he saw Elisabeth. He walked over.

"How are things going?" he asked. His voice was politely neutral.

"Fine, thanks," she said. She saw that his jaw was tight with tension, and his smile did not reach his eyes, which were gray today. *They always turn gray when he's upset*, she thought.

She determined that she would not be the cause of his worries. "Thank you very much for—for yesterday."

"Not at all," he said, his voice cool. "Happy to have you. Have you talked to Ricky Junior yet?"

"Yes, actually—we talked this morning. I did some work on his case, and his assistant helped me get into the computer system."

"Good. I'm sure there are others who would like the help. I'm new, so I don't have a full grasp of everyone's projects yet. But I'm sure there's a lot more where that came from." He looked like he wanted to get away, but Elisabeth was determined to thank him for the advance and get it over with.

She glanced over her shoulder at the receptionist, who was busily transferring calls. She lowered her voice. "I wanted to specifically thank you for the advance."

"Don't worry about it," Shawn said. He hesitated, then asked, "Was it enough?"

Elisabeth felt her neck grow hot. She nodded, not knowing how to respond. On the one hand, she was grateful. On the other hand, this wasn't exactly professional, was it. Did the fact that she had once nearly married the managing partner mean that there was something ethically wrong with her receiving an advance from Lawson & Lawson? There hadn't been any examples like this in her ethics textbook.

She changed the subject. "I heard about your dad. Is he better?"

"Much better, thanks."

Ricky Junior was sauntering into the reception area. "Hey! New managing partner! Come to lunch with us, we're celebrating! And maybe we can convince Beth to join us full time."

Oh, no, Elisabeth thought.

But she needn't have worried. Shawn was declining, saying that he had too much work to do.

As they left the building, Elisabeth couldn't help one last backward glance at Shawn, who was still standing absently in the reception lounge, the stack of phone messages limp in his hand. He was gazing into the middle distance, seemingly lost in thought. She suddenly knew exactly what he was thinking, because their conversation had been almost borderline normal.

But we can't be friends, Elisabeth thought. *Just let it go.*

It was drizzling. As they walked toward the small cluster of eateries on Main Street, Ricky Junior prattled cheerfully about his never-ending pile of work, adding that he was not only grateful for Elisabeth's help, but that he was hoping no one else at the firm managed to steal her away.

"Shawn came to me first, because he knows me," he was saying. "But pretty soon the others will hear and then they'll try to nab you. I hope you've got the time."

Elisabeth decided to tell Ricky Junior the truth. "It's really slow right now," she confessed. "Sometimes I really have a hard time making a go of it."

"Yeah, it's hard to make it on your own," Ricky Junior agreed. "What helps is that I get to specialize, because I'm part of a practice. If someone needs something that I don't do, I can pass that over to someone who does."

"That actually reminds me," Elisabeth said. "I just picked up a divorce client. And I know nothing about divorce law."

“Yikes,” Ricky Junior shuddered. “Are you sure you want a divorce case? You can pass it over to someone who does divorces.”

Elisabeth shook her head. “Well, I’m not sure it’ll end up as a divorce—yet. The client looked pretty sad when she talked to me. Maybe she can work things out. And to be honest, I can’t afford to let go of clients right now. I really need this one.”

“Yeah. Well, that’s a hard one. Times are tough for small firms right now. You should just come on board. We’re so busy all the time, and you must already know everyone in town. I would think you could fit right in.”

“Thanks, Ricky,” Elisabeth said, smiling. She couldn’t possibly explain to him that she didn’t think she could ever work for a blue-chip law firm, especially one where Shawn Waterstone was the managing partner. She couldn’t even explain to herself why she hadn’t tried harder to find a proper law firm job when she’d graduated law school. Somehow, she’d thought that she could just make it work, that she could hang out a shingle, the way her grandfather had when he was a young man, and the way his father had. She had this weird idea that she could help people, that she would know all her clients personally and hold their hands through difficult times in their lives.

But times were different. People wanted specialists. Computers needed information systems staff to figure them out. There was so much technology involved, it was all that Elisabeth could do to stay functional. Her laptop was ancient. Her internet access was poor. And she’d avoided upgrading her old flip phone because she was afraid of the expense of the data package that was required of all smart phones. Never mind that even her clients complained that she was only intermittently reachable via text—she would chide them with the admonition that they knew exactly where to find her, either at the courthouse or

beavering away in her study in the old Burnham manse on Church Street.

Maybe Ricky is right, she thought as he led her into a cute little Italian place on Main Street. Maybe I should just tell Angela no. Maybe someone at Lawson & Lawson can handle her divorce.

No, she couldn't afford to turn away business. She could charge several hundred dollars for an uncomplicated divorce, and if there were assets to divide she could charge even more for the time it would take to negotiate. Angela seemed prosperous. A good client would come back for other services, too. She would just have to learn about divorce law as she went along.

When she arrived at Mrs. Miller's home, however, she learned that Angela had canceled their appointment.

"Beth, my dear—" Mrs. Miller sighed deeply. "She is terrified out of her wits. Absolutely terrified. She hasn't ever lived her life alone. She moved straight from her mother's house to his when she got married. She's having such a hard time."

"Can I go in to see her, at least?" Elisabeth asked.

Mrs. Miller shook her head. "She won't come out of her room."

"I see," Elisabeth said, disappointed. "Well. Let her know that I stopped by. And she knows where to find me if she wants to talk." She felt a faint sensation of panic in her stomach. This was her only current lead. At least she could scrape by with Ricky Junior's case. As long as no expensive disasters struck, anyway.

"Will I see you at the baked bean supper on Sunday at church?" Mrs. Miller was saying.

"Um—yes, I imagine so," Elisabeth said. She was sure she looked as guilty as she felt. She hadn't realized there was a dinner on Sunday, and she normally would have volunteered to help.

“Well, good,” Mrs. Miller said. “Don’t worry about Angela. She’ll come round. She’s much better off without that man. He’s such a big shot with that company of his, he probably hasn’t noticed that she’s left.” She snorted. “I never liked him. He built all these ugly houses.” She gestured around her.

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Elisabeth said.

“Yes. Horrible. Simply horrible. Well, you take care, Beth. I will keep trying with Angela, but this may take time.”

Elisabeth clanged the gate to Mrs. Miller’s garden behind her. While the neighborhood around her had grown up into oversized faux-colonial mansions with acres of close-cropped lawn, Mrs. Miller still maintained an old-fashioned messy flower garden, with hollyhocks rising tall and nasturtiums clamoring around in rich hues of oranges and reds and yellows over her white picket fence. The frost would get them soon, Elisabeth thought. Pausing to touch a particularly vibrant red blossom, her eye was caught by a movement above her head. Startled, she squinted upwards into the clear afternoon light. Someone was waving from a gabled side window.

It was Angela Stuart.

He'd been tempted to accept Ricky Junior's invitation and join them for lunch. Shawn sat in his office, glumly evaluating a soggy tuna sandwich. He had been entirely too tempted. But who was he kidding? He could not put aside his past with Beth, not even for an hour. Not when watching her pretend that there was nothing between them caused his chest to constrict with pain.

He couldn't get the sight of her thin body out of his mind, hovering in a cloud of flowery cotton print, and the fine, weary lines around her eyes.

Her mother was dead, she had said. When had that happened? He allowed his mind to wander back in time, back to the summer before he'd left. Her mother had been ill, off and on. He'd hardly seen her, in fact. But he had never supposed that she was really all that sick. After all, she had seemed to devote an enormous amount of energy nagging away at Beth. Beth was always running around, trying to anticipate her every need, and that woman had hardly had a kind word for her, he mused. Didn't even approve of college, for God's sake. A waste of time,

she had said more than once. Implying, of course, that Beth herself was rather a waste of time.

Shawn found himself getting angry. Abruptly, he tossed the sandwich into the trash can and got up to pace about the room. He had always felt that Paula Burnham would not be content with less than ruining her daughter's life, just as she had felt her own life was ruined by her marriage to a pleasant but unfocused man who would never make anything of himself.

He paced restlessly, his anger getting the better of him as he considered the injustice. He should have known, he thought, scowling. She should have called him, emailed him. He would have come back to be with her, to have helped her with the funeral, to have sorted out the inevitable messes that death brings. Maybe this eight-year estrangement would have been a lot shorter. Maybe she would have joined him in New York after all, and they'd have been married by now. They'd have started a family. They'd be happy.

And then of course, his lawyer's brain said sensibly, why hadn't he been the one to speak to her? It would have been just as easy for him to have called, or indeed to have stopped by. He could have sought out a mutual friend or two in order to ask after her. He'd had plenty of opportunity. It wasn't as if he had turned his back on Greenleigh completely during that time.

But I couldn't, he protested to himself. *How could I, when she's the one who left me standing around waiting? I'm not the one who changed my mind about getting married. Oh, no. I'm just the one who sat up all night in the high school parking lot. I'm just the idiot who couldn't believe that she would really stand me up, after all those promises to each other. How could I be the one to break the ice? When I had nothing to do with putting it there to begin with?*

Eight years spent shoving his feelings away had obviously not amounted to any kind of success at healing his wounded

heart. He needed to work through his pain, or he would not be able to survive a new start in Greenleigh.

Shawn sat down at his desk again. He had to get some work done. He had spent the entire morning on the factory floor, trying to direct a repair crew from Wisconsin who had come out to maintain the equipment. His father had not been feeling well, and was spending the day at the hospital, where his doctors were hoping to adjust his heart medication after running a few additional tests. All in all, it seemed that his father was mending, but slowly. Years of overwork and bad diet could not be reversed so quickly. But perhaps he would be able to get back to his former active self, and then perhaps Shawn could leave again, get back to a place where he wouldn't have to spend his days looking at Elisabeth Burnham's work and his nights thinking about Elisabeth Burnham in his arms. Lawson & Lawson could find another managing partner.

He worked late, trying clear his mind of the voices that assailed him, plowing through the mass of paperwork laid upon him by the other partners at the firm, all of them grateful that he and not they would have to deal with the day-to-day responsibility of running a law firm. The housekeeper had prepared dinner that evening, under his strict instructions about cutting back on the salt and fat, and when he called to check up on his father at about six he found that his dad was on his way out to play chess with some friends at the senior center.

"Should you be running around town like that, Dad?" Shawn wished he had called the hospital earlier to confirm his father's discharge instructions.

"Don't be such an old woman," his father retorted. "I'm perfectly fine. I wasted the entire day getting my arm poked and peeing into a cup. I'm going to play chess."

"But you shouldn't drive—"

"I'm not. Joe Peterson is giving me a ride. See, he's honking the horn, he's waiting. Gotta run. Don't work too hard." His father hung up on him before he could reply.

Great, Shawn thought. *I'd better stop by a little later and take him home or he'll try to play chess all night.* He glanced at his watch. Ten o'clock would probably do it. That would give him ample time to clear off part of his desk, and perhaps to take a look at a few cases he was thinking of assigning to himself. He ordered some take-out food, removed his tie, and settled in for the evening. By nine o'clock his mind was wandering and the room was littered with the remains of his dinner and the local sports pages. He decided to give up on doing any more work, cast a disparaging glance over the state of his office, and hoped that the maintenance crew would take care of it the following morning before he arrived. Slinging his jacket over his shoulder and stuffing his tie into a pocket, he locked up and went in search of his father.

The Greenleigh Senior Center was in a residential part of town, in a neighborhood of small, neat cottages and modest frame houses. It was an unremarkable neighborhood, the houses much newer than those closer to the center of town, and in some parts it resembled a suburban housing tract. Many of the owners of these homes were elderly, and they had actively supported the building of a senior center in their neighborhood when it was proposed back in the nineties. *An entirely different constituency from the folks who live in those grand old houses downtown*, Shawn observed as he slowed the car down outside.

The senior center itself was a low brick building next to the middle school, and on any given night it catered to the local contra dancing troupe, the book club, the knitting guild, or any one of a number of active groups managed by the patrons of the center. Tonight there was a film and a speaker in the auditorium

on the state of the environment in New England, and it seemed from the occasional bursts of applause wafting into the night that the meeting was well-attended. Shawn parked the car in the lot and made his way over to the entrance.

The building smelled like scorched coffee and floor polish. Shawn was stopped at the door to the multi-purpose room by several old cronies of his father's, warning him that his father's chess match was close to being over and that he would not forgive even his only son for interrupting his concentration.

"Not a chess player, are you?" Joe Peterson, baseball cap perched atop a shock of white hair, jabbed a bony finger at Shawn's chest. Shawn grinned. He thought to himself every time he saw Mr. Peterson that he really wanted to know whether he'd been wearing the same navy blue baseball cap for decades, or if he had more than one.

"No, not me. I'm not that kind of strategic thinker, I'm afraid. A disappointment to my dad."

"No!" A chorus of protest arose, and a short, skinny man in a khaki work uniform shook his head in disapproval. "Your dad does nothing but talk about how proud he is of you."

