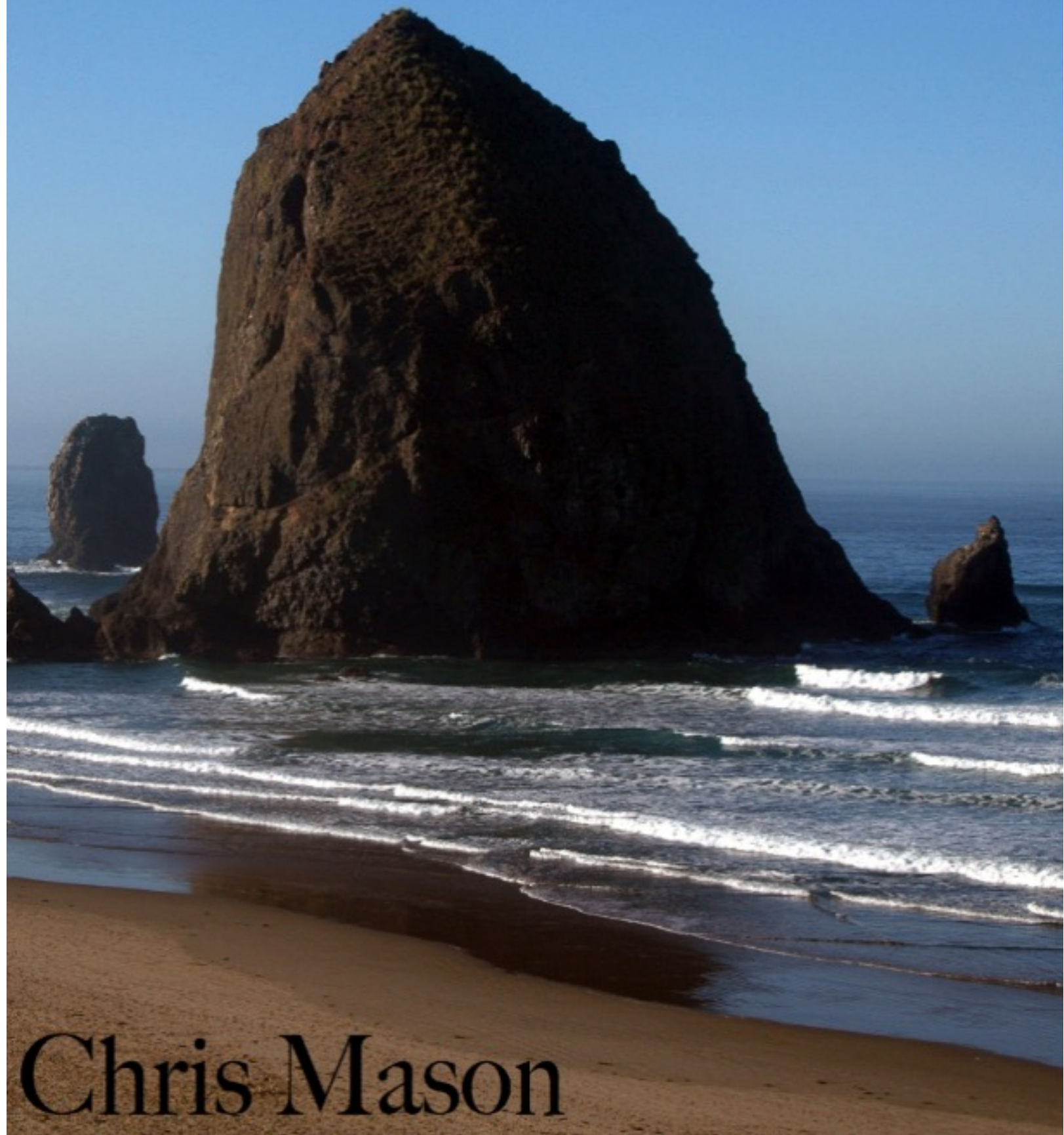


Wild Sands



Chris Mason

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By Chris Mason

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For Nancy

Chapter 1: Prelude

When the MAX train reached the Rose Quarter, Jason closed up his laptop and put it away in his worn leather backpack. He always spent the last few minutes of each day's half-hour ride watching his fellow commuters, wondering where they were headed and what they were thinking. Outside, the sky had that determined, bluish-gray look that meant there would be no sun today, and so the people-watching would be dour. Train riders are different on gloomy days than on sunny ones: they hunch more, talk less, shake their soggy newspapers irritably.

Jason recognized a few people, though he didn't know their names. A middle-aged woman with long, silver hair clenched a baby blue umbrella between her knees and read a paperback romance novel, as she did every day, while she slowly nibbled a muffin. A boy who looked too young to drive, or to shave, was nevertheless dressed in an expensive charcoal gray suit; he stared out the window, clutching a black umbrella in one hand and a long, black overcoat in the other.

As the train approached Old Town, street people became more numerous. The homeless, and the teens who pursued cool by pretending to be, huddled up against the buildings, trying to escape the drizzle. The structures in this part of town were made of brick, once blackened by soot but recently power-washed almost clean; misbegotten, graceless, mostly untenanted mid-century hulks, they crouched two or three stories over the street, waiting to be useful once again.

The MAX slowed and stopped. Jason grabbed his backpack and his hat and crab-walked to the nearest exit, then stepped out onto First Avenue.

He was not dressed like a businessman: he wore a waterproof, wide-brimmed leather Aussie hat and an unbuttoned duster over his jeans and open-necked Oxford shirt. In place of the dirty white tennies his colleagues wore religiously, he had black leather walking shoes. His hair was long enough to curl up in back. Instead of a briefcase he carried the scuffed backpack he had used in college.

Anyone in the software business would have recognized him instantly as one of their own.

It was only a ten-minute walk from the MAX stop to the reclaimed warehouse where he worked. The Pearl District was in the early stages of gentrification. Empty buildings were slowly filling up with art galleries, specialty furniture stores, trendy bistros, and condos for hip urban Generation Whatever types. The top two floors of a full-block, four-story brownstone had been taken over by Zebra Software Inc.

Jason ran up the stairs to the third floor and waved at Wendy the receptionist, who smiled vaguely and turned back to her computer screen. He swiped his badge and slipped through the security door. It was about a quarter to eight, too early for most of his late-rising troops to be in yet, so he had a little time to try to get some work done before Chaos descended on him.

The office was arranged into three concentric circles. In the window offices around the perimeter, which had real doors, managers and senior programmers could think or play solitaire, theoretically in privacy. The cubicles filling the interior held swarms of drones, grunts, and newbies. In the very center was an open space with desks for the secretaries, programming assistants, and interns.

Jason walked around the outside corridor to his corner office and closed the door behind him. He took the laptop out of his pack, awakened it and his desktop computer, and started the synchronization process that would transfer all the e-mails he'd written overnight to his primary

computer and then out into the network. While that chugged along, he shrugged off his coat and hung it and his hat on the back of the door.

The screen of his computer still displayed the program code for the bug he'd been struggling with last night. Sometimes he'd wake up with the solution to difficult problems like this one fully formed in his mind, but not today. He dropped into his chair and focused his mind on the glitch, trying to tease out where it was hiding in this suspect page of code.

Someone pounded on his door and banged it open before he could respond. Two of his team leads, Bryan and Patrice, tried to rush in at the same moment and bounced off each other and the doorframe. Bryan was in his early twenties, rumpled and short-haired, with a two-day beard. Patrice looked as if she'd just stepped out of an L. L. Bean catalogue. Both of them were red-eyed and shaky—up all night, obviously, fueled on coffee and acrimony.