"Yeah," added another voice, "and he still has hope for your chess game."

Laughter followed. Shawn sat obligingly down on a sofa, noting that his dad was grimly surveying a chessboard in a far corner of the room, his opponent a pleasant-looking gentleman in his early sixties.

"Who's that?" he asked Mr. Peterson. Mr. Peterson glanced in the direction of the chess game.

"That's Bob Stuart. Don't you know him? He's one of the town selectmen. Got a big construction company."

Shawn suddenly recognized the name. "Stuart. Yeah, I think his company is a client."

"He hasn't been around the senior center for long," the man

in the khaki uniform interjected. Mr. Peterson nodded. Shawn cast him a questioning look.

“Wife left him, you see. Been hanging out here since.”

Shawn felt embarrassed, rather as if he had been prying. “Oh. That's too bad.”

“Yep. Terrible thing. My wife's known Angela for—oh, mebbe these twenty years or more. Nice lady. Never knew there was a problem.”

“But that's how it is,” Khaki Uniform said in solemn tones. “They up and leave ya, and you're left wondering what hit them all of a sudden.”

“Once they leave, it's too late,” Mr Peterson said. “Ya gotta take care of 'em before they leave. Ya need to talk about stuff.” He nodded in the direction of the chess game, where a burst of laughter heralded the end of the game. Sam Waterstone and Bob Stuart were standing up and shaking hands.

“Bob's a good guy. But Angela's a real sweet lady, and there's no such thing as 'all of a sudden.' If she left him, she's been mad for a long time. Hey there. So who's the champion?” He directed the question toward the two chess players making their way across the room.

“Shawn! You didn't have to come and get me. Joe would've taken me home.” Sam Waterstone sounded annoyed. He was a lean, angular man, balding and wearing wire-rimmed glasses, shorter than his son but with a quick, nervous energy in his step. He wore a red plaid flannel shirt and stained khakis. There was a pencil behind one ear and a steel tape measure clipped to his belt.

Shawn gave Mr. Peterson a knowing glance. “Yeah, right. Only after you two painted the town red.”

“This is my son,” Sam said to Bob Stuart. “The lawyer.” He sounded mournful, as if he were announcing bad news.

“Sorry about that introduction,” Shawn said, holding out his

hand. "That's really not the only way to describe me. I'm not that bad."

Bob laughed, shaking his hand, the clasp firm. "No, no, I have lots of respect for lawyers. They save my butt all the time. I've heard all about you. Are you home from New York permanently?"

"More or less," Shawn said, noting the flicker of discomfort crossing his father's face. "Dad, you look tired."

"Tired? Bob, am I tired?" Sam sounded insulted.

"If that's how you play when you're tired, don't challenge me to any games when you're awake," Bob responded. He nodded at Joe Peterson. "Beat me in no time at all."

"We warned ya," Mr. Peterson said, shaking his head.

"That's not exactly true," Sam said magnanimously. He paused. "But I'm pretty damned good, ain't I?"

"And on that note," Shawn said, grasping his father's arm firmly. "G'night fellas. We're going home to bed." Deaf to his father's protests, he steered him gently in the direction of the door. Once in the hallway, he relaxed his grip.

"I played a really good game," his father was saying. "Bob Stuart is a very good chess player, though. I'll play him again tomorrow."

"Dad, can't you make your chess dates on the weekends? In the daytime?" They emerged from the senior center and walked in the direction of the parking lot. "I don't like you up and about this late at night."

"Don't mother-hen me," Sam said. Shawn sighed, exasperated, as Sam walked slightly ahead toward the car. He noted that his dad seemed to have shrunk in height, in addition to having lost weight since the heart attack. Their faces had never looked particularly alike, with Shawn favoring his mother's fair hair and almost girlish good looks, but in height and build they had

been the same, tall and angular. Shawn was a strong, clear physical copy of his dad, down to the way he stood and walked, but now his father seemed wrinkled and faded. Shawn went up to the car, where Sam stood waiting with his jaw set stubbornly.

“I’m not trying to mother-hen you, Dad.” He unlocked the doors, observing the parking lot lights shining on Sam’s balding pate. He almost asked him why he wasn’t wearing a hat, then decided not to annoy him further. “But you’ve just had a heart attack. And I want you to continue to be able to do all the things you like to do. If you’re not careful, you’ll have another heart attack and then I’ll really mother-hen you. You won’t enjoy that at all.”

He started up the car, glancing at his father’s profile as he did so. The grim lines about his mouth had faded, and he was humming something that sounded like “My Wild Irish Rose,” only it wasn’t quite right. He knew better than to comment, since it would lead to a protracted discussion about the right melody, and finally to a loud, tuneless concert in the car.

“It’s been over ten years,” Sam said suddenly. Shawn, who had been thinking vaguely about the mess he had left in his office, was startled. Then he realized what Sam was referring to.

“Yes, it has,” he said softly. They stopped for a traffic light. Shawn glanced at his dad, who was drumming away softly on the car door. It sounded like the “1812 Overture.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“I guess you still miss her.” Sam cast a sidewise look at his son.

“God, yeah.” Shawn smiled, his eyes on the road. “She was my mom. I’ll never get used to her being gone. The house still feels weird without her.” He stopped abruptly, wondering if he was hurting his dad’s feelings.

“I was thinking about her tonight. I’m surprised I could win

a chess game, I was so distracted. But I kept thinking about her.” Sam shook his head.

“Why tonight?” Shawn hoped that Sam wasn't going to talk about his own death, or about growing old, two subjects that they had successfully avoided after the heart attack. Just contemplating it made Shawn feel sick with apprehension.

“Bob Stuart.”

“What?”

“Bob Stuart. His wife left him, you know.”

Oh, that, Shawn thought with relief. He made his tone light, glad that they were talking about someone else's problems. “I heard. That's too bad. He seems very nice. I think my firm represents his company.”

“He's a good guy. Town selectman, you know. And very successful businessman. He's a good contractor. You can trust him. He started that environmental group that was in the auditorium tonight.” There was a silence. Shawn waited. The silence continued, Sam drumming genially on the car door in time to an invisible conductor. Shawn knew his father too well to imagine that the conversation was over.

“Were they married long?”

“What?”

“Bob Stuart. He and his wife.” Shawn slowed down for a stop sign, thinking in exasperation that sometimes he wished his dad weren't such a consummate Yankee and would just spit out whatever it was that he wanted to say.

“Dunno. He's younger than me. Maybe thirty years or so.”

“That's a long time. Must be hard.”

“Mmm.” There was another silence. Sam changed the pattern of his drumming.

This time Shawn couldn't pick out the tune. “Don't Cry For Me, Argentina?” Something from “Carmen?” Whatever it was, it definitely sounded like a tango.

“It’s like death.”

“What?” Shawn jumped. Death? What was like death? He gazed at his dad, worried. He did not want to have a conversation about death.

“Light’s green.”

“Oh. Right.” Shawn pressed on the accelerator again. “What’s like death?”

“Divorce. You know. Splitting up. Your family is changed forever.”

Shawn was perplexed. He wasn’t sure whether to respond. Happily, his father continued.

“Bob Stuart’s wife just up and left one day. They’ll never be the same again.” They were pulling into the driveway of the Waterstone home, a dark red farmhouse toward the edge of town, surrounded by cornfields, which at this time of year were filled with post-harvest debris. Development had not yet come to these fields, and Shawn hoped it never would. It was somewhat out of the way, but it was the last bit of rural New England left in the town of Greenleigh. His grandfather had bought this farmhouse and the land around it back at the turn of the century, and until the interstate had come by in the seventies, it had remained the last isolated corner of Greenleigh. They weren’t isolated anymore, but at least there were still ponds and open fields here.

Shawn turned off the engine. He turned to his father, but Sam was opening the door and stepping out of the car. “Maybe they’ll both be happier this way. Or maybe they can patch things up,” he offered. This was a really depressing subject, and he was ready to ditch it.

“Yeah,” Sam said over his shoulder as he trudged in the direction of the house. “I hope they fix it. No one should be alone.” He fumbled at the door for a second before the porch was flooded with a pool of light from the lamp overhead.

Shawn sat immobile in his seat. Sometimes he didn't know whether his father was truly a philosopher or perhaps just going slightly senile. But the realization that whatever was wrong in the Stuart household, they still had a shot at happiness, caused him to feel what must have been just the merest taste of his father's loneliness. It must seem incomprehensible to his widowed father that someone would voluntarily part with a thirty-year relationship, unless something truly terrible were happening.

Shawn had gone off to college, gone off to law school, gone off to New York. He'd left his dad behind. It was much better to be the one to leave, than to be the one left behind. That must be why the thought of someone else's divorce didn't affect him in particular. He'd imagined that a divorce meant both people deciding to leave a relationship. He hadn't considered that in some cases, there was a person who walked out on another person.

Actually, he admitted, he'd been the one to walk out on Beth. He'd never considered that before.

It's awful to be alone, he suddenly thought. *I've never been alone*. His thoughts flitted to Elisabeth, at this very hour probably sitting alone in her kitchen, staring into a cup of tea. His spine stiffened. No, he had miscalculated once already by imagining that her life had not changed since he left. Perhaps she was sitting in a warm, friendly room, surrounded by friends.

"Hey, Shawn, do something about Martha's cooking, will you?" Sam was shouting back at him, walking into the kitchen, groping for the light switch. "It's gotten bland. If I say something she'll be hurt. But you're a lawyer—think of something tactful to say." The kitchen light went on.

Shawn chuckled. He got out of the car, not bothering to take his keys with him. No need for that in good old Greenleigh. He cast one last look about the darkened fields, the scorched

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remains of the summer's harvest only faintly evident in shadowy heaps on the ground. The air was chill, and he could hear the faint hum of the interstate in the distance. Autumn crickets added their song to the night.

He'd been homesick, he realized. He just hadn't known for what exactly—and still wasn't quite sure.

Angela Stuart was peering down from one of Mrs. Miller's upstairs bedroom windows, her face pale and strained with anxiety. She waved at Elisabeth through the billowing folds of crisp white curtains, leaning precariously forward.

"I would like to talk to you," she said in a stage whisper. Elisabeth cupped her hand around her ear, indicating that she could barely hear her. Angela tried again.

"Alone," she mouthed exaggeratedly. "Talk to you alone."

"Of course," Elisabeth mouthed back. Mrs. Miller was so overwhelming. She was probably pressing Angela at every opportunity to file for divorce. She called up softly, "Can you come down?"

"Side door," Angela mouthed.

"How about coffee? Pierre's? I'll go ahead?" Angela nodded and ducked behind the white curtains again.

Pierre's was a little coffee shop opened by a French-Canadian Greenleigh resident back in the seventies. The decor and ambience was still exactly as it was back in the day, complete

with dusty curtains and green walls. It had long since been bought out by a young woman sporting an intimidating collection of body art and piercings, but it would always be the old Pierre's to the denizens of Greenleigh. It had the best coffee—apparently Ms. Tattoo had bought the coffee secrets from the previous owners as well—and one could go in for a coffee and stay all afternoon for the price of a cup. Even in this digital era, the shop was filled with old books, newspapers, and magazines. Elisabeth ordered coffee and stood about, browsing through the comics until Angela arrived.

Elisabeth recalled again how pretty she was. Today she had taken less care in her appearance, and was wearing a faded yellow blouse and a denim skirt, but she had truly perfect white skin and shiny dark hair. She was breathing hard, as if she had run all the way.

“Oh, I'm so glad I caught you!” she exclaimed.

“So am I,” Elisabeth said. “Coffee?”

“Oh, I'll get it,” Angela said, heading toward the ancient push-button cash register in the corner, where Ms. Tattoo sat reading Dostoevsky. She said over her shoulder, “I'll get you a refill.”

“Thank you.”

“Let's leave. Do you mind if we talk while we walk? I just don't want to be overheard. I'm always afraid of running into people,” she said ruefully.

“Privacy? In Greenleigh? What's that?” Elisabeth joked, pushing the door open and gesturing for Angela to precede her. They strolled slowly down the street, narrowly avoiding the path of a skateboarder who skipped nimbly off the sidewalk just in time to avoid them. The teenager called out an apology and waved.

“There was a skateboard craze back in the seventies. I

remember when even I had one.” Angela was sipping slowly, savoring the coffee.

“I think it never left,” Elisabeth said. She was used to starting out her meetings with aimless chitchat. People needed to warm up a bit before they could talk about something upsetting. Yankees always had this way of sussing you out, she thought. They put you through the ropes, find out if they liked your style, and then they might confide in you—or they might part with you amiably and never say another word. She wondered if people in other parts of the country did that, too. “You have children, Mrs. Stuart?”

“Angela. Please call me Angela. I have three. They’re not children anymore, though. Rob is twenty-seven, Jennie’s twenty-five, and Grace is twenty-four. They’ve all been out of the house for a while now, since leaving for college.”

“Boston?” Elisabeth asked. Most of Greenleigh’s young people went to Boston, then off to parts unknown from there.

“The older two went off to Boston, but Grace—she’s stubborn, wouldn’t do what everyone else did. She’s in California, studying architecture. Not the kind of architecture her father deals with, obviously,” Angela added. “I think she is completely uninterested in old houses. And anyway, they have all kinds of different rules for building out there. You know, earthquakes.”

“Oh, of course. But that’s wonderful. You must be very proud,” Elisabeth said.

“I am,” Angela said, her face lighting up. They were coming up on the neighborhood elementary school, and they turned naturally into the empty playground, making themselves comfortable on a bench. The long slanted rays of afternoon sun cast a golden glow about the yard, the jungle gym and the swing set gleaming brightly, almost blindingly.

Elisabeth noticed a sparkle on Angela’s right hand, and tried

not to stare, but curiosity got the better of her. Angela noticed her expression. She extended her hand.

“Anniversary present. Twenty-fifth.”

“It’s lovely.” Elisabeth examined the diamond, turning the plump white hand slightly so that the stone’s facets caught, winking, in the sunlight. It was of a generous size, classically cut, mounted in a fussy setting of yellow gold and smaller diamonds. Elisabeth released the hand, looking up to see Angela’s expression. Angela wore a small smile, but the corner of her mouth quivered slightly.

“I don’t usually wear it. I took it with me when I left the house—I thought, well, I thought I was going to give it back.” Angela laughed a little, her voice fading as a wave of pain swept over her brow. “Isn’t that silly of me? I don’t know what I was thinking, but I just—packed my bags and figured I would work it out with him later. And I took the ring.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” Elisabeth watched as Angela examined the ring on her hand, twisting it and turning it this way and that.

Angela looked up. Tears filled her eyes. There was a long pause.

“I just needed to do something. I couldn’t stand it anymore. If I didn’t do something, anything—I was going to burst. What do you do when you’ve had it with years of waiting? All I can think about now is all the times when he could have chosen me and he chose something else instead. Usually work.” She coughed, reaching into her handbag for a tissue. “It does add up. I’m just tired of it.”

Tired relationships and broken promises. It seemed the entire world ran on the fumes of good intentions. If things had finally fallen apart between her parents, Elisabeth mused, her dad would have continued to live in the Burnham home. Her mom’s family was in Vermont, and she wasn’t on good terms with them. Where would

she have gone? She tried to imagine her mother walking out the door, suitcase in hand. Would she have taken Elisabeth with her? She couldn't be sure. Could she, Elisabeth, have lived anywhere else but in the Burnham house? It was something she'd never thought about in all those years when she'd wondered why her mother just didn't leave this man whom she had seemingly misjudged so badly.

She wondered, for the first time, if her mother blamed her for her inability to walk out of that miserable marriage. Maybe that was why she'd been so awful to her, because having a small child made it impossible for her to start over.

Elisabeth sat up a little straighter as the thought occurred to her. Maybe, just maybe—that was why she'd clung to Elisabeth so desperately. Maybe she'd given up on her own happiness because of Elisabeth, so she needed Elisabeth to stay with her, to give her life meaning.

She thought again about the night that she'd promised to meet Shawn in the high school parking lot so they could leave Greenleigh together. She hadn't been able to bring herself to do it, to leave her mother, the house, and Greenleigh. She'd blamed her own weakness. But she'd blamed her mother, too, for preventing her from finding happiness. And she'd been angry. And she was still angry. But maybe her mother wasn't so much selfish and mean, as terrified of being left alone, because she was unable to leave Greenleigh herself.

Angela continued. "He gave me this ring a few years ago. I was thinking of leaving him then, too, but I kept hesitating. Grace was still in school, and she would come home during vacations. I kept thinking how unfair it would be to her if she had nowhere to come home to. And then this—" She held out her hand, turning it so that the ring sparkled. "When I saw it, I thought that he must still love me. He's not the emotional type, the sentimental type. Really a grumpy old New Englander. So

when I saw the ring, I just—I thought it meant a lot. I thought that maybe it was an apology, even. But no.” She laughed without humor and shook her head.

“Turns out, he had a client who couldn’t pay, and this was part of what he got. The guy was a jewelry dealer. So this was free. He was so pleased!” Angela laughed again, bitterly.

“Oh, dear,” Elisabeth said. She felt secret kinship with Bob Stuart. She’d done just the same kind of barter with her clients when they couldn’t pay. She got it, she really did—but there was no way to put a good face on this for Angela.

“Bob shares nothing with me. Nothing. I don’t know anything about what he does with that company of his. After the kids left, I was bored out of my mind. I thought about getting a job, but I don’t think anyone would hire me. I’ve never had a career. I went to art school in the seventies. I have no idea how designers do their work anymore.”

“Could you ask Bob? Maybe someone at the company could mentor you, show you how to use all the new programs. You could go out on your own after that,” Elisabeth suggested.

Angela shuddered. “No, I don’t want to have anything to do with that company of his. It’s like he’s really married to the company, not to me. It would be like asking his mistress for help.”

“I understand,” Elisabeth said.

“I’m really afraid of the day that he finally retires. I don’t know if I can be with him all the time. I don’t know who he is anymore, and he makes me nervous every time he walks through the door. I can’t imagine he likes being with me, either. He’s never been very talkative, but I guess after the kids left for college, it really started bothering me. It’s like I could suddenly see how irrelevant I was if there weren’t any kids around to take care of.”

They sat quietly for a moment, watching their shadows elongate as the sun sank lower in the sky.

“There’s no other explanation for the fact that hardly a sentence passes between us that we haven’t spoken before. So to shake things up, the other day I asked him if he wanted to go to a movie. He looked at me like I was nuts. He said he didn’t know I went to movies.” Angela pressed her hand to her mouth for a moment, halfway between a sob and giggle, before continuing. “After twenty-eight years he said he didn’t know I went to movies! And I could tell you down to the last calorie what his favorite foods are and what kinds of pants he won’t wear, but I have not the faintest clue what makes his mind tick nowadays. And I don’t think he’s interested in what I think, either.”

“He’s a selectman, I understand,” Elisabeth said. “So he’s active in town politics.”

“Yes, but he had to be persuaded to do it.” Angela shrugged. “If you ask me, there was something sketchy about the whole thing. I think it’s because of Bob’s company. These developers want to take all the open land in Greenleigh and build housing tracts. They all come to Bob—Bob is very, very honest, and he’s never had a problem getting permits from the zoning board. They know that. They all want Bob on their projects because they know he’ll get it done, and they know that if they run into trouble with environmental regulations, he knows the right people to call. And if he’s a selectman, even better. When the vacancy came up a few years back, a squad of those good old boys came over and talked him into it. I thought it was disgusting. When they showed up, I left the house.” She gave a bitter laugh. “I went to a movie!”

“But he also started the environmental group that meets over at the senior center every month,” Elisabeth countered. “I know a few people who go to those meetings. I can’t imagine that he’d

be involved in a project that isn't good for Greenleigh. Isn't that the same Bob Stuart?"

"The same," Angela said. "I had no idea that Bob was starting an environmental group in Greenleigh. No idea. But of course, I'm just his wife. No reason at all why he would tell me such a thing. And you're right, people know him as an environmentalist. He's not going to take on a project that will damage the environment or make Greenleigh a wasteland of ugly houses. But I didn't like it that he got support from developers for that selectman's seat." She hesitated. "All right, perhaps I'm being unfair. But as his wife, I didn't like being the last to know. I wish—I wish he'd confided in me. There was some ugly push-back and he lost sleep over it. I lost sleep because he lost sleep." She dabbed her eyes.

She still loved him. Elisabeth could see it, as clear as day. Even with her own dashed hopes and fear that she had become boring and irrelevant, Angela loved him so much, she would lose sleep over anything that pained him. She'd given him a family, a home, and the best years of her life. Her husband was a part of her story. Elisabeth had no doubt that she'd do it all over again.

She stared into space, thinking about how one would go about repairing a broken marriage. Mrs. Miller was wrong. This wasn't thirty years of broken. It was something else. Maybe a missing piece? Maybe a misaligned gear, somewhere? This didn't feel like two people at loggerheads. "Irreconcilable differences," was the term. This didn't fall under that category.

It was more like—a stuck gear. Rust.

She felt like she was just the wrong one to consult about something like this. *I'm biased*, she thought. *No, scratch that. I'm damaged. I can't give a good recommendation because I can't think straight about broken relationships. Especially since I was the one who was left behind.*

But she needed the business. She needed the money. She would have to muddle through. And if Angela was determined to go through with this, she would need help.

“Angela, your home—could you bear to move? Sell it, even?”

“It’ll break my heart,” Angela admitted. Her brow wrinkled as she traced the rim of her empty cup with a finger. “Bob built that house for us. That was back when we were young and broke. He asked me what I wanted and I told him. He did everything himself, and I love that house as if it were my child.” She laughed. “It sounds so silly. But we made that house together.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all,” Elisabeth said.

“I don’t know what would be worse,” Angela said. “To live there alone, with my marriage over, or to not live there.” She blew her nose. “Although I want to be upfront with you, Beth. I’m financially independent. I inherited quite a large sum from my parents when they passed. And I also saved a nest egg for myself over the years. Bob told me to do it, because he was worried that if something were to happen to him or the company, he wanted me to have my own money in my own name. So whatever this costs, I can pay for it. And whatever happens afterwards, I can afford it. I’m pretty much set for life. I’m sorry, that sounds so crass, but I wanted to be clear about that. And I’m ready with a check for you.”

She opened her purse and removed an envelope. She handed it to Elisabeth, who took it.

“I hope it’s enough. But if it’s not, I’ll write you another check.”

“Thank you, Angela.” Elisabeth was touched. She appreciated Angela’s thoughtfulness, her generosity, and the depth of her devotion to her family. She decided that she would do anything at all possible to help sort this relationship out—whatever that meant. “Go back to Mrs. Miller’s and try to relax for a

few days. Don't think about it too much. Does your husband have a lawyer?"

Angela got up from the bench, walking over to a trash can where she deposited her paper cup and several shredded tissues. She stood there for a moment, back turned to Elisabeth.

"I don't know," she said, her voice muffled.

"I'll find out. Don't worry about anything."

Angela returned slowly to the bench, her knuckles whitening as she pressed her handbag hard against her knees. She was, Elisabeth knew, struggling not to burst into tears again.

"I just didn't know what came next, how to face this. It was all so big and—big and messy. And with Sarah nagging me day and night to get my act together—it was just too much. I couldn't think of what to do. Sarah's a good friend," she added hastily, "but she gets a bit over-enthusiastic sometimes."

"Yes, I know Mrs. Miller very well," Elisabeth said, smiling. "I think I mentioned to you that she's known me most of my life. I know how she is." She stood up from the bench, shivering slightly. "Goodness, the wind has turned. Amazing how these days just suddenly turn into fall weather."

Later that evening, after a fight with the boiler to heat up the tepid water in the tank, Elisabeth sat in the kitchen with her feet propped up on a chair as she typed up her notes from her conversation with Angela Stuart. Peppermint tea steeped in the cracked mug in front of her, and she watched with interest as an ant, fleeing from the newly chilled garden outside, tugged a leaf across the width of her kitchen table. She could somehow never bring herself to squash the ants that brazenly invaded her kitchen from time to time. Mrs. Miller had said darkly that she knew how to get rid of them, and for good, but Elisabeth reasoned that since they had been around longer than the Burnhams had, it wasn't really fair to vanquish them with technology. They made their appearance each spring and fall, struggling

across the old pine kitchen table as they hoarded their booty, and Elisabeth sat and watched them come and go.

She wiggled her toes thoughtfully, watching as another ant struggled up the table leg, this one burdened with a minuscule crumb. Yesterday's toast, Elisabeth realized. She took a sip of tea. The kitchen had such ancient appliances, and the doors and windows weren't sealed up tight, which explained the presence of all those ants. But it was the coziest part of the house to sit in, especially in the winter when she got the woodstove going. Elisabeth had once read in some magazine that woodstoves were popular among young professionals in places like New York. She found that hysterically funny. People in Greenleigh had woodstoves because it was cold in the winter. Full stop.

She stared at the empty corner next to the china cabinet, remembering the bitterly cold winter before her mother's death, when she had lugged a mattress into the kitchen and shoved it into that corner, settling her mother there for what she had realized would be her last months. The old bedrooms were just too drafty and cold, and the boiler too cantankerous, and from her vantage point on the mattress, her mother was able to keep the woodfire stoked during the hours when Elisabeth was away. Proud to the end, her mother insisted that she didn't need help, that she could take care of herself. She was resentful of the set-up at first, accusing Elisabeth of treating her like an old woman. But she eventually acquiesced silently to the fact that she was very ill, and spent her days on the old mattress, waiting to die.