"Hey, boss," Bryan panted. "We're hosed. The determinant we're using in the goal-seeking module is utter, fragrant bullshit, and it's shaking the tree downline—"

"It's not the determinant," Patrice said, "it's just the relative weights, it has no effect on the design, and I can fix it."

"Then why haven't you?"

"Because I've had my hands full trying to keep you from gutting six months of work."

"I'm just trying to fix the damned thing."

"Keep your grimy hands off my files."

Jason's stomach churned as he listened to them bicker. Their arguments were running in smooth, well-worn ruts. They weren't going to be able to free themselves on their own.

"Shut up," Jason said mildly. It took a few seconds for them to register what he'd said and run down. They squared off to face him and waited for orders. "Bryan, we've simulated this until the CPU is worn down to a stub. I can't believe the determinant is wrong." Bryan started to protest but Jason held up his hand. "And you know the project rules. No one changes someone else's code without the owner's knowledge and permission." Patrice beamed smugly at Bryan. "Go home, get some sleep, come back for the bug bash tomorrow. We'll figure it out on Monday."

"It won't be much of a bug bash," Bryan said, "with this big, fat goober squatting right in the middle of the—"

"Out," a new voice said.

The programmers turned. Jeanne, Jason's assistant, was standing in the doorway, holding two large Starbucks cups and wearing her drill sergeant frown. She was twice as old and twice as fierce as either of the drones.

"Our fearless leader has spoken. Go home."

They managed to leave the room without bumping into anything. Jeanne held out one of the cups to Jason.

She was in her late forties, half again as old as Jason—older, in fact, than everyone else in the department. She was of average height, average build, and usually rather plain in appearance unless, as now, her face was transformed by a smile and a twinkle in her piercing green eyes.

"It's started already," Jason said. He sipped the still-scalding coffee.

"They're gone now," Jeanne said. "If you're lucky, you've got maybe fifteen minutes before the next one. Enjoy it while you can."

She closed the door behind her. Jason went back to the bug, but he had a premonition that he wouldn't find the solution today, and maybe not tomorrow either.

Jeanne had been optimistic. The next interruption came at 8:03 and they continued, in clusters and singletons, throughout the day. People brought him code problems, jokes, personal disputes, organization and staffing issues, schedule crises, and urgent purchase orders that needed his signature immediately. One young guy, after just six months at the company, was concerned because his career was stalled. Meanwhile Jason dealt with nine urgent e-mails, and skipped forty-seven less-urgent ones that he would synch onto his laptop and read and respond to that night.

Thirty-two people in three teams worked for him, and it seemed as if most of them, every single day, found some excuse to exercise the company's open-door policy, which allowed anyone to come to any of their superiors at pretty much any time. In practice, people rarely bothered anyone more than two levels above them. But that still meant that, although only four people reported to Jason directly, all thirty-two people on his project could break into his chain of thought at any time. It was considered bad form to use "Do not disturb" signs except at performance evaluation time.

Except for a half hour break for lunch, Jason continued his vain attempts to think around the interruptions until, in mid-afternoon, Jeanne knocked and walked into his office holding a glossy magazine.

"Listen to this," she said. "*The pride of the basement is a glass, floor-to-ceiling display case with an adjacent detailing station where the seven beloved Harley Davidsons are washed and waxed each week.*" Isn't that sweet?"

"What are you talking about?" Jason said. His brain felt bruised.

"Our lord and master got his house in *Sunset* magazine. Did you know that Gary can't ride a motorcycle?"

"That's not true. He *can* ride, he just doesn't. He lost his license."

"Oh, now I remember. Racing on I-5. As I recall, they caught him going over 120 five separate times."

"One twenty-five, seven times. The judge called him a menace to humanity."

"Check this out," Jeanne said, and laid the magazine down on his desk. She stood behind him and read over his shoulder. The photographs showed a lushly decorated house, with golden walls, giant potted plants everywhere, and a zebra skin rug in the three-story foyer.

"Think he shot that zebra himself, or did he hire a hit man?" Jeanne said.

Jason numbly turned the page.

"Oh, I like this bit," Jeanne said. "*Three adjoining Victorian homes in Portland's fashionable Northwest district were knocked down to make way for this faux-Victorian dream palace.*" It's so dreamy!"

Something caught his eye. "What's that?"

"What?"

The right-most column of the right-hand page was an ad for a B&B in Cannon Beach. The photograph showed two women standing in front of a real Victorian house, with beach and ocean visible behind it. "Rest your troubled spirit at Wild Sands," the ad said.

Jason was about to say how nice it looked, when the ad suddenly came alive. The grasses swayed and the women's hair blew in the wind. The shorter woman, a blonde, waved shyly. The tall brunette pushed her hair out of her face and blew him a kiss. He smelled something—like cookies baking, and beneath that, like a double bass below the ethereal strain of a violin, the tang of the sea.

He blinked and looked again. It was just a magazine ad, static, nothing but ink dots on paper.

“Did you see that?” he said.

“See what?”

He looked back down, and once again the wind blew, the blonde gave a little wave, the brunette shifted her hips and blew a kiss, and he smelled pastries with undertones of salt air.

“You had to see it that time.”

“Jason, what are you talking about?” He ripped the page out of the magazine. “Hey,” Jeanne said, “that’s mine!”

Jason dialed the number in the ad.

“*Wild Sands*,” a voice said in his ear. It was the most magical, hypnotic voice Jason had ever heard, soft and a little low, sweet and sad, somehow musical. He didn’t know what he wanted to say, had no idea why he had called the number. “*Hello?*”

“I’d like to book a room for the weekend,” he heard himself saying.

“*Okay. How many?*”

“Just one.”

“What are you doing?” Jeanne said.

“*And how many nights?*” the fairy voice whispered in his ear.

“Um. Tonight. And Saturday.”

“You have a bug bash this weekend,” Jeanne said. “And a meeting with Gary afterwards.”

“*We have a nice ocean view room,*” the voice said, “*with a private bath and a fireplace, a queen-sized bed, and a little sitting area, for \$115. How does that sound?*”

“Perfect,” Jason said. “Do you need a credit card?”

“You’re going to get fired, and then I’m going to have to quit this lousy job,” Jeanne said.

“*Not necessary. Can you give me your name?*”

“Jason Day.”

“Jason Mud, you mean,” Jeanne said. “It’s going to be hard to motivate the troops to work all day and night if their fearless leader is off on a beach vacation somewhere.”

“*And a phone number?*”

Jason gave her his cellular number. He had no idea what he was doing.

“*Do you have any idea when you might be arriving?*” the sylph asked him.

“I’m not sure. How long does it take to get there from Portland?”

“The real question,” Jeanne said, “is how long does it take to get back to reality?”

“*Maybe two and a half hours, but I’ve heard there’s going to be snow tonight. It might take longer.*”

“Can you tell me how to get there?” he said. She gave him driving instructions from Portland. It sounded easy. He wrote it down on a scrap of paper and read it back.

“*We’ll see you tonight, then,*” she said. “*Oh, will you want dinner?*”

It was impossible to think about food with that voice haunting his brain. But he’d probably be hungry. He said yes and she thanked him and hung up.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jeanne demanded.

Jason stood up. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

“You’re leaving? It’s only 4:00! What’ll I tell people?”

He grabbed the directions and the page with the magical B&B ad, patted her on the shoulder, and walked out.

“We’re both going to get fired!” she shouted after him. “And you owe me a new magazine.”