Elisabeth never again wanted to see a mattress in the kitchen, she thought. And because she was wrapped in her old yellow robe and sitting with her herb tea in the old cracked mug, she allowed herself to shed a tear for her mother. It had been a hard life for a proud young woman accustomed to a leisured existence. At what point did she realize, Elisabeth wondered, that Ralph Burnham was running through money like water

and unlikely to make more? At what point did her feelings of fear and disappointment overtake her youthful love and passion?

Sometimes Elisabeth wondered whether there had even been any youthful love and passion. Her mother had been plain, a tall woman with straight brown hair and strong features. Her father, by contrast, was a short, slight man with golden brown curls, always cheerful, always pleasant. As Elisabeth remembered them from her youth, they had never gotten along. There had always been that worry about money, for one thing, since the money from Grandfather's trust was running out. Paula would scold, Ralph would smile and mutter a non sequitur. Then he would leave, packing up the old Plymouth with his cleaning products, and return ten hours later, having sold nothing, with scarcely a mention as to where he had been, although they all knew that he was at the Athena Diner with his childhood friends, smoking and playing cards. He would pick Elisabeth up, tickle her a bit distractedly, then escape to the front room with his newspaper. Paula didn't like to go in there because it smelled like old Burnham books, she complained, and it gave her the willies.

Her father didn't come home from his sales trip one day; he had been killed in a car accident in a neighboring town, some forty miles away. Elisabeth had wept, sad to lose the playful daddy of her childhood, but Paula had been stony-faced and resentful, as if in death Ralph Burnham had become even more useless than he had been in life. There was life insurance, and Paula was a good and frugal manager of the proceeds. But without her customary target, she focused her sharp tongue instead on her daughter, a slight, pale girl with golden brown curls and a shy smile who looked exactly like her father.

Human relationships, in fact, were Elisabeth's trade, and she knew all too well that they buckled and frayed under pressure.

She stood up to put her empty mug in the sink. Was a bad marriage worth saving? Had her parents come to her, Elisabeth Burnham, attorney-at-law, what would she have counseled?

She did not know the answer. All that she did know was that she needed the clients, and that Angela had given her a large check. She was going to try hard to make Angela happy. She thanked her silently and went to bed.

When the phone rang, Shawn was tempted not to answer. He was deep in the middle of a pleading that he was trying to compose, and knew that another distraction would make it impossible for him to regain his train of thought. On the other hand, it was his cell phone, and not many people actually called him on that number. He searched until he finally found the phone under a pile of papers on the couch.

“What the heck takes you so long?” His father sounded annoyed.

“Sorry. I couldn’t—” He left the sentence dangling, not wanting to admit that he couldn’t find the telephone under the mess in his office.

“Listen. I’m at the factory. Bob Stuart just stopped by.”

“Your chess buddy?” Shawn’s gaze wandered over to the book case. One of his books was missing. *Why don’t people tell me when they borrow things*, he thought, irritated.

“Right. Well, I’m sending him over to you.”

“Me?” His attention focused back on his father. “Why?”

“You know. His problem.”

“His problem,” Shawn repeated, not understanding.

“You know.” His father’s voice took on an impatient tone. “Look, I can’t stay on because the dye on number six isn’t coming out right. I told him you could see him this afternoon.”

“Dad, you need to let me know when you send people my way,” Shawn said, grumpily pulling his phone away from his ear briefly to check the time. “I’m tied up this afternoon.”

“What?” There was a roar of machinery in the background as someone opened the door to his father’s office and shouted something.

“Shawn! Hello? Gotta run!” His father hollered briefly at him and hung up without waiting for a reply. Shawn put his phone down, noting with distaste the pizza stains on his desk from the previous night’s dinner. He’d gotten into the habit of working late and eating in, and the custodians were clearly too terrified to clean his desk. Shawn swiped at the stains, but only succeeded at smudging them further and adding a small splotch of red to his sleeve. He cursed.

He went over to the bookcase to inspect the space in his New England collection. He remembered his father’s comments a couple of weeks ago about Bob Stuart and his wife having marital problems, but he didn’t practice family law, so he couldn’t conceive of why Bob Stuart would come to see him. Perhaps it was a town selectman thing. Civic duty of one kind or another. Maybe even a charitable function. It was getting into fall, after all, and to the extent that Greenleigh had any social activity at all, it would usually take place in conjunction with the holiday season.

Shawn continued to scowl at the bookcase. He hated it when books were missing. *Why don’t people ask*, he muttered, stalking over to the door. He flung it open and stormed down the hallway to the men’s room, hoping to do something about the tomato stain on his sleeve. A couple of the clerks stopped dead in their

tracks in the hallway, gawking, and fled when he turned his sour gaze upon them. *What's your problem*, he thought.

When he returned to his office the door was shut. He was in even worse spirits than before, having succeeded not only in smudging the tomato stain further but in soaking his entire sleeve. He had rolled it up in the bathroom, but it was dripping wet and clung clammily to his arm. He then had to roll the other one up as well in order to prevent the inevitable questions about why he would roll up one and not the other, and why roll up sleeves on such a chilly day anyway? He wondered if he should just wear his jacket all day and forestall the questions. He scowled and pushed the door to his office open, slamming it shut behind him.

At first he wasn't aware that there was anyone else there. He stood just inside his office, examining the rolled-up tomato stain, which was now prominently displayed over his forearm. A movement distracted him, and he looked up, surprised.

"I'm sorry. I thought you had gone out." Elisabeth stood next to his bookcase, the missing volume in her hand, actively in the process of replacing it. He gaped at her for a moment. She was looking a little better than she had over the past couple of weeks, the shadows under her eyes neatly camouflaged with makeup, he realized. Her lipstick matched the pale pink dress she was wearing, the wide skirt cinched in at the waist with a sturdy belt made from the same fabric. He marveled again at how thin she was, the sweetheart neckline of the bodice revealing the bones of her collar and neck, where the skin was almost translucent. The bodice gaped a bit, as if the dress had been purchased for someone else.

Shawn transferred his gaze from her bosom to her face. He glared at her, remembering that he didn't like it when people took his books. What was she doing nosing around his books anyway?

Elisabeth moved away from the bookcase, but did not approach his desk, her hands folded primly in front of her, briefcase dangling limply from her shoulder. *Christ, I'm not going to eat you*, he wanted to say. But he steeled himself and said instead, "How are you getting along with those projects?"

"Very well, thank you. I have enough to keep me busy for a little while."

"Let me know if you run out of things to do." Shawn indicated the pile on his desk. "There's a lot going on here, as you can see."

Elisabeth nodded, taking another step backwards. She was, Shawn realized, trying to slip away.

"Was there something—?" His voice faded. He found himself hoping that she had come to talk to him. About something, anything.

Elisabeth shook her head. "No." She began to head toward the door, but halfway there she paused and turned.

"Actually, I should thank you for the loan of that book."

"Book?" Shawn feigned innocence. He didn't want to admit that not ten minutes ago he had been ready to boil in oil the silent borrower of his books.

"You weren't here yesterday morning and Ricky Junior and I were settling a bet. He thought you wouldn't mind if we confirmed the winner by checking your books. More reliable than the internet."

"Of course not," Shawn said, trying to sound pleasant. "I hope that it helped." Ricky Junior? She was playing games with Ricky Junior? He felt momentarily jealous that she hadn't turned to him, before he remembered that he was still angry at her for jilting him.

She was on her way to the door again. "Yes," she said over her shoulder, "it was a ring-necked duck, not a mallard that we

saw at the common. Thanks.” With that she shut the door behind her.

Shawn felt his knees weaken a bit, and he sat down. He shook his head. He laughed. Then he surveyed the mess on his desk.

“Ring-necked duck,” he said aloud. So she and Ricky Junior were taking walks down to the common and watching the ducks. “How sweet,” he muttered. But he felt anything but sweet. He felt vicious and nasty. Frustrated.

Go after her, he thought. Go after her. Ask her back in. Ask her to have lunch with you. Dinner. Anything. Give her the whole damned lot of books. Drag her out to that confounded duck pond.

Kiss her.

That last thought entered his brain along a line of logic that he realized needed to be sternly banished from his existence. He would not fall in love with Elisabeth Burnham again. And the surest way in which to fail that promise was to feel her again in his arms, her pulse quickening as he ran his hand along the slim lines of her waist and his lips along the curve of her chin—

Stop that. He tore his mind away from its wretched contemplation of what he would never again possess. *No more, he told himself, no more. One rejection is enough. It's more than enough.*

He noticed that she had left a half-empty packet of tissues on the desk. Slowly, and with great reluctance, he picked up the packet. He weighed it in his hand, then quickly, as if someone might be watching, he lifted it to his nose. It smelled of her, of soap, chewing gum, chamomile tea, and the polished leather of her briefcase. The scent reminded him of evenings spent huddled on the worn couch in her front room, stealing kisses as they kept one ear on the door for her mother's footsteps. He opened the top drawer of his desk and tossed the packet into it, shutting it quickly, not wanting to ask himself why he did such a silly and sentimental thing.

To work, he muttered. *Damn it all*. With one vigorous gesture, he swept part of the pile on his desk onto the floor, the papers and files landing with a dull thud, and felt better.

He had almost forgotten his father's phone call. The receptionist informed him at exactly two o'clock that Bob Stuart was there to see him, and he was tempted to say he wasn't in. He had a long and boring meeting to go to, and he hadn't gotten very far in getting his desk into any kind of order. But as he hesitated, something made him recall the conversation with his dad in the car that night on the way home from the senior center. He remembered the feeling of isolation that he had gleaned from his father's words.

Bob is the one left behind, he thought. *Like Dad*.

"I'll be right there," he told the receptionist. On his way out he stuck his head into Ricky Junior's office, asking him to go in his stead to his meeting. Ricky Junior seemed delighted and flattered to be asked. This was one of the hidden perks of being managing partner. *Everyone imagines that if it's a meeting that I'm attending, it must be either interesting or important*, he mused as he sauntered down the hall. *Little do they know*.

Bob Stuart awaited him in the reception area, pacing a little nervously. Shawn called out to him in a friendly way.

"Still playing those late-night chess games?" The two men shook hands.

"Playing with your dad is a revelation," Bob said, shaking his head and smiling. "I always learn something."

"He's a stubborn old geezer," Shawn said affectionately. "Best dad in the world. I don't play chess, though, so in that department I'm persona non grata."

"My kids never played chess, either," Bob admitted. "I don't think they even know how." Shawn led the way into his office and shut the door.

"Will you let me get you some coffee? Tea?"

“Oh, no, not for me, thanks. I'm cutting back. All that caffeine.”

“I'm sure we've got decaf,” Shawn began, but Bob waved this away as well.

“No, really, I'm just fine. I know you're very busy, and I don't want to take up too much of your time.” Shawn motioned for him to sit down at the sofa, an offer that Bob accepted hesitantly. He looked down at his hands, as if weighing his words carefully before speaking.

Shawn jumped into the breach. “How are things at town hall?”

Bob furrowed his brow, puzzled. Shawn smiled. “I take it that you're not here to discuss town business.”

Bob broke into a rueful grin. He rubbed at his crewcut. He was a pleasant-faced, portly fellow in a navy blue fisherman's sweater and an expensive-looking navy-blue wool jacket. He didn't look at all like a man in the construction trades, but perhaps for the large ring of keys at his waist, and the leather phone carrier on his belt. He looked instead like a prosperous grandfather on vacation. “No—no, I'm not. I wish I were, but I'm here on a personal matter.” He paused. “Your father told me I could come to you, but I don't want to take up too much time—”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Shawn interrupted. “I'm happy to help.”

“Thank you,” Bob said, looking grateful. He stopped, then continued, his voice firm. “It's about my wife, Angela. She left me several weeks ago. I assume that she probably wants a divorce, and I just need a little guidance before I go ahead and involve myself in all the legal mess that I'm sure a divorce always creates.”

“I hope I can help, but I don't do family law,” Shawn said. He added, “I can refer you to someone with more experience in these things.”

“No, no, I don't really need specific advice—at least, not at the moment.” Bob dug a small notebook out of his pants pocket and flipped through it, coming to a page with neatly numbered items on a list. He referred to it briefly before continuing.

“I don't intend to contest anything that Angela says. I want it to be as painless as possible for her. Mainly, though, I want her to be secure—we're both getting on in years, and anything could happen.”

“I see,” Shawn said. “I suppose you aren't worried about her making any—well, how do I put it?—unreasonable demands?”

Bob smiled. “That's not really her style.”

“If I may ask,” Shawn said, “what is it exactly that she is saying? The grounds for divorce, I mean.”

“I don't know, to be honest.”

Shawn sat back in his seat, perplexed. Bob continued, “I haven't spoken to her since she left. I thought that maybe she wanted some time away to think, and I hoped—” Here his voice, until now a rolling, gentle cadence, choked slightly. “I hoped that she would come home after a spell, and we could work things out.” A faint smile appeared. “I waited these past weeks, and I heard nothing. Then late last week, I got a phone call from her attorney. It looks like Angela is serious about getting a divorce, and her lawyer wants to see me. I wanted to talk to someone before seeing her lawyer.”

“If you've gotten a call from your wife's attorney, you need to hire an attorney yourself,” Shawn exclaimed. “You shouldn't be sitting around speculating as to your wife's motives. You need representation.”

“I've been putting off meeting with her lawyer—basic dread, I guess. I finally made an appointment, but then I changed it a couple of times. I just couldn't face the whole situation.” Bob sighed deeply.

“Listen to me, Bob,” Shawn said, rising from his seat. “I urge

you to get legal counsel before you talk to your wife's lawyer. I'm sure her attorney will be talking about money and settlements, and you absolutely should not get into those territories without a lawyer to protect your interests."

Bob smiled. "I'm not particularly worried about that, Shawn. I'm prepared to give her everything I have."

"Bob, you can't really mean that. Surely you've got a pension, plus your home and your savings. Not to mention all the assets you've bought over the years. And your company! You need to take a look at your company assets as well." Shawn knew next to nothing about divorce law, but he gave a mental shudder at the thought of the havoc a divorce could wreak on a prosperous business owned by one principal.

"No, I mean it. She can have all of it," Bob said. "I'd like to leave something for the kids, and I'm sure Angela would not object to that. Otherwise, all of it. Me, I don't need a lot to live on, and I can find a small apartment somewhere. But Angela deserves to live well, in the manner to which she's accustomed. In her own home. My God, she built that home, really. It was nothing when we moved in. She told me what to do and I did it—but I was always working, so I never really got to enjoy it. Angela—that's her house. She made it what it is today."

"That's very noble of you, Bob. But you need to think about this. Carefully." Shawn tried not to sound too lawyerly. He felt almost rude giving advice of this sort to a man thirty years his senior, but he felt obliged to express his disapproval of the path Bob seemed determined to take.

"I've put a lot of thought into it, Shawn, and the one thing I want both of us to come away with is dignity. I may have failed at keeping Angela happy, but I don't want us to part on bad terms."

"I see." Shawn sat down on the arm of the nearest easy chair. "All right. But you at least need to have your attorney with you when you speak to her lawyer. Otherwise you'll have a commu-

nication problem when you try to tell your lawyer everything that you talk about.”

“I suppose I hadn't thought of that,” Bob admitted. “I was trying to put off hiring a lawyer until I had settled the money issue with Angela.”

“No, no, then it'll be too late. Everyone needs to understand everything that you and Angela decide on. From the beginning.”

“Well, it's a good thing that I was able to check with you before heading off to my meeting with Angela's lawyer.” Bob paused. “My last question—can you recommend a lawyer for me?”

Shawn felt a rush of emotion. He remembered his father's words, remembered the ache that he had felt thinking about what it meant to be alone, and how wrong it seemed for anyone to be alone. And Angela had left Bob without a word, the way he had left Beth without a word. Bob was making drastic decisions without asking Angela why she'd left, why they couldn't be together. Beth had made drastic decisions in her life, too, because she and Shawn hadn't resolved things. They'd avoided the conversation that Bob needed to have with Angela. He didn't want Bob to suffer the way he, Shawn, had made Beth suffer. He said, the words tumbling out in spite of himself, “I'd be happy to do this for you.”

Bob looked surprised. “Oh, no, don't feel like you need to—you're very busy—I know you don't—”

“Please, let me do this,” Shawn said quietly. “I really want to help. Really. You play chess with my dad, after all.” He struggled to find the right words, words that wouldn't insult the older man. “I want this to be easy for you.”

“It can never be easy,” Bob said. His voice was matter-of-fact, as if he were discussing auto repair rather than divorce. But his eyes were sad.

“A relationship of nearly thirty years' endurance is going to

be hard to break up,” Shawn said. “But let me do this as a friend, Bob.”

“If you would, I would be grateful,” Bob said. “I don't think I've ever been so terrified in my life, and lawyers tend to terrify me even further. Sorry, Shawn, but that's how most of us ordinary folks react to you guys.”

“I know,” Shawn said. He got up and went over to his desk, where he was fortunately able to locate his appointment book under a pile of papers. “When are you meeting with your wife's lawyer?”

“Friday morning. Angela is not going to be there, apparently. Not that I blame her.” Bob rose from the sofa, tucking his notebook back into his pants pocket.

“Friday morning.” Shawn was circling something and arrowing it over to another day. “All right. Done. I'll be there. Where do I go?”

“It's a little home office in one of those mansions on Church Street,” Bob said, walking across the room toward the door. Shawn, who had been following, stopped suddenly, standing stock still in the middle of the room. A terrible thought had just entered his brain.

“Church Street?” His voice was strained. Bob turned around at the door, eyeing him curiously.

“Yes, literally several doors down from the Congregational Church. Her name's Elisabeth Burnham. I'm sure you must have heard of her. People in town really like her. She was very nice on the telephone, too, not at all lawyer-like.” He laughed as he realized what he had said. “Sorry. You know what I mean.”

Shawn hadn't moved. “Elisabeth Burnham.” His voice sounded to himself like a stranger's. “Yes, I know her.” Hadn't he just had this conversation? Oh, right, Ricky Senior had asked her if he knew Elisabeth. So *did* he know Elisabeth? Here again he was being shown some other Elisabeth Burnham, some

woman he could not identify as the woman who had destroyed the Shawn Waterstone he had been so long ago. Had he ever really known her?

He was having trouble remembering who she'd been, back in those days. His Elisabeth had been sweet, generous of spirit. His Elisabeth had needed protection from the world. But this Elisabeth didn't need him to take care of her; she was in the business of looking after others. He definitely didn't know this Elisabeth.

He realized that he ought to say something to Bob, even to renege on his offer, but his throat was tight, and his mind was not responding to the rapid-fire "oughts" piling up in his brain.

"We can meet there," Bob was saying. "If you'd like." He stopped, watching Shawn. Shawn looked at him blankly.

"Where?"

"Church Street. Elisabeth Burnham's office. Do you know where that is?"

"Uh—yeah, yes, I mean, I do. What time?"

"Ten o'clock." He held out his hand to Shawn. "I can't tell you what a relief it is to know that I can turn to you with my questions. Thank you. I don't want to get in your way, so if you ever get too busy—"

"Absolutely not," Shawn said quickly, realizing that his hesitation must be showing on his face. "I'll see you Friday morning, Bob." The door closed.

His head was starting to pound. He went over to his desk and sat down limply. "I'm screwed," he said out loud.

He'd gone through the years feeling angry and abandoned, but actually, he'd been the one to leave. He'd been the one who'd done the abandoning. And, like Angela, he'd left without a word and hadn't bothered to explain. He'd figured that Beth had rejected him, so there was nothing else to say. And like Bob, Beth had soldiered on, probably concluding from his silence

that Shawn was the one doing the rejecting, just as Bob was sure that Angela was rejecting him.

This was ridiculous. People needed to talk these things through. It was stupid to go nearly a decade without a word, just suffering alone. He needed to talk to Beth. Right away. Maybe they could be friends. Or maybe they could salvage the remains of that relationship and move forward into something better.

Besides having had the very bad luck to run into Shawn Waterstone while she was trying to return the book she had pilfered from his bookshelf, the quarterly water bill had arrived, and Elisabeth had spent the afternoon doing complex calculations concerning her bank account and the various household bills. At least, it had seemed complex. In actuality it had been no more than addition and subtraction—mostly subtraction—but it left her mind dazed and her stomach in knots. No matter how much fancy footwork she tried to come up with, the fact was that there were many bills but little cash.

But of course, when it rains, it pours, Elisabeth thought, banging absently at the water tank with a wrench. She had been operating for weeks now with lukewarm water at best, but this morning it had verged on cold. She'd ended up heating water for a tub bath in a kettle on the woodstove. She viewed the tank with dismay. It was a big old thing, and she'd never paid it the least bit of attention. A new one would break her budget. She had seen that when she'd tried to concoct some way of paying for that water bill. There just was no money to spare for extras—although this wasn't an “extra,” Elisabeth thought ruefully.

She twirled the wrench about in her fingers, sitting back on her haunches. She looked about the cellar. It was musty and dark, the single bulb dangling overhead a mere twenty-five watts. She had never wanted to waste the wattage of a more powerful bulb since she never came down here. Her father had not been a very good repairman, and he tended to just turn things off when they stopped working, so he had not spent much time down in the cellar, either.

Elisabeth sighed, pushing back a curl from her face, re-tucking it into her ponytail. How much longer before everything propping up this house just gave up and failed? How much longer before she, Elisabeth Burnham, attorney-at-law, just gave up and failed?

She tossed the useless wrench into the cluttered steel toolbox and slammed the lid shut. She had hoped that Lawson & Lawson would be a temporary solution, a source of income to tide her over during a rough spot. But she knew that her life was much like this house, in dire need of restructuring. Patchwork repairs wouldn't do the job forever. Neither would temporary checks from Lawson & Lawson.

What she needed was clients. Angela Stuart was a gift from the gods at the exact time that she needed one. And yes, it meant she would have to endure Mrs. Miller's gossipy interventions for the foreseeable future. But Angela's check had reminded her that big checks from multiple clients with deep pockets were the only answer to the permanent problem of this run-down old home.

Of course, the problem with Angela was that she clearly did not want a divorce. Elisabeth was sure of this. She thought that she could convince Angela to talk to her husband, to go for counseling, to not give up—so long as her husband wasn't an utter jerk. And she somehow couldn't imagine that the man

who'd given Angela the house of her dreams had mysteriously transformed into a jerk.

But a divorce would pay for a new water tank.

Elisabeth stood, giving the tank one last weary look. Apart from a faint hissing sound, she couldn't tell whether it was behaving particularly oddly. She was tempted to give it a small kick, but refrained, just in case it collapsed into pieces.

As she climbed the cellar steps, lugging the toolbox with both hands, she thought she could hear faint tapping. She paused, listening. For a moment all was silent. Then just as she began to move again, the tapping started up. Someone at the door.

"Coming!" she called. She hurried as best as she could, but banged her knee hard with a corner of the toolbox as she arrived at the top of the stairs. Wincing with pain, she dropped the toolbox, causing the lid to flip open with a crash, scattering its contents across the smooth wooden floor of the kitchen. She saw immediately that the hinge on the lid had finally given way, the metal bits bent apart.

"Damn!" she said with force, rubbing her knee. She suspected that it was bleeding underneath the stretchy knit leggings, and in any case it would certainly turn a most unattractive purple in a day or so. She limped out into the hall, grimacing at her reflection in the hall mirror. Grease stains marred her neck, as well as her oversized blue flannel shirt, and wisps of curly hair were escaping from her ponytail. She hobbled over to the door, swiping at her neck with her sleeve. Swinging it open she uttered a hasty apology for her tardiness. The words died on her lips.

Shawn Waterstone stood uncomfortably on her doorstep. His starched white shirt collar still managed to look crisp and professional after a long day at the office, though he'd removed his tie. He must have left his coat in the car, because he was in

his suit jacket, a dark gray wool. An enormous briefcase stood at his feet. Elisabeth stood speechless as she leaned down to rub her knee with one hand.

“Hi,” he said. He seemed awkward, almost embarrassed.

“Hi,” Elisabeth responded. She could feel the legging fabric beginning to stick to her kneecap. She looked down. There was a small rip and a dark stain.

“What happened to your knee?”

“Nothing,” Elisabeth said, straightening. She attempted an air of nonchalance. “Banged it, that’s all. What’s up?” Her knee was beginning to throb.

“I brought some files by—a project that just came up this afternoon. You weren’t around. Just thought I’d drop them off—I’m on my way home.”

“Is it urgent?” Her tone was polite, but she eyed him suspiciously. There was something a little odd about his demeanor, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She didn’t want him to be so sorry for her that he began to give her work out of pity.

“Sort of. It’s a case of Ricky’s. Junior, I mean. He’s so overloaded that it would be good to get this one out of the way quickly.” Silence followed. Elisabeth felt her cheeks warming, the flush rising from her neck to her face, and knew that Shawn saw it, too. She felt like a bug under a magnifying glass. Exposed.

“You need to take care of that knee.” Shawn was frowning at her leg. Elisabeth glanced down. The wet spot was beginning to ooze. She looked back up at Shawn. She knew she had to invite him in but the mental image of them sitting stiffly in the front room talking about Lawson & Lawson made her feel sick with dread.

“Why don’t you come in?” she said hesitantly.

“Please don’t worry about it. I’ll just wait right here.” Shawn stepped back from the doorway a little, glancing casually over

his shoulder into the deepening dusk. A big, unpruned rhododendron bush, its leaves dark and waxy green, dwarfed the veranda leading off the entryway to one side of the house. "You've taken your porch furniture in, I see."