On the train ride home, he read the ad over and over and stared at the photograph, willing it to move, waiting for the scents to come to him again, but it stubbornly remained still. All he could smell was the damp air, which seemed colder than it had been that morning. It wasn't until he was putting the key into his front door that he realized that he'd left his backpack, laptop, and coat and hat in his office.

* * *

It was a cliché to say one was overworked, but Jason knew it was true in his case because of the number of miles he didn't put on his car. It was a three year old Saturn sedan with two thousand miles on it. Since he took the light rail to work, and almost all he did was work, the only time he used his car was to get groceries, go to the occasional movie, and visit his parents once a week. This driving record did not prepare him for the nightmare he encountered trying to escape to the beach.

Getting through Portland was not the problem. He followed the MAX line down Burnside, crossed the Willamette River on the Burnside Bridge, and picked up Route 26 downtown. Route 26 would take him almost all the way—except that by the time he got on it he couldn't *see* it because it was whited out in a blizzard.

Jason knew how to drive in snow, but most people in the Pacific Northwest knew as much about snow as they did about yaks. And navigating through driving snow in the darkness that had fallen by that time was utterly outside their comfort zone. On the long stretch through Beaverton and Hillsboro there were three accidents, five cars abandoned in the breakdown lane or the median, and dozens who had pulled over hoping to wait it out, as if this were a momentary squall. It mystified him how the accidents could have occurred, because he could have crawled on his hands and knees faster than traffic was moving. Two hours after leaving home, he was past the suburbs and the congestion.

That meant country driving—little traffic, no street lights, and a terrifying void on either side of the road. He ended up following a pair of dim red taillights, using the speed limit and yield signs to be sure his guide wasn't leading him into a ditch.

Shortly after his leader turned off the highway, the flat, straight road turned into a hilly, winding horror, and trees closed in on either side. They were mostly pines, but he passed occasional large, dense stands of birch that looked more like bamboo forests than hardwood. He saw a sign for the Tillamook State Forest, topped with a tall dunce cap of feathery snow. Now he was following dim tracks on the highway and using the trees to gauge his distance from the edge of oblivion. His headlights illuminated a cone of mesmerizing white streaks, outside of which there was nothing.

He could smell his own sour sweat from the strain of concentration and fear. Finally, four hours out from home, he came to the ramp for Route 101 and turned south. He hadn't noticed until then that the storm had slacked off so that now it was a gentle snowfall instead of a blizzard. He almost missed the turn off the highway to Cannon Beach—it looked more like a driveway than a road.

He passed through more dense forest and suddenly was on the outskirts of the town: scattered low, shingle-sided buildings. The road took a ninety-degree turn to the right and then another to the left, and he was on Hemlock, the main street. Following his scribbled directions, he drove through town. There was no other traffic. He couldn't see or hear the ocean through the snow, but he knew it had to be off to his right somewhere, past the little shops that stood crowded, shoulder-to-shoulder. Most of the buildings were dark, but he saw several restaurants that blazed through the glittering snow like lighthouses.

A right turn on Tanana took him down a short street to a dead end. Directly ahead was the house he'd seen in the bewitched ad, but without the soft afternoon light, the gentle breeze, the sea, or the women. Jason parked the car, grabbed his overnight bag, and groaned as he stepped out of the car. His back was knotted up from stress.

The B&B was a three-story Victorian with a turret room and a big front porch. Bright, welcoming lights shone on the porch and from inside the curtained windows. The clapboards were painted soft marine blue. Jason rang the doorbell and turned to look back down the street. He could hear the surf crashing somewhere.

The door opened behind him. Before he could turn around, someone grabbed the back of his coat and snatched him tripping inside.

Chapter 2: Fugue #1

The brunette from the ad was brushing snow off his jacket. She was almost as tall as he was, and she wasn't shy or gentle about the brushing. Jason felt dizzy from hunger, the terrible drive, the sudden warmth, rich smells of potpourri and cake, and the pummeling. He raised his arms as if defending himself from a boxer, and she stopped.

"You're Jason, right?" the woman said. It was not the voice he'd heard on the phone.

"Yes."

"Drop your bag and come on into the kitchen."

She led him straight back down a narrow hallway whose walls were covered with a profusion of photographs, most of them black and white. He didn't have time to get more than a general impression of heavy furniture in the rooms off the hallway—and of long, swaying brown hair—before she pushed open a swinging door into a brightly-lit kitchen.

It was small, but as he looked around Jason could see that someone had put some thought into its design. On the right a commercial Viking stove and oven dominated the wall. A very large butcher block table stood in the center of the room. To the left, a large refrigerator shared the long wall with metal restaurant shelving that was filled with neat rows of supplies; the shelves continued around the corner. The outside wall had a door, low cupboards, a sink, and a small table with two chairs, below wide windows looking out on darkness.

A woman, the blonde from the ad, was standing by the worktable. Her head only came up to Jason's shoulders, but she seemed taller somehow.

"Are you hungry?" she said, and Jason felt his knees start to give way. It was the voice from the phone, a little less distant but just as alluring. He put out a hand to the doorjamb.

"I have no idea," he said.

"You're later than we expected. I'll make you some pasta." She turned to the sink to wash her hands.

"So, this is Robin," the brunette said. "I'm Sheila, and you're Jason. I see you're not married."

Robin turned back abruptly. "Sheila!"

Sheila smiled at her, then turned the smile like a spotlight onto Jason. He felt dizzy again, and confused.

"Let me show you your room," she said, and brushed past him. She smelled like a field of clover. At the front door she picked up his bag and ran upstairs, taking them two at a time, to a landing and through a door with a flowery ceramic plaque that read, "Sand Castle Room."

She set his bag down on a little folding stand. Jason stood in the doorway. It was a nice room: dark wallpaper, a four-poster bed covered with a quilt, gas fireplace flickering and hissing softly, a little sitting area—and that door must be the bathroom.

"Do you need help unpacking?" Sheila said.

"No, thanks, but I do need to... um..." He gestured at the bathroom.

"Of course." She took a step back to give him a clear path, but made no move to leave.

Jason hesitated between shyness and urgency. It took only a few seconds for his bladder to win that battle. He went into the bathroom and closed the door.

After washing his hands, he hesitated for a moment. The towels were embroidered, they looked too good to wipe his hands on, but that must be what they were for, so he went ahead and used one. When he came out, Sheila was standing in the same spot, smiling.

"You washed your hands," she said.

He looked down at them. Were they dirty? "Yes."

"You're a prince. Let's get you some dinner."

He followed her downstairs to the dining room. One entire wall of the room was filled with a massive, floor-to-ceiling, carved wooden hutch. Its upper half was mostly glass, revealing shelves filled with china and sparkling glass bowls. Sheila pulled out a chair at the head of the large, rectangular table. A salad and bread and butter were already set out for him. Feeling awkward, he let her seat him and then he forgot that she was standing there watching him as he tore into the salad.

Just as he finished, Robin brought out a large, shallow, rimmed bowl of steaming pasta. It gave off the aroma of olive oil and garlic, and it was covered with generous shavings of Parmesan. Jason managed to get the first forkful into his mouth without drooling.

Robin watched him for a moment, then said, "Sheila, can you give me a hand in the kitchen?"

Jason was barely aware that they were leaving. When he finished, he was still alone. Carefully, he pushed his chair back and walked quietly upstairs. One of the steps creaked, but he made it to his room unobserved. He didn't bother to unpack, just brushed his teeth, stripped off his clothes, and fell into the soft, cool bed.

* * *

Robin sat at the small kitchen table, working on bills and invoices, while Sheila finished up the dishes. Robin's Bernese Mountain dog, Bear, padded over and rested his head in her lap, looking up at her with wet eyes that asked for nothing else but this.