"Actually, I never brought it out." Elisabeth said, a slightly bitter edge to her voice. "I somehow missed summer this year. Mrs. McPherson next door hounded me about bringing out the porch furniture but every time I thought about doing it something else came up. No one ever sits out here anyway." She caught her breath. "But of course, that's a stupid thing to say, isn't it? Since here you are, looking around for a place to sit." She smiled at him ruefully, and he responded, the hazel eyes lighting up with humor. Her heart ached as she realized how familiar and comforting his silhouette on the porch seemed.

"Come in." She stepped back, gesturing for him to enter.

"No, really, I can just drop these off. I'll wait." His words sounded insincere, and that settled it for her. She turned away from the door.

"I'm going upstairs to do something about my knee," she said over her shoulder, heading toward the stairs. "Shut the door behind you." Halfway up the stairs she heard the door shut quietly and the floor creak as he stepped into the hallway. Something tugged at her heart, a little flicker of excitement, quickly dampened by the reality of her situation.

I won't, she thought. I won't get all wrought up over a little bit of kindness.

She winced as she rounded the corner of the staircase, both from the throbbing in her knee and the embarrassing knowledge that he knew how badly she needed the work. Apparently, she needed work so badly that he came to her front door with it. Well, he didn't know everything, thank goodness. She would die of humiliation if he knew just how desperate things had gotten. He probably couldn't imagine anything that bad.

She limped into her bedroom to try to gingerly step into a pair of jeans, but the rough denim caused her to wince and pull her leg out again. At a loss, she pulled on a sweater and a short knit skirt. At least that didn't rub against her knee. She hastily checked her image in the mirror. She'd gotten the grease stains off her neck, but her hair was still a mess. She loosened the elastic that held it up and let the curly brown locks tumble about her shoulders. No, she decided. She didn't want it to look like she was trying to look nice for him. She swept the hair up again and limped out into the hall, where she gingerly negotiated the stairway down.

A noise from the kitchen caused her to limp in that direction. She walked in just as Shawn was replacing the last wrench in the broken tool box. He stood, picking up the heavy box to put it on the kitchen table.

"I think you need a new tool box." The glimmer of amusement in his voice caused Elisabeth to stiffen. She did not want him to laugh at her sorry efforts to do her own repairs.

"I can probably fix that one," she said, moving to take the toolbox.

"Watch it." Shawn caught it just as she picked it up by the lid, half lifting the body of the box and nearly causing it to overturn onto the floor again. "I'll bet I know how you hurt your knee. What were you trying to fix?"

Elisabeth pushed the box toward the center of the table, angry that she was so clumsy, angry that anyone had been a witness to her own pathetic circumstances.

"The water tank," she muttered, moving off in the direction of the stove. She turned her back and busied herself with the kettle. "Let me make you some tea."

"What's up with the water tank?" Shawn persisted.

"Well, what else would be up with a water tank?" Elisabeth snapped. "It isn't heating water."

“Would you like me to take a look at it?” Shawn started toward the cellar door.

“No, I would not,” Elisabeth retorted, but Shawn was already continuing down the steps. She half-turned, ready to protest, but she could hear him thumping down the creaky old steps, pausing to feel around for the light switch, then letting out a muffled curse. She giggled involuntarily. He must have banged his head on something hanging from the low ceiling.

She went in search of something better than her old cracked mug while he shuffled about in the cellar. As she poured the hot water into the cups, she realized that despite the years of separation, she could still recall how he liked his tea. *All this useless information, stored up in my brain, she thought. It would do me good to get rid of the stuff that I don't need anymore. It would make room in my head for something else, something more useful. Something more lucrative.*

She heard his footsteps coming up the stairs. Shawn was saying something as he came into the kitchen. “—be something wrong with the coil.”

“What does that mean? What’s a coil?” Elisabeth hoped it wasn’t expensive, whatever it was.

Shawn sat down at the table, helping himself to his tea. “That kind of tank has a coil in it—that’s what heats the water. They get dirty over time—minerals and such. Anyway, it’s such an old tank, you’d be better off just getting a whole new tank, I suspect.”

“A new water tank?” Elisabeth snapped to attention. “Oh, no.”

“It’s possible that you just need to clean out the thing, but it’s a tremendous headache. It’s pretty ancient, and it’s probably never been cleaned.”

“You’ve got that right,” Elisabeth said, thinking of her father lounging about in the front room in his robe and slippers, nose

in a book, while her mother complained about his inability to maintain the house.

A new water tank, she mused. Yeah, come to think of it, she could do that. *Angela's divorce*, she thought. *Enough for a whole new tank. Wow, hot water 24/7.*

For a moment, she fantasized about hot water gushing out of the taps, hot showers first thing in the morning. What a concept.

Shawn rose, sauntering over to the stove where he picked up the kettle, weighing it in his grasp before pouring more water into his mug. He returned to the table, having located a teaspoon near the sink, and sugared the weakened tea in his cup. Stirring, he went to the refrigerator, bending over to retrieve the milk.

It was so odd, seeing Shawn at home in her kitchen all over again. She almost liked it. Almost.

He put the spoon in the sink, and seeing her looking at him, gestured with the mug. "The house still looks the same. Like it used to."

The warmth in his tone brought her back to her present reality with a jolt. A voice in her head cried out a warning. The present was bad enough; what if he wanted to talk about the past? She was so afraid of the past. What if he wanted to talk about them? About why she hadn't shown up? Why she'd jilted him? She felt panic growing in her chest, like an expanding bubble, getting larger and larger. It was becoming difficult to breathe.

She should never have invited him in.

Shawn was leaning against the kitchen sink, staring at her expectantly.

"What?" she choked.

"I said, we haven't done this in such a long time." The tentative, friendly expression on his face faded, to be replaced by something bordering on concern. "Is something wrong?"

“No, I—” She stood up quickly, knocking her injured knee against the table leg. She doubled over in pain, much worse than before now that she was bare-legged.

“Owwww—” She grimaced. Shawn started toward her, mug clattering onto the countertop, but she held up a hand hastily. “I’m fine,” she whispered, clutching her knee.

“Did you want to show me that new case?” She tried to speak normally, but her voice was rasping. Shawn’s mouth tightened. She saw the veil drop down over his face almost as surely as if she had physically put it there herself. Her heart ached, but she knew he got the message.

“Actually, I put the files in the front room. I take it that’s your office?” His voice took on the cool, professional tone she had come to associate with him in the office. Somehow it did not ease the quickening of her pulse. She felt physically ill.

“Yes, that’s right. Thank you. Is there anything I should know about it?” She tried to put a note of finality into her voice, the kind that she used when she was trying to end a telephone conversation.

The expression on Shawn’s face grew more frozen. He got it, knew that she wanted him to leave.

He shook his head. “No, it’s self-explanatory.” He put his empty mug into the sink. “Thanks for the tea.” He began to head out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the door.

A lump formed in Elisabeth’s throat. She hobbled slowly behind him, watching as he picked up his briefcase from where he had deposited it at the foot of the staircase. Elisabeth could see her reflection in the hall mirror. She looked miserable.

“Take care of that leg. Looks like it hurts. And think about a new water tank.”

Elisabeth nodded. Shawn put his hand on the doorknob, then stopped. There was a pause. Then he turned to her. He seemed to have made a decision.

“If you have the time, I’m sure Ricky Junior would like it if you just took that case off his hands. As the lead attorney, I mean.”

“Really?” Elisabeth stared at him in amazement.

“Don’t look so shocked. I was being a jerk when I gave you paralegal work to do. Ricky Junior told me that all the strategy behind his last case was yours. I was just being an idiot. I’m sorry.”

“Oh—” she faltered, not knowing what to say.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable by coming here, Bethie.”

Had she misheard him, or had he called her by that fond old nickname?

“I’ve upset you by coming to the house,” Shawn was saying. “But I needed to see you. I needed to talk to you. I didn’t want to leave things between us—” He stopped, struggling for words.

Elisabeth opened her mouth, but he stopped her. “No, let me say it. I just—I just—I should have talked to you sooner, Beth. I was stubborn and stupid. Eight years is a long time to be stubborn and stupid. Especially because we were—we were—”

“No, it was my fault,” Elisabeth interrupted. “It was completely my fault. I was the one who didn’t show up. And I should have explained.”

But what could she have explained, she thought. That she lived with a noose around her neck? That Shawn could not have set her free? That Greenleigh held her prisoner? Would he have listened? And wouldn’t the result have been the same? Wouldn’t they still be apart? Wouldn’t they still be having this awkward conversation, rehashing the past in order to figure out a way to move forward?

“But I should have dealt with it the right way, instead of getting angry and just cutting you off.” Shawn hesitated, and then said, “I want us to be friends again. I want us to start over.”

At this, Elisabeth blanched. “What does that mean? Start over?”

“It means start over. Put these years behind us. Maybe—maybe—we can work it out.”

Elisabeth felt her hands trembling. She pressed them together, hoping he wouldn’t notice. “What do you mean, work it out?”

Shawn threw up his hands in exasperation. “All right, then, you want me to say it? I’ll say it. I loved you, Bethie. I thought we would always be together. I don’t want to pretend we never happened. Especially with us both living in Greenleigh now. It’s wrong. We have to settle this thing that’s between us.”

“Shawn—” Elisabeth tried to speak, but he rushed on.

“I can’t stop thinking about us. Because we never actually broke up. We never ended things. I just want us to be able to—” Here he stopped. He looked at Elisabeth, and she sensed that he was about to step toward her.

No, she thought frantically. No, if you kiss me, that’ll be the end. I won’t be able to think. I won’t be myself anymore. I’ll just be the Beth who belongs to Shawn. Everything will be all messed up.

In spite of herself, she said it out loud. “Shawn, no.”

He stopped. His arms were raised, as if he were going to reach out to her, but he lowered them.

“Why?” he demanded. “We work together. I just want to clear the air. And—I still—I still—you still make me feel—”

If you only knew how much I want you to kiss me, she thought. *I’ve been so lonely.* But she knew she couldn’t say it.

“Shawn, no,” she said instead.

“Why? Why won’t you talk to me?” he said, angrily. “I got up the courage to come and see you tonight because I wanted us to start over, to not be haunted by mistakes from the past. Why won’t you just let us do that? I still love you, Beth. My feelings haven’t changed. God, I didn’t mean to say all of this.” He ran a

hand through his hair, then passed his hand over his face wearily.

Elisabeth took a deep breath. Of all the things she'd expected and feared, this had not been one of them. She'd expected his anger and his contempt, and she'd worried that he might want explanations from her, before she knew what to think and how to feel—but love! He loved her still! That, she hadn't expected.

"I'm not in a good place right now," she protested. "It's complicated. So much has changed. You've been gone for such a long time."

"I know things are hard, but—" Shawn stopped, then gestured at the front room. "I saw those bills on your desk."

"You what?" Elisabeth gasped.

"I put the files on your desk, on top of a big pile of bills. I didn't snoop, they were right there."

Oh, my God. Elisabeth put her hand on the coat tree to steady herself. The bills! She had left them scattered all over the desk because she'd been trying to find a way to pay something thirty days late so that she could make the due date for the water bill.

"I didn't know it was that bad," Shawn said. His voice was calmer now. "I didn't mean to look, but I was trying to clear a space for the files and I couldn't help it."

"Well, you knew I needed the work," Elisabeth said. She was trying mightily to keep the emotion out of her voice, and wasn't at all sure if it was convincing. Shawn knew her so well, damn it. "I told you that when you hired me. I only have one client right now. This one client is going to have to pay for the new water tank, incidentally. Thank God I have any clients at all."

Something shifted in Shawn's eyes. He looked disconcerted, as if something had just occurred to him.

"That first day, when I saw you," he said slowly. "You said something about a client."

“Yes. When I made the appointment to see Mr. Murray, I had no clients at all. And I didn’t have any prospects. I really had nowhere else to turn, unless I gave up practicing law. That morning, when I was late—I’d just had a potential client show up. And she’s all I have right now. Look, Shawn.” She took a deep breath. “This is hard for me. It’s awful. You know—you’re here, trying to help, and it’s like I’ve bared my soul to you. You’ve seen everything—everything about how hard it is for me to exist in Greenleigh, in this house. I appreciate your help. And I know I did a really, really horrible thing to you all those years ago. But right now—right now, could you save my last shred of dignity and just leave?”

“Beth, I—”

“Please,” Elisabeth said. “Right now I don’t want to talk about the past. Or about the things that have happened since you left. Or about how I’m going to manage going forward. I just want—some quiet. I need to think. Let me figure my life out.”

Shawn stood still, his gaze unwavering. “All right,” he said finally. “But I’m not giving up. I still love you, and we still need to talk.” He waited, but Elisabeth did not respond. Finally, he picked up his briefcase and left.

S hawn sat in his car, not moving, watching Elisabeth's shadow slanted across the curtains of her office. He was parked just down the street, and he had a view of the brightly-lit front room from where he sat. He shivered. It was a clear night, perfect for a hard frost.

"I must be out of my mind." He made the comment aloud, his gaze not moving from the slight figure behind the bulky shape of her desk. Was she working? She was very still.