"He's cute, isn't he?" Sheila said.

Robin knew she wasn't talking about Bear. She put down her pen. "Don't start, Sheila."

Sheila dried her hands on a towel and leaned against the sink. "You know I never start anything I can't finish."

"No, I don't know that. And you don't know one thing about him."

"Wrong. I know five things. He's single. Sort of cute, not handsome, just what I like in a guy. Doesn't drive a pickup. Obviously has some money. Washes his hands after he pees. What else do I need to know?"

"Remember what happened last time?"

"That guy in Mendocino?"

"No, the one who burned his house down and screamed out of town with the police on his tail. The FBI is still looking for him."

"Well, that wasn't my fault. How was I supposed to know he was married, and mentally unhinged?"

Robin gathered up her papers into a neat stack. She felt Sheila's eyes on her for a long moment.

"Oh, I get it," Sheila said. "*You* want him."

Robin rolled her eyes and sighed. "I have to get back to my baking." She stood up and began tying on her apron.

Sheila sat on the floor beside Bear and ran her fingers roughly through his long fur. The big dog looked at Sheila eye-to-eye for a moment, then collapsed into her lap.

“Oh, Bear,” Sheila baby-talked as she rubbed the dog’s belly, “you don’t want mommy to mess with that nasty old rich man, do you? You don’t want her to ignore you and play with that stupid man! You don’t want her to steal that nice man from your sweet Sheila, do you? No, of course not. Mommy, pay attention to me and leave that nasty rich man to someone who knows how to handle him.”

Bear looked up at her with his tongue out, and Sheila mimicked him, rolling her head, sticking out her tongue, and panting up at Robin.

“Go to your bed, Bear,” Robin said firmly. The dog immediately rolled over and walked to his bed in front of the back door. He plopped down and put his head on his paws.

“You, too,” she said to Sheila. Sheila shrugged, got up agilely, and left the room.

Robin mixed the dry and wet muffin ingredients together, poured the batter into muffin pans, and put them into the oven. She stood motionless for several minutes in front of the oven, and finally looked down at her dog.

“Bear?” she said. “I feel strange.” The dog closed its eyes.

* * *

Jason slept in until 8:30 a.m. for the first time since college. When he came downstairs, he found the same place set at the dining room table. While he vacillated between sitting down and waiting or going to the kitchen to announce himself, the door banged open and Sheila came out carrying a big serving tray.

He hadn’t noticed through the fog of fatigue last night, but this girl was stunning. She looked like one of those tall, lithe U.S.A. Olympic volleyball team women.

“Sit,” she said, and started unloading small plates of muffins, sweet breads, pastries, and cakes onto the table in front of his place setting. When she was done there was a barricade a million calories deep between Jason and the rest of the table.

“Now,” she said, “you’re not getting up until you finish everything.”

It was a week’s worth of breakfast for a family of four. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. House rules.” She set the tray down at the far end of the table and took the seat to his right.

Robin came in with a plate in one hand and a thermos and a carafe of orange juice clutched in the other. She set the plate down on the charger in front of Jason: it was an omelet, with fruit slices on the side. She poured him juice and coffee and sat down on the other side of Sheila.

“Pig out,” Sheila said.

“Oh, Sheila, give it a rest,” Robin said.

“I think I may have given you the wrong impression last night,” Jason said. “I’m not actually starving to death.”

“You looked like a baby bird swallowing worms,” Sheila said.

“This is our normal breakfast,” Robin said. “We didn’t make any special—”

“Eat.”

Jason took a bite of the omelet and changed his mind. Maybe he was starving.

It was disconcerting to be the only one eating. He wondered if they did this with all their guests. But as he tucked in he managed to get a better look at the two of them, too. He’d been so tired, hungry, and stressed when he arrived that he’d only formed a general impression of his hosts.

Sheila was flat out pretty, lean and athletic, with broad cheekbones, intense eyes, and long, thick hair. Robin was at least four inches shorter, with plainer features and rather short, blonde hair. He thought he might not particularly notice Robin if he saw her walking down a city street, especially because she held herself in tightly, as if she wanted to be missed; but he was sure that men stopped and turned to watch Sheila walk by.

They watched him eat for a few minutes before Sheila said, "So, you're from Portland?" He nodded. "What do you do? Let me guess. Real estate?" He shook his head. "Marketing? No? Assistant bank manager?"

"Software," Jason said.

"Oh, a computer geek. What's the square root of your birthday?"

"What?"

"Let him eat," Robin said.

"I'm not bugging you, am I, Jason? Bug, get it? Software bug."

"Sheila, for pity's sake, leave him alone."

She let him finish off a piece of lemon poppy seed cake before she spoke again.

"Have you ever been hiking in the Coast Range?"

"Um... no."

"Great, we can go when you're done. No rush." She waited calmly for ten seconds. "I'll go get the car ready. Hurry up." She ran out of the room.

Robin smiled sheepishly. Jason finished a mouthful of muffin and took a sip of coffee. "Is she always like that?"

"Pretty much. You didn't have any plans for today, did you?"

"Nothing about this weekend was planned." He debated trying what looked like chocolate pound cake and decided to refrain. "Am I the only guest here?"

"This weekend, yes. This is the slow time of year, but in the summer we're booked solid."

"I can see why. This is an amazing breakfast."

"Thanks. Well, I'd better... get back to the kitchen. Have fun today."

Fun? He poured himself more coffee and leaned back with the mug. He didn't want to go hiking. He didn't particularly like hiking, and especially after last night's drive he'd really rather just take it easy today. He tried to remember if he'd actually agreed to go. All he could recall saying was that he'd never been up in the Coast Range.

Sunlight was streaming in through the wavy glass panes of the windows. Jason carried his coffee out the front door to check on the weather. He was astonished to see that all but a few traces of the blizzard were gone: only in the shadows of the buildings and of his car was there any snow left at all. The air was cool but he was almost comfortable in shirt-sleeves. He shut the door behind him and followed the porch to the right, around to the back of the house, and nearly dropped his coffee mug. Somehow he hadn't got around to looking at the view yet.

The sand began thirty feet behind the house and sloped slowly down, tufted with tall grass, before falling off abruptly to a deep, flat beach that seemed to go on forever to the left and right. The beach was cloaked in light fog. A dim, pointed shape like a giant wizard's cap hulked offshore to the right, perhaps half a mile away; he couldn't tell what it was through the fog, but it looked a little like the prow of a beached oil tanker.

The sun had lifted above the fog, which seemed to be thinning even as Jason watched. Suddenly he became aware of the gentle sound of surf slapping on sand, in an irregular rhythm, with a low hiss. Scattered people—some alone, some in larger groups, but mostly couples—were

walking this way and that on the beach, stooping occasionally to pick up a shell or a pebble. Several small children were flinging sand into the ocean while their parents stood nearby, looking inland and ignoring them. A three-wheeled recumbent bike sped past just above the surf line.

Above the beach, weathered houses lined the bluff, continuing on in both directions as far as the eye could see. They displayed a profusion of styles: some were low and wood-shingled; others tall and narrow, sided with clapboards; some were arrogant concrete and glass. Gnarled trees hunched low here and there among them.

It was one of the most captivating sights Jason had ever seen. He wanted to spend the day walking up and down the sand, looking for shells and dodging the waves. But as he turned to go back in and get a coat, Sheila darted around the far corner of the porch.

“There you are. What are you doing out here? Come on, I’m all ready. You need to put on something warmer.”

She grabbed his arm, sloshing his coffee, and dragged him forcibly toward the house. He didn’t have a chance to ask her what the giant wizard’s hat was. As they passed a window he saw Robin watching him from the kitchen. She looked away when their eyes met, but he thought he saw something—disappointment?—in the split second of connection before he was abducted.

* * *

Confused in a haze of irritation and attraction, Jason had no idea where they were, even though Sheila had given him a map. He knew they were following Route 101 south along the coast, but he’d lost track of the towns. Sometimes the ocean would be visible glittering off to the right and he’d wonder why he’d agreed to leave the beach, then the road would swing inland and he’d wonder why anyone would want to hike in the hills when they could be strolling along the shore.

When he could see the water, there were often huge pillars or pyramids of stone standing out in the surf, mysterious and aloof. Some of them had trees growing out of their crowns, but most were simply bare rock. The thing he’d thought was the prow of a ship must have been another of those.

It was about an hour since they’d left the B&B. Sheila had kept up a running chatter the entire time, sometimes asking him questions but rarely waiting for an answer, and not really listening when he did. It was superficial chit-chat, apparently just noise to fill the silence, but Jason managed to mine a few nuggets of information out of the slag. She and Robin had bought the B&B three years ago after meeting in California, where Sheila had been born. Sheila loved active sports—windsurfing, skiing, snowboarding, hiking and biking—and Robin refused to do any of those with her.

Jason was beginning to suspect that Sheila was driving without any particular destination, and when she finally turned off the highway onto a small road exactly like the last twenty they’d passed, this feeling grew stronger. The Subaru station wagon had no trouble with the rutted, potholed gravel drive, but Jason was starting to get carsick. Tall pines and fir trees grew up close enough to swat at the car as it passed. The quasi-road widened suddenly and Sheila spun the wheel and stomped on the brake, kicking up a spray of gravel and coming to rest facing the ocean.

“We’re here,” she said, as if “here” were actually someplace instead of just a wide spot in a mule track in the wilderness.

He’d left home with no plan and not much more in his bag than his bathroom kit and a change of underwear. He was wearing his habitual walking shoes, and his coat was warm

enough, but he hadn't come prepared for this, and Sheila seemed to belong to the willy-nilly school of hiking preparation. She had no pack, no water, no supplies or equipment of any kind, just a hooded sweater and tennis shoes. Jason hadn't done much in the way of hiking, but he knew you needed more than that if you were going hiking in the Northwest. People routinely got lost in the woods and were found, alive or not, after a week of walking in circles. When she'd said she was going to get the car ready, he'd expected something other than just pulling it out of the garage.

"This way," she said, and plunged off into the woods.

"Where are we going?" Jason said, trying to follow her. There was a trail, of sorts, but it consisted as much of tree roots as of bare soil.

"Surprise."

The surprise came quickly. Only fifteen minutes after leaving the car and struggling uphill through the dim woods, they stood at the base of a waterfall whose top could not be seen. The wide stream of water plunged into a pool of jagged rocks, and after recovering itself flowed out in a noisy, narrow creek at a sharp angle to the trail they'd taken up. Dense fir forest crowded the little pond.

Jason had to admit to himself that this was worth seeing, and well worth the effort. He sat down to catch his breath and watch the constant, thundering splash of the waterfall.

"What are you doing?" Sheila said. She nearly had to shout to be heard over the falling water.

"I'm resting."

"What for? Let's go, there's a lot more to see up top."

It wasn't over. He stood up and followed her around the pool to a trail even more narrow and tortuous than the first one. The early part was like steps as they climbed up damp, fractured rock. Once they got away from the waterfall the trail settled back to exposed roots and dark, sandy soil. It was steeper than the lower section, and though Jason thought of himself as being in shape he had to concentrate on his breathing. His legs were starting to ache. Sheila, though, never paused and hardly seemed to be breathing hard at all.

An hour later, they stood at the top of the falls. The hill, or mountain or whatever it was, continued on above them, but apparently they were stopping here. The ocean sparkled far below, past the woods and the highway, with occasional spires and pillars standing in the surf like broken teeth. Jason was winded and sore; he wished he'd been able to find a way to say no to this adventure, but saying "no" to Sheila was, apparently, no easy thing.

"Check this out," Sheila said. She was standing on a slab of rock right at the edge of the precipice. Jason joined her and tentatively looked down.

The water fell away below them to a pool several hundred feet down. That was not the one where they'd first stopped—it was obviously perched on the side of the hill—so there must be several pools and falls in the cascade. Sheila picked up a pebble and dropped it. It vanished instantly into the churning stream.

"Pretty cool, huh?" she said. "Well, let's go."

"What? Aren't we going to..."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you need to use a tree?" He did, but that wasn't what he'd been about to say. "Or, you could, you know, add your little contribution to the falls."

"I'll find a tree," he said.

They rendezvoused back at the top of the falls. He didn't understand what the rush was, other than that he was thirsty (but not thirsty enough to risk giardia by drinking unpurified water),

hungry, tired, and still confused. Sheila was pretty but pushy, and he didn't like bossy women—but somehow he found her attractive. He resigned himself to following her back down the trail.

* * *

Robin sat at the upright grand piano in the sitting room, playing Debussy études with feeling but not much precision. She was in her “hammer” mood, slamming out the notes, using the sheet music as a guide only, letting her anger and frustration control her fingers. It was very gratifying emotionally, but it wasn't always pleasant to listen to, which was why she only played when she was alone in the house.

She stopped and rested her hands in her lap. She didn't know why she was angry. She also felt vaguely disappointed, but she didn't know with whom, over what. In addition, since she was cataloguing her feelings, she felt restless, and dissatisfied with her life, and she wanted to punch someone's face.

“Other than that,” she said aloud, “I'm really feeling grand, thank you.”

She launched into another étude.

The piano had been left with the house when she and Sheila bought it from Erika. Like the built-in hutch in the dining room, it was too heavy to move, and anyway was more properly considered part of the house than just a furnishing.

She never regretted buying this place, or coming to live in Cannon Beach, or starting a B&B, though she sometimes regretted taking on Sheila as a partner. They had met at another B&B, in Sausalito. Robin had been visiting her brother John at Christmas time, and John's wife had refused to let her stay with them. Her excuse was the new baby, their second, but Robin knew better. Stephanie never liked her, she didn't know why, and wished that she hadn't come. Robin had got a room in a little B&B recommended by John, and the very first morning she had been engulfed by the Sheila tsunami. Before her second cup of coffee, Sheila had introduced herself, told Robin all about the boyfriend she'd just broken up with—including graphic details of the embarrassing incident with duct tape in the bedroom that had caused the split—and admitted that she was staying in this B&B in Sausalito, which she'd always wanted to see, in the hope of meeting a new guy. By the end of the third day Sheila had ferreted out Robin's dream of owning a bakery someday and suggested instead that they go in together on running a B&B.

It had seemed like a good idea. Robin had the organization and the skills, Sheila had the energy, and both had money from inheritances to finance it. It was Robin's idea to look at the Oregon coast—her parents had honeymooned in Newport and Florence, though no one knew why.

On a road trip checking out the towns along the coast, they'd come across this B&B for sale. The house was run down, but still structurally sound. The owner, Erika, had been running it as a B&B for a decade, and before that as a boarding house for thirty years more. While Sheila raced down to the beach and out of sight, Robin and Erika had had tea on the porch outside the kitchen and talked for an hour. The old woman, her white hair pulled back in a bun, had rocked and touched Robin lightly on the arm, and told her stories about the boarders she'd had: the man who kept snakes in big jars in his room; the man who turned out to be a woman, but Erika had kept her secret for another ten years; the man who had proposed to her on his third day as a boarder, married her when she was forty-one, and died two years later. Robin told her how her parents had died in a car crash in Tuscany on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. When the tea was cold, Erika agreed to sell them her business at an absurdly low price.