He'd had every chance to tell her what he had come to say, and yet he had let it slip by. Instead, he had idiotically told her he'd loved her.

At the moment he'd said it, he'd known it was true. In fact, he'd probably known it when she first answered the door and he saw her as the same Bethie he'd tried to marry.

She was so thin. He had seen the inside of her refrigerator when he had gone to get the milk for his tea. It looked like it had a crisper full of vegetables, but not much else. Old Mrs. McPherson next door probably gave her a lot of garden produce, he suspected. There had been a block of cheese and some bread.

He felt weary and frustrated. *She needed me to believe in her,*

when all I wanted to do was to run away because of my own pain. The only solution I could offer was the coward's way out. The going got tough, so I left.

The light in the front room switched off. Elisabeth must have gone to bed. He saw a flicker of lamplight in an upstairs window, but his view was obscured by a large oak tree. The house loomed dark against the sky. It might as well have been a haunted house, but for the tiniest glow in that one upstairs window. Shawn glared at it. He hated that house. As far as he was concerned, it was haunted with spirits who wanted nothing but ill for Beth.

Beth, left to face her mother's death alone. Left to muddle her way through law school, alone. Left to concentrate on achieving her dreams for herself, alone.

He felt like a jerk. All these years, he'd been angry and hurt, not bothering to consider that Beth was the one left behind. Like Bob Stuart.

Shawn started up the engine. It was getting much too cold, and he'd had enough for one night. Tomorrow, he'd corner her and explain to her about the Stuarts. He'd planned to tell her that she couldn't represent Angela Stuart if Lawson & Lawson already had Bob Stuart's construction company as a client. But that was before he'd found out that Angela Stuart was her only client. When he'd realized that Angela was her only client, he hadn't been able to bring himself to tell her that she'd have to give up the case.

That conversation needed to happen, and when it did, it was going to suck.

He couldn't find her at the firm all morning, and when he at last mentioned her absence to Ricky Junior, he was told that she was in court that day. "One of her old clients suddenly called her to help him out in small claims," Ricky Junior said. Ricky munched on a handful of potato chips from a large bag propped

on his desk against a jumbo-sized soda container. Shawn viewed the chips with distaste, thinking of the grease stains they were liable to leave. He resolved to keep his personal things out of Ricky Junior's office.

"Incidentally, Ricky, I hired Beth as a law clerk, not a lawyer, but given how busy you are I gave her one of your cases. That ought to take the load off of you."

"Hey, thanks, that's great. That'll help a lot." Ricky dug into the bag for the little crumbs at the bottom. He licked his fingers, then took a swig of his soda directly out of the bottle. He tossed the empty bag into the trash. Shawn watched, revolted.

"Is that your lunch?"

"What? Hell, no. Just a snack. If you want to see her you'll have to call her at home. Or go down to the courthouse."

The courthouse. That was it. He could snag her on her way out. He checked his phone for the time. The judge would probably recess for lunch at noon, so if he wanted to catch her, he knew he had to hurry.



ELISABETH WAS IN THE LOBBY. SHE CAUGHT SHAWN'S EYE AS HE advanced toward her.

"Hello," she said. Her eyes were tired, but she looked calm, matter-of-fact, despite their parting the night before. "What are you doing here? Work? Don't tell me you have a client in small claims?"

"No, actually. I need to discuss something with you." Seeing her expression, he added hastily, "Work-related. Can I take you to lunch?" But Elisabeth shook her head, patting her briefcase.

"I have a date. With peanut butter and jelly."

They stopped in the entrance hall of the building, amidst the sounds of clicking heels belonging to the secretaries criss-

crossing the halls at a run as they tried to squeeze their errands and their lunch into the space of an hour, the residents of the county wandering about, trying to settle their real estate taxes or retrieve their drivers' licenses after they'd had one too many and been caught by a trooper on the highway. The din was pleasant, a hum of jobs well done, salaries well-earned.

Elisabeth looked up at him inquiringly. "Did you need something from me?" she asked.

Shawn found his voice caught in his throat. He looked down at her, all serious brown eyes and girlish dress, and he wanted to both shake her and kiss her at the same time. *We need to talk*, he wanted to shout. *Stop pretending that what was between us is gone.*

Everything about their lives had entwined them about each other, as if they together had formed a single tense strand. He bent toward her lips, wanting so much to touch her, wanting to feel that unity again.

But he didn't dare. And especially not in the middle of the Greenleigh courthouse, subject to the curious stares of half the legal community. Instead, he stammered, "Beth, I—I have to confess something—something you won't like." God, he sounded like he was twelve years old.

Elisabeth raised her eyebrows. She glanced at her watch. "I hope you don't mind if I start on that sandwich right here. I don't want to hear anything I don't like on an empty stomach." Her tone was light, but he could see the tension in her neck as she bent her head over the briefcase. She brought out a sandwich and began to unwrap it. She nodded at him to go on.

Shawn watched as she took a bite. He knew he had to just say it, as quickly as possible. He took a deep breath. "Beth, I know you're representing Angela Stuart."

Surprise crossed her face. "You seem to know a lot about my cases. Greenleigh is such a small town." Elisabeth took the last

two bites of her sandwich, crumpled up the plastic, and stashed it in the pocket of her dress.

“Actually, I should have told you about the Stuart case last night.” Shawn hesitated. “I didn’t get around to it. But that was part of the reason I stopped by. I’m sorry I got distracted.” There was an uncomfortable pause.

Elisabeth broke the silence. “What do you mean?”

“Bob Stuart—he’s a friend of my father’s. And a client of the firm. He owns Stuart Construction. He came to me asking for personal legal advice, and I offered to help him out and handle his divorce case. I didn’t know his wife was your client.” There, he’d said it.

Elisabeth’s eyes widened. “I suppose you withdrew after you found out who his wife’s counsel was?”

“No. I mean, I thought about it, but it won’t help the matter. Stuart Construction uses our firm for all their legal work, and Ricky Junior in particular works on their corporate stuff a lot. You really can’t be representing Angela Stuart. I’m sorry.”

“And you know she’s my only client right now,” Elisabeth said.

Shawn nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “It turns out I have a personal connection to Bob Stuart, too. He plays chess with my dad at the senior center. This is such a small town, it’s hard to tease apart all the different connections. But you can’t represent Angela Stuart and work for Lawson & Lawson at the same time.”

“So the only way I can help Angela is to quit working for Lawson & Lawson?” Elisabeth said.

Shawn frowned. “Well, I suppose. But—”

“But what? But I’m too broke to quit?”

“Well, no, but—” Shawn began, but Elisabeth cut him off.

“So now that you’ve seen all of my bills, now that you’ve seen the whole ugly truth about my life, I guess you can just make all the decisions about everything. Like who my clients should be.

Like what I can afford to do. Like whether I need a new water tank." The words came tumbling out faster and faster.

"Hey, I don't—"

"No," Elisabeth snapped. "*You* don't anything. *I'll* make these decisions on my own, thanks very much. Just because you know everything doesn't mean you own everything." She turned on her heel but Shawn grabbed her arm.

"Hold on," he said tersely. "You're not being fair."

She wrenched her arm away and glared at him. "Stop it. You're making a scene. And you're my boss, remember? Just think of what all the gossips will say."

She stalked down the hall, heading for the ladies' room.

Shawn sat down on one of the benches in the courthouse entryway. He was bewildered, but he was also angry. What choice did he have but to ask her to give up Angela as her client? There was no other answer, and it had nothing to do with anything he knew about her finances or her life. Bob's company was too deeply enmeshed in Lawson & Lawson for it to make a difference if Shawn represented him or not. And what was this about "helping" Angela Stuart? Wasn't this a divorce?

The more he thought, the more irritated he became. He waited until she emerged from the ladies room, patting her forehead and neck with a damp paper towel. When she saw him waiting for her, her lips thinned and she lifted her chin.

Shawn almost laughed. He recognized the posture immediately, somewhere deep in his gut. He couldn't even remember when he had ever seen her do that before, but he knew it to be a sign that she was not to be crossed. He rose as she tried to walk by him, and hurried after her.

"Beth. Beth, stop. Just listen to me."

"I'm busy," she retorted. "Leave me alone."

"I'm really sorry about Angela Stuart. But I can't think of any

other answer.” She kept walking, so he raised his voice and called out, “It’s just a divorce!”

At this, Elisabeth stopped. She turned around. Her face was flushed. “How can you even say that?” she said. “That’s someone’s *life* you’re talking about.” She seemed to want to say more, but she shut her lips tightly, turned around, and stalked off. This time he didn’t follow her. It was probably time for her to get back into court.

What the hell just happened? Shawn thought. *Where did I screw up?*

He walked angrily out the doors of the courthouse, standing at the top of the grand staircase in front, pulling up the collar of his coat against the chill wind. They could expect snow within the next few weeks, he thought, even before Thanksgiving. Bad sign for winter. He thought of Elisabeth’s water heater, and wondered whether the boiler was holding up. He wished he had thought to snoop around more when he had been in the cellar. He’d be willing to bet that the boiler needed to be replaced, too. For a house of that size, that would easily run her close to ten thousand dollars. He’d seen the bills on her desk—second and third notices for utilities and property taxes, lots of other smaller but equally urgent bills. There was no way she had a spare ten grand lying around.

Shawn peered into the wind in the direction of Church Street. He could see the gentle rise of the row of grand old downtown houses beyond the Congregational church. His heart still ached for the love he had left behind so long ago. It seemed almost quaint now. He wanted to heal that wound. He needed to either try again, or to close the book and move on.

He sometimes got the feeling that the old Beth was still there somewhere, but at other times, like today, it seemed the very fact that he’d known and loved her for so long was what put her off.

As if his love for her was some kind of straitjacket that she was desperately trying to ditch.

He wished he understood better what had caused her to bail on him. At the time, he'd assumed it was her mother. And sometimes, when he was in a bad mood, he'd decided that she basically loved Greenleigh more than she loved him. Weirdly, he understood that. His mother had loved Greenleigh. And that was why he'd felt the need to flee. He got it—love and hate sometimes came from the same strange place.

Looking at that pile of bills on her desk, he'd known it was more complicated than just feelings. There were solid, three-dimensional reasons for her decisions. But he was back in Greenleigh now, back for good. Why wasn't she overjoyed? Why didn't she want to clear the air between them? Wasn't it the best thing possible that he was home to stay?

Had she changed that much?

What he was afraid of was that it was his fault. That he'd changed her, by not reaching out to her over the years to tell her that it was all right, that he'd understood that she wasn't ready to leave Greenleigh. Except that he hadn't understood and it wasn't all right, so there was nothing he could have done about that.

That was his greatest fear, that perhaps he had destroyed any shot of happiness that they had, and that there was nothing he could have done about it. This was why he had felt compelled to tell her that he still loved her. He didn't want to waste any more time.

The following morning, Shawn walked into the library where she and Ricky Junior were working. He paused in the doorway, silent, and at first Elisabeth didn't notice that he was there. Ricky Junior had one hand on the back of her chair as he bent over where she sat, and she was thinking abstractedly that while she really enjoyed his light-hearted company, she didn't want the relationship to head in the direction he so clearly wanted it to—should she tell him? How should she tell him?—when her skin prickled, alerting her to someone else in the room. She glanced up, words dying on her lips. From the expression on Shawn's face, he was not happy with what he was seeing. Or perhaps he just wasn't happy, she couldn't tell which.

I don't like his haircut, she thought—*it's too short*—then remembered that the length of his hair wasn't any of her business.

Even though he said he loved her. She'd repeated those words to herself over and over again, into the wee hours of the morning as she lay in bed listening to the wheezing of the radiators. He said he still loved her.

There was a time when she would have leapt at those words, clutched at them for dear life. But now, she didn't know what she felt. It was as if her core were numb and she'd forgotten how to feel pleasure.

And what if she failed him again? What if she allowed this thing to move forward, but he wanted to go in a direction she wasn't ready for? What if she rejected him again? And with them both in Greenleigh, both of them lawyers, both of them at the same firm—it would be awful. It might make it impossible for her to work as an attorney in Greenleigh.

If that happened, where would she go?

"I need to talk to you," he said abruptly, without preamble. "In my office." He nodded at Ricky Junior, who didn't seem in the least bit perturbed by his boss's sudden appearance.

"I'm going out for a five-dollar coffee, Beth," Ricky said, his tone a mock threat. "I'm getting you a mocha latte."

"No, don't," Elisabeth scolded. They had a private joke about Ricky Junior's taste for overpriced gourmet coffees. Elisabeth was scandalized by the money that Ricky Junior spent on fancy drinks when perfectly good coffee was available in the office.

"I'm going to wear you down," Ricky Junior continued. "Nothing like a mid-morning latte. I'll win you over to the dark side yet. How about you, Shawn? Latte?"

Shawn was watching them, his eyes traveling from one to the other as Ricky Junior shrugged innocently in response to Elisabeth's frown. "No, thank you," he said, then turned on his heel and left.