After a year of preparation and remodeling and three years in business, Robin knew more about Sheila than she'd ever known about her own family. She wasn't sure that was such a good

thing. Sheila's energy never flagged, but the difficulty was in pointing that weapon in the right direction. And right now...

"That's an interesting composition," a voice said behind her.

Robin gasped and jerked her hands off the keyboard. But it was just Mark.

"Sorry," he said. "I rang the bell, but I guess you couldn't hear it over the, uh, music."

He sat down on the low armchair near the piano. He was tall and solid, rugged-looking, with sandy hair. His scarred, rough hands clasped each other between his knees. On that chair, with Robin sitting on the piano bench, he had to look up at her like a schoolboy to his teacher. His expression reminded her of a schoolboy's: innocent of anything but perhaps a frog in the punch bowl.

Robin closed the keyboard cover. "That wasn't intended for an audience."

"Good thing. I don't think you'd sell too many tickets, not here in Cannon Beach, anyway."

She smiled ruefully. "Can I get you something?"

"I wouldn't mind some coffee if you've got some."

She nodded toward the kitchen, then led the way, and poured him a mug. Without having to ask, she put out a small plate of the muffins she'd baked the night before. Mark took one and, between sips of coffee, ate it in two bites.

"I think you could use a new coat of paint this summer," he said.

"Really? It's only been three years."

"Salt air and sand," he said. "And the wind. It's like a sand-blasted."

"If you think it's necessary..."

"You could maybe hold off till next year, but I wouldn't. Easier to paint than to repair the clapboards."

"We can afford it, I think. But it would be better to do it before the season."

He nodded and gobbled another muffin.

"Got something for you," he said, and fished around in his jeans pocket. He pulled out a perfect black turban snail shell, purplish-black, almost two inches long. "Found it down by the creek," he said. "Cleaned it up a bit."

"Thanks." She took it from him and put it carefully into a large jar of shells on the shelf above the sink.

"Well, gotta go. Trusses came in for the Wilson house, gotta go put 'em up."

"Good luck," Robin said, and walked him out to the front door.

She watched him shamble out to his pickup and get in. He waved and drove away. As always, the things he hadn't said were the real point of the visit. And the things he didn't say were always the same, and her answer was the same as always, too.

At least for now.

* * *

Sheila said she knew a great seafood restaurant in Newport, so they drove an hour farther south on Route 101. It was starting to get dark when they arrived, but it was still a bit early for dinner, so she parked the car near the waterfront and they walked down the street.

The wall of a processing plant went on for the length of two city blocks, painted light blue, with crude fish added here and there as if someone had realized belatedly that unrelenting baby blue could cause suicides. They passed loading docks; dripping hoses; shouting men shoving empty white rolling bins; women wearing hair nets and long, white lab coats, leaning against the wall, smoking and staring at them.

Past the long blue wall, the view opened up to the water. This was still a working port, so the view was mostly of fishing trawlers and oily waves. Wooden piers, some of them capped by restaurants, punched out into the bay. On the inland side, weather-beaten homes with well-kept yards gave way to ale houses and shops. Sheila was walking too fast for Jason to do more than cursory window-shopping; he saw pewter fairies and a beach towel with cats on it, but the rest went by too quickly to identify.

“Do you ever stroll?” he said.

“We’re strolling right now.”

“Strolling is not a cardiovascular exercise.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed and kept jogging. The shops ended abruptly, giving way to taller, newer houses than the ancient, low cottages that had predominated where they’d parked the car. The slope up from the bay had been steepening for the entire length of the street, so the tallest houses here were one story if you were looking down and three stories looking up.

Sheila stopped and checked her watch. “Hungry?”

He’d overloaded at breakfast, but that was seven hours ago and he hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since. “Sure,” he said.

They walked briskly back to the largest pier-based restaurant, Crabby Jane’s. A covered porch shielded the entrance, so low that they had to duck to get in. On the wall facing the street, buoys and bumpers hung from clapboard that had once been painted but now was bare and weathered to a pearly gray.

The décor inside was strictly tourist glitz: flickering candle lamps, glass balls in netting, more bumpers hanging from posts, paintings of fishing vessels and sunsets over the marina that Jason discovered, on a second look, were actually quite good. Strangely, though, the dozen or so patrons already there didn’t look like tourists. At least half of them looked as if they’d just rolled off one of the ships in the bay.

“A lot of the locals eat here,” Sheila said. “The specials are just an hour or two out of the water.”

A stout woman in an orange apron grumbled at them to follow her. She set them up in a booth against the wall. A different large woman sullenly took their order and came back a moment later with two beers.

Sheila had been unnaturally quiet on the drive down to Newport and ever since they’d arrived. He’d thought her chatter on the way to the waterfall was normal, but maybe she’d just been nervous. Or maybe he’d upset her somehow, though he couldn’t think how.

“I’ve heard the aquarium here is excellent,” he said. “Have you ever been to it?”

“Once.”

“What’s it like?”

“Fishy.”

He frowned at her and she seemed to wake up.

“There’s an entire room,” she said, “full of jellyfish in tall, vertical tubes. They float up and down in groups, like little blobs in a lava lamp. There’s an enormous exhibit where you walk through tunnels in the center of huge tanks and the fish swim all around you—above and below, on all sides. You can lie down on the floor and look up at sharks swimming overhead.”

“That sounds exciting.”

“No,” she said, “not really. Nice; interesting; but not exciting.”

He frowned again. They didn't speak until their salads arrived a few minutes later.

"So you've had the B&B for three years?" he said.

"I'm thinking of getting out."

"Really? Why?"

"Robin really runs the place. She's the brains and the cook. I'm the dishwasher and the chamber maid. It's getting old."

"You could do some of the interesting stuff."

"Don't know how. Robin is so good at everything. I'm just the stupid kitchen slut."

He looked down at his salad, which was mostly iceberg lettuce, with a few vegetables and some tasteless croutons tossed in.

"Sorry," Sheila said. "That just slipped out. You know what my high school yearbook says under my picture?"

He looked up. "Most likely to climb Mount Everest?"

"Most likely to embarrass the Pope."

Just as he laughed the waitress arrived with their food. She glared at him as if laughter were not permitted during dinner hours. She dropped the plates and took away their salads, although neither of them had finished yet. Sheila's sautéed shrimp looked excellent, and the grilled salmon, when he tasted it, was perfect.

"Let's talk about you," Sheila said. "Are you one of those software millionaires?"

He barked another laugh. "Not even close."

"I bet you work for one of those Internet companies. When it goes public you'll be worth a billion bucks." He shook his head. "Okay, what then?"

"We do rogue stuff for the government," he said. "Think tank projects, fringe programming, things that might be useful to the military or the NSC someday."

"Ooh. Spy stuff."

"No, not that exciting. It's just research, really."

"And what do you do out there in the fringe? What's your job?"

"I'm a project lead. That means I don't get to do any of the fun stuff, and when the project tanks I chew my own leg off to get out of the trap."

"Ah," she said, spearing a shrimp with her fork. "A cannibal, huh? Let me ask you something. Have you ever wondered why there was no cannibalism on Gilligan's Island?"

He choked on a roasted potato. Sheila grinned at him.

"I mean really," she said, "why didn't they eat Ginger in the first season? I would have."

* * *

It wasn't very late when they pulled up to the B&B, but Jason was exhausted. Sheila had probed him and, he thought, tested him all through dinner and all the way back. It was as bad as his job. He needed some quiet and some sleep.

He trudged up the steps to the front door and held it open for her. She was lagging behind, but bounded up the steps and instead of going through, stopped right in front of him and kissed him on the mouth. He was so startled that he didn't kiss her back.

"Thanks for the great date, Jason!" she said, and went in.

Robin was standing in the hallway with her mouth open. Jason felt his face burning. He closed the door, mumbled goodnight, and stumbled upstairs to his room.

"Hi, Robin," he heard Sheila say. There was a pause, then an irritated "What?"

Jason heard the kitchen door swing open and shut. He closed the door of his room.

* * *

There was a white terry cloth robe in the closet with “Wild Sands” stitched on the breast. Jason put it on over his pajama bottoms and snuck downstairs. It was just after two in the morning. He’d slept for almost six hours.

His feet were freezing, but he hadn’t thought to bring slippers. It didn’t occur to him that he could have put on socks until he was standing at the kitchen door. He reached out—but the light was on inside, so instead of just pushing it open, he knocked tentatively.

Robin pulled the door open. Her frown turned into a smile when she saw him. She looked him up and down, from his tousled hair to his bare feet, and stood aside to let him in.

The kitchen was at full throttle. It looked like she was baking six things at once: the workbench was covered with mixing bowls, baking sheets, giant glass canisters of flour and sugar, measuring spoons and wooden spoons, little jars and big jars and cellophane bags. The air was warm and smelled of citrus, spices, and sugar.

Robin was wearing a big, red apron that hadn’t done its job. There were scuffs of flour and unidentifiable substances on her arms, pant legs, shoes, and in her hair. But she looked happier than Jason had yet seen her in the twenty-eight hours he’d known her.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Jason said.

“I never sleep through the night,” Robin said.

“Do you ever sleep at all?” he said, waving a hand at the contrary evidence.

“Sleep is for amateurs. What are you doing down here?”

He grinned sheepishly. “I didn’t know you were up. I was hoping to find a snack.”

“Of course. Anything to drink?”

“Milk, please.”

She loaded up a plate with some of the goodies he remembered from yesterday’s breakfast. He sat down at the little table and started with the chocolate pound cake, the one he’d refrained from last time; when the flavor exploded in his mouth, he realized that that had been a mistake.

“So now I know where all these cakes and things come from. Do you do this every night?”

“Almost every night. I like baking.”

“Your guests can’t possibly eat all this,” he said, although he was making good progress on his share. “And I know *you* don’t eat it, unless you have a hyperactive thyroid.”

“I try not to eat any of it. I sell a lot of it to a local store. No—” She shook her head and smiled as she guessed his next question. “I won’t tell you which one. Then you’d just go there to get your fix.”

“The atmosphere’s better here.” He finished the glass of milk and leaned back.

“And some of it goes to the church. They have a food program for homeless and needy people. None of it goes to waste. But you’d be surprised how much of it some of our guests can pack away.”

“But you really do it because it makes you happy.”

She was facing away from him, but he thought she smiled at that. “It reminds me of making cookies with my mom when I was a little girl.”

“Maybe some day you’ll do it with your own daughter.”

“Maybe.”

Robin’s dog had been sleeping on his bed. Jason noticed him for the first time when the dog got up and sauntered over to him. He was large, the size of a Saint Bernard, with long, silky fur that was white on the muzzle and chest and black over brown elsewhere.

“That’s quite a—oomph!”

Bear had raised himself up and put his paws on Jason’s shoulders so they were eye to eye. Jason’s chair tilted back from the extra weight.

“He wants to dance,” Robin said.

Jason pushed Bear off him, stood up, and held out his hands. Bear hopped up on his hind legs again and put his front paws into Jason’s.

“I think maybe he wants to tango.”

“Try a waltz,” Robin said.

Jason led Bear through a few box steps. “Not bad. What’s his name?”

“Bear.”

“It suits him. Doesn’t the health inspector mind you keeping a dog in your kitchen?”

“Bear’s brother lives with the health inspector.”

“Oh.” He let Bear down and returned to his chair. The dog sniffed him thoroughly, then went back to his bed, circled a few times, and lay down with his head on his front paws, looking straight at Jason. “He’s a pretty good dancer.”

“Practice,” Robin said. She put two bread pans into the oven and leaned back against her work table.

“Somehow I imagined you having a cat.”

“What a horrible thing to say to a woman!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s pretty much the same as saying, ‘Oh, I thought you’d be married by now.’”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

She laughed and he did too, in relief. She turned back to her table and began flattening a ball of dough.

“Some people freak out when Bear does the shoulder trick,” Robin said. “You must have some experience with dogs.”

“Not much. I’ve never had a dog.”

“Never? Not even as a boy?”

“My dad wanted a dog. Mom wouldn’t let him. She said, ‘You can have a dog, or you can have me.’ Sometimes I’d catch him slowing down when we passed a pet store.”

“Oh. Didn’t they get along?”

“They’re still together. I see them all the time, they live just a couple blocks away from me.”

“You moved a few blocks away from your parents?”

“No,” he said. “They moved a few blocks away from me. When my dad retired, he moved to Portland from the Seattle area, to be near me, I guess.”

“So you grew up in Seattle.” Now she was rolling the dough out into a large rectangle. Jason was trying to guess what it was going to be, but he hadn’t come up with anything yet.

“No, Denver. We moved to Seattle when my dad got a job at Boeing.”

“What was it like growing up in Denver?”

“Not as snowy as I thought it would be.”

She laughed. He leaned forward to see what she was doing: spreading soft butter on the rectangle of dough, then sprinkling it with a light brown—

“Cinnamon rolls?” he said.

“Uh huh.”

"I'm in big trouble." He watched her scatter raisins on it and roll up the dough. "Hey, sorry about that cat thing. I don't really like cats, either."

"I don't dislike cats, I just don't have one. Bear is enough work." She used a square, flat, metallic thing to cut the rolled-up dough into roll-sized pieces. "They say that people who don't like cats are insecure." She raised one eyebrow at him.

"I'm not insecure. I just don't like them. They also say," he raised an eyebrow back at her, "that people who like cats are masochists."

"Cats have their place."

"Yes, just not my place."

"Did you know," she said as she laid the rolls onto baking sheets, "that house cats are descended from feral cats that are untamable? It took the Egyptians over two thousand years to domesticate them."

"I'd say they never quite finished the job. And they could have saved themselves the trouble, if you ask me."

"Cats are sweet, especially kittens."

"All small mammals are cute. Our brains are hard-wired to think so, otherwise we'd drown our own young."

"They're great mousers."

"So are terriers, ferrets, and snakes."

Bear got up from his bed, lumbered over to Jason, and put his paws up on his shoulders again. This time Jason lost his balance and fell slowly backward, knocking his head on the floor and ending up in a sitting posture lying on his back.

"Ouch," he said. Robin laughed so hard she had to cover her mouth with her hands. Bear licked his face. "Did I say something wrong? Does he love cats, or hate ferrets maybe?"

"Did you have a good time with Sheila yesterday?"

Jason looked up at her. She was still smiling, but he felt awfully vulnerable with his legs up in the air, dressed in pajamas and robe, with a large dog with big teeth licking his face.

"Is there a wrong answer that'll get my throat torn out?" he said.

"Go to your bed, Bear," Robin said. The dog instantly turned away and went back to his bed by the door. Jason picked himself up, straightened his clothes, and settled back down at the table. "Where did you go?"