"Wonder what's up," Ricky Junior said to Elisabeth. "Let me know if it's something I did. I don't want you to take the fall for me."

"Don't worry," Elisabeth replied, balancing her briefcase on top of her pile of papers. "I'm sure it's me, not you. I've probably messed up on something. No lattes! Okay?"

“No promises,” Ricky Junior replied. Elisabeth grimaced. She knew he would be back with overpriced coffees, pastries, and an attempt to take her out to dinner.

She made her way down the hall until she reached Shawn’s office. The door was ajar, and she pushed at it slightly with her shoulder, peeking in to see if he was there. He was. His back was to her as he leaned against the credenza behind his desk, gazing off in the distance at something through the window.

She would have knocked, but her arms were full, so she entered quietly, placed her pile on one of the two chairs in front of his desk, and began to sit down, but he half turned around and pointed at the door behind her. Obediently, she went to shut it, and when she returned, he was facing the window again, staring outside.

There was a long silence.

Elisabeth’s eyes traveled around the office. There were framed photographs on a side table at the back of the room, and she tried not to stare but she was desperately curious about who was in them. She couldn’t tell, but it looked like law school classmates—smiling men and women in festive attire, clutching champagne flutes. His law school diploma hung on one wall, a bland corporate painting on the other—she was quite sure that was an office fixture, as it was definitely not his taste—and a plant that looked like it had seen better days perched on a coffee table in front of a small couch.

She went to inspect the plant. It was badly in need of water, and looked as if it had some kind of blight or fungus on the underside of its leaves.

Shawn said, without turning around, “Congratulations on winning your case yesterday.”

“Thank you,” Elisabeth replied. At the sound of her voice, he looked over his shoulder, noting that she was no longer in front of his desk. She added helpfully, “Your plant. It’s dying.”

"Yeah. I know. I tend to kill plants."

He turned then, and walked over to the sofa and sat down. Alarmed, she began to retreat to a chair in front of his desk. There were piles of paper and folders on the nearby arm chairs, so there was nowhere else to sit—except on the sofa next to him.

He stopped her, gesturing at the couch next to him. "I don't bite," he said dryly. "And I want to talk to you. Come sit down. I don't want to project my voice across the room."

"All right," Elisabeth said. She wondered why he hadn't just sat at his desk so that he could face her across it, but she was determined not to look like it bothered her to sit next to him. She sat primly on the edge of the sofa, facing him. He had tucked himself into his corner, his long legs crossed, one arm across the back of the sofa.

"Who was your client yesterday?"

"Oh. The natural foods store on Main Street. He isn't my client right now, but I've done work for him in the past. It was a slip-and-fall case, and it was just small claims so he didn't originally call me. He just got scared at the last minute. I'm glad I could help."

"Did he pay you?" Shawn asked bluntly.

Elisabeth bristled. "He will."

"In cash, I mean."

"As it happens," Elisabeth said coldly, "I am currently being paid in groceries. And that's fine. They're struggling in that new location on Main Street."

"So you're not actually getting paid for the case you won yesterday."

"For goodness' sake, Shawn." Elisabeth was getting angry. "I thought I made that clear yesterday. Just because you know everything about me doesn't give you the right to judge my business."

“This is about the Stuart divorce.” Shawn ignored her comment.

Of course, thought Elisabeth. Of course it was. She studied his face, not trusting herself to reply.

“I’ve thought about it—carefully. And I keep coming to the same conclusion. We can’t be on opposing sides of this case.”

Elisabeth remained silent. She looked down at her hands, knotted in her lap. She noticed a small tear on the edge of one pocket, where she had caught it on a chair. Probably time to stop wearing flower-print dresses around law firms with heavy wooden chairs.

“There are all kinds of problems with this scenario, but I’m sure I don’t have to go into those. At bottom, you’re a contract attorney with the firm, and I’m the supervising attorney on all of your cases. We can’t be on opposing sides in a courtroom.”

Elisabeth allowed the sound of his voice to fade out of her hearing. She listened to the tiny creaks and sighs of the sofa as Shawn leaned back slightly, waiting for her to react.

The situation was frankly absurd. How had the two of them ended up on the opposing sides of a courtroom? In a divorce case, of all things?

The gods are laughing at me, is what she wanted to say. *Someone up there thinks it’s really funny to poke at me and watch me squirm. I’m obviously a source of entertainment for some idle viewer.*

In spite of herself, she looked up at him, and thought about what she would say if she had the courage. His gray eyes were fixed on her, growing increasingly uncertain as she let the seconds tick by.

This is happening because I’m just an organism in this universe, Shawn. Because I don’t matter. Because I’m expendable. My mom could have told you that.

But the Stuarts—they matter. They matter to each other, and they matter to me.

She waited a little longer, to make sure he wasn't going to jump in and say more.

"Is that it?" she said, finally.

"That's it," he said.

"I see. And—if I don't give up Angela Stuart as a client?"

"That's fine, but you can't work for me anymore."

"Right, that's what you said yesterday," Elisabeth said, although for a moment she wondered if she had said it out loud or only in her head. "Right," she repeated, just to make sure.

She had calculated her possible future earnings and her bill payments down to the penny, and she knew that Lawson & Lawson wasn't enough to raise her out of the hole. Without Angela Stuart, she didn't know how she would get through the winter.

She let her gaze slip away, to the little display of festive law students on the side table at the back of the room. She could make out their faces more clearly now. They looked so happy. Shawn looked so happy.

She looked back at him. His gaze had not moved, but she was struck by the unhappiness in it. He didn't resemble the Shawn in the photograph at all.

Law school graduation, she thought. Back then he would have been making plans to take me to New York with him. So that was probably the happiest he'd been since before his mother died.

And now look at him. I'm really good at making him unhappy. Special talent of mine.

She rose. There was nothing more to be said. Startled, Shawn heaved himself up from the sofa also.

"I understand. I'll talk to Angela, let her know that she needs to find counsel elsewhere."

"Beth," Shawn said quickly. "I'm sorry. I wish—"

"It's okay," Elisabeth said, moving toward her pile of papers.

"It isn't okay," Shawn said, following her to the chair. He

stopped, towering over her as she bent over to retrieve her papers. “I could back out of representing Bob Stuart myself, but we already represent his contracting company. It would still be a problem.”

“Don’t apologize,” Elisabeth said, straightening up again. “I understand. I can’t afford to give up my work here at Lawson & Lawson. And I’m sorry I lost my temper yesterday. I felt—weird—that you already knew the answer before you’d even spoken to me. It wasn’t a conversation. It was more like you were making an announcement. I was kind of put off by that.” She took a deep breath. “But obviously, there really is only one answer to this situation. So I understand.”

She saw Shawn beginning to speak again and held up her hand. “No, it’s fine. Please, it’s fine.” She turned away from him, saying over her shoulder, “I’ve got some errands to run so I’ll see you later.”

Elisabeth could smell the aroma of the mocha latte before she even got to the library, so she walked past without stopping and continued into the reception area. She collected her books and papers into a messy pile and squashed as much of it as she could manage into her briefcase, then realized with irritation that she had left her coat in the library with Ricky Junior. As she walked back to the library door, she could hear Ricky Junior talking with Shawn in his office, so she slipped into the library quickly to grab her coat off a chair. She looked longingly at the mocha latte and chocolate croissant that Ricky Junior had left for her but knew she couldn’t stay. She’d have to figure out that business some other time.

“But why? What did you say to her?” She could hear Ricky Junior pestering Shawn in the distance. She shuddered.

She hurried home as quickly as she could muster with the wind seemingly trying to knock her down at every possible opportunity. Throwing her coat over a chair in the hallway, she

went straight to the kitchen. She was ravenous. She opened the refrigerator, to be faced with nothing but a small block of cheese and some vegetables. She hurried to cut herself a piece of cheese, setting up the cutting board next to the sink, and in her haste nearly sliced off a fingertip. She jumped, staring numbly at the blood beginning to trickle down the side of her finger and onto the cutting board.

Suddenly, she burst into tears. She looked down at the block of cheese on the cutting board, little droplets of blood scattered from the wound on her finger, and hurled the knife into the sink as hard as she could. It clattered, but with far less sinister effect than desired, and slid slowly down toward the drain, where it rested. Even her rage and frustration seemed to manifest themselves in pathetic ways. She felt a great welling of panic and tension in her chest, and she leaned forward on her elbows on the kitchen counter and sobbed. She sobbed so hard that her shoulders heaved and shook, and she felt her legs wobble and give way beneath her as she slid to her knees, her hands clinging to the polished oak of the cabinets. She tried to wipe at her face with her hands, but they shook so badly that all she could muster was to bury her face in them, pressing the palms against the warm, wet flesh of her cheekbones, rubbing at her eyes, willing the tears to stop.

She remained where she had sunk to her knees, leaning against the cabinets, hiccuping, spent. She couldn't work enough hours at Lawson & Lawson to completely support herself. And now, she couldn't even take the clients who came to her. The whole town had some kind of relationship with Lawson & Lawson—at least everyone in town who could afford to pay her. She wasn't a fool. She knew that this was a trap from which she could never extract herself. She could help the Angela Stuarts of the world and starve, or take the leftovers from Lawson & Lawson and barely scrape by. In

either case, the house would tumble down around her and bury her.

Elisabeth glared at the corner of the kitchen where her mother's little bed had been. *All right, Mom, she said silently. I know I was boring and not pretty. I wasn't going to make anything of myself. I was going to stay here in quiet little Greenleigh and waste away. And no one was going to love me the way you did, so you made sure that I would always stay by your side. You weren't going to let me take my chances on some man, the way that you did, and lose. So you made sure I would never have the confidence to make the mistake that you made.*

Elisabeth laughed, but it came out like a snort. "I'm still here, Mom!" she said out loud. "Everything happened just the way you said. I'm a failure and I don't have a man. But where are you?" She began to sob anew. "You screwed up!" she screamed. "You screwed up! You weren't supposed to leave me behind! That wasn't the plan!" Her voice cracked, echoing against the shiny hard surfaces of the kitchen.

Shawn's mother had left him, too. And he'd never recovered from that. He couldn't bear to be in Greenleigh without her. Only something extreme like his father's heart attack could have brought him back to Greenleigh. He couldn't possibly be happy to be back. No wonder he wanted to start over with her—he was clutching at any shred of happiness he could possibly find. He was hoping to find something, anything good in coming home to Greenleigh.

When had she been happy? Elisabeth thought back over the years. Hours spent with Shawn. Hours spent with his mother before she got sick. Those were the years when her mother had been alive and nagging at her, but Shawn had been there for her, and all was well. It only got messy after his mother had died, when he tried to tell her that they would never find happiness together in Greenleigh.

He still loved her. And damn it, she loved him, too.

“Shawn, I’ve missed you,” she said to the empty room. “I’ve missed us,” she amended. The words made her stomach flutter. It felt strange, like thinking about a crush or a first boyfriend. It was odd, to think that if she wanted, she didn’t have to spend the night alone. Ever again.

The sound of her voice faded away. She listened. She could hear nothing more than the occasional purr of an automobile coasting down Church Street.

The window above the sink rattled with a sudden gust of wind, and she raised her face. There was a crack in that window, and Elisabeth had been putting off the inevitable duct tape repair for months. It was already time to shut the storm windows, and she had been thinking that perhaps it would be enough to leave the cracked window be if the storm window was going to go over it anyway. She slowly heaved herself to her feet, tiptoed to peer at the cracked corner. The crack had gotten worse, and the pane was starting to collapse. She turned away. She felt the draft at her neck, but she couldn’t bear to think about it any longer.

She left the mess on the cutting board and went out into the hall. Her finger was still bleeding, so she grabbed a tissue. She went into the front room, directly over to the maple secretary, and scabbled about until she found what she was looking for.

She was going to take care of Angela Stuart, no matter what Shawn said. She’d have to do it through a back door, but she’d do it.

KEEP READING

COMING HOME TO GREENLEIGH

Thank you for reading this sample of Coming Home to Greenleigh! I hope I've interested you enough to continue onward.

If you'd like to read the rest of the book, publication date is 31 January 2020. It's available on all platforms. Here's the link:

Coming Home to Greenleigh at books2read.com/Greenleigh

Thank you again! If you enjoy the book, I hope you'll join my newsletter list for lots of sneak peeks and special offers!


Cassandra Austen Newsletter at cassandraaustenbooks.com


ABOUT THE AUTHOR




You might say Cassandra Austen is an old-world romantic in a digital age. Author of *The Portrait* and the forthcoming *Coming Home to Greenleigh* (January 2020), Cassandra's work evokes the heroes and heroines of Jane Austen, coupled with the rich romance of landscapes such as old New England...Georgian Bath...or wooden ships sailing just off the port of Gibraltar. Strong women, honorable men, and the courage to do right.


Cassandra herself lives on a drafty (yet atmospheric) old farm in northern New England.

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ALSO BY CASSANDRA AUSTEN

The Portrait