"I have no idea. She took me to a waterfall, then *up* the waterfall. We spent about three seconds up there, then we came back down. We had dinner in Newport, at Crabby Somebody's."

"Did you have fun?"

Jason knew he was standing in a minefield. He didn't know why. "She's kind of intense, isn't she?"

"When we bought this place, I threatened to call it *Wild Sheila*, but she wouldn't let me."

"Have you been friends long?"

"Four or five years. We met at a B&B in California. I think that's where Sheila got the idea for us to run our own B&B together. It would never have occurred to me."

"What did you do before?"

"Nothing much. Not what I got my degree in."

"What was—"

"So it was a nice day, then?"

He pushed his milk glass back from the edge of the table. "I didn't know it was a date until she said that when we got back. I wasn't looking for a date. I... I don't do that much. And I didn't even really want to go, I'd rather have spent the day on the beach."

A timer went off. Robin took her breads out of the oven, rolled them expertly out of the pans onto wire racks, and drizzled a glaze over them. Jason watched apprehensively.

"Do you mind if I give you some advice?" she said. Jason shook his head. "Sheila's a good person, but she's like a stubborn trail horse. If you let her, she'll lead you off the trail so she can nibble on some tasty weed. If you actually want to ride on the trail, you're going to have to use the reins."

Jason thought about that. "Thanks for the advice. But I'm not looking for a ride right now."

"You're already in the saddle, Jason, whether you know it or not. Be careful."

He stood up and put his plate and glass into the sink. "Thank you for the snack."

"See you at breakfast," she said.

He paused with his hand on the door. She was facing away from him, mixing something in a bowl. He wanted to say something, but he didn't really know what it was. She shook her hair out of her eyes. He let the door close behind him.

* * *

They watched him eat a slice of quiche and a cinnamon roll. He started to reach for the almond bread but changed his mind.

"Do you have to leave so early?" Sheila said. "You haven't seen the beach yet."

Whose fault is that, he thought. "Sorry, I have to go. I was supposed to work this weekend."

"Oh ho. Playing hooky?"

"Not really. I think I went a little nuts—I've been working too hard lately. But maybe I can save my job if I show up this afternoon."

"Well, come back when you can be nuts for a whole weekend. I'll show you Haystack Rock."

"Yes," Robin said unexpectedly. "We'd love to have you back anytime."

Sheila glared at her. Jason excused himself and went upstairs to pack, which took about a minute.

The two women stood together on the porch as Jason threw his bag onto the passenger seat and climbed into his car.

"Come back soon," Sheila called.

Jason started the car and checked his rear view mirror. When he looked at them again, Robin waved shyly and Sheila pulled her hair out of her face and blew him a kiss—exactly the way he'd seen the ad animate. He had to close his eyes against the momentary dizziness. He looked again, and they were just standing there, smiling. He waved and pulled away.

"You can be so disgusting," Robin said. She turned and walked back into the house.

"What?" Sheila said as she followed her. "It's just good business. I bet you everything I've got that he comes back."

"We'll never see him again," Robin said, and retreated to the safety and comfort of her kitchen.

* * *

Jason had every intention of going to work, and so he didn't give in to the temptation to stop somewhere in town and walk, if only for a few moments, on the beach. He drove back to

Portland, squinting against the intermittent sunshine. The clouds that had been hanging over the area for weeks seemed to be breaking up.

But when he reached downtown Portland in the early afternoon, he realized that if he did go to work, he would be worse than useless. He would probably end up handing in his resignation, and he couldn't afford to do that. So he drove out of the city, back to his suburban home, changed his clothes, and went out for a movie. Then he got a pizza and went to a second movie.

The phone message light was blinking when he got home. Six messages. He erased them without listening to them and went to bed.

Chapter 3: Interlude #1

There was no point in getting up earlier than usual. If he was doomed, it could come at the regular time. He did have to fight the urge to cringe when he walked into the offices of Zebra, but Wendy gave him the same vacuous wave as always and his badge opened the door, so they hadn't fired him yet. Gary probably wanted the satisfaction of doing it personally.

Jason woke up his desktop and blanched: over a hundred new e-mails. The buggy code he'd been struggling with all of last week was still staring at him from his monitor; he had not the slightest interest in tackling that again. He decided to start wading through his mail, but he'd only managed to delete five of them when Jeanne wafted into his office and sat in the chair beside his desk. She handed him his morning Starbucks. They sipped in silence for a moment: his Americano, her latté.

"How bad is it?" he said.

"He wants to see you the moment you get in."

"Maybe I'll wait a while."

"I wouldn't rule out the possibility that the security cameras caught you arriving. And I know the system logs every time you swipe your badge. He probably knows you're here." She leaned forward and whispered. "He could be listening to us right now."

Jason spoke to the ceiling. "Hey, Gary, buzz off."

"Be a man, boss."

He stood up, hitched his pants, and pretended to spit into the corner. "If I don't come back, you can have my koala." She had given him a stuffed koala doll for his birthday last year, saying, "They're cuddly and cute but they have a nasty bite. Reminds me of someone."

Jason went up the stairs to the northwest corner office and knocked. Gary mumbled something and Jason went in.

The CEO's office was four times the size of his. Gary was sitting at a desk made of slabs of polished amber-colored wood. He looked up, jumped up, and strode over to Jason. Jason wasn't sure what to expect, but Gary just said his name, grabbed his arm, and half-dragged him over to the coffee table in the far corner of the room. He sat down and grinned at Jason.

Gary Karris had been one of the first hundred employees at Microsoft. He had more vigor than anyone Jason had ever known, to the point that it could be scary to be around him for long. He didn't *need* coffee in the morning—he woke up in high gear. The hair at his temples was graying and his face was outdoorsman-wrinkled, so he looked older than his 40 years; only nine years older than Jason but vastly wealthier. Some people at Zebra said that Gary wanted to be Bill Gates, but that was absurd: Gates had built his wealth by monopolizing system software, taking a small cut from almost every personal computer ever sold. Gary, on the other hand, didn't want to own the world, so he had a totally different strategy: only one customer—the U.S. government, which had very, very deep pockets. His costs stayed low because he had no product support and no marketing. Gates was richer, but Gary was plenty rich enough.

"What happened this weekend?" Gary said after a lengthy pause.

Jason shifted in his seat. "I went a little nuts. Friday was crazy and I guess I just went over the edge."

"Jeanne said something about you going out to the coast."

"Cannon Beach. I don't know why, but I felt a compulsion to go out there."

Gary nodded. "Better now?"

"I think so. Listen, Gary, I know we're on a tight schedule—"

"We're three months behind."

"I know. But I'm going to need a weekend off now and then."

Gary looked at him placidly without speaking.

"I haven't had a vacation in two years," Jason said. "These six-day weeks are killing me. I'm trying to do my own programming, coordinate the team leads, and arbitrate every technical glitch—it's too much. I feel like I'm going to snap and wake up some morning to discover that I've bought a cabin in Montana and I'm raising goats."

"Goats, huh?" Gary scratched his jaw. "Well, that would be a waste." He scrutinized Jason's face for a moment. "Okay, how about one weekend a month?"

"Deal."

"Good, glad we got that settled." He leapt up from his chair and headed back to his desk, then turned around abruptly. "Hey, did you see I got my house in *Sunset* magazine?"

"Yeah, Jeanne showed me."

"Something else, huh? Okay, thanks, Jason. Send me the bug bash numbers this afternoon, okay?"

Jason walked out, unperturbed by Gary's abruptness. He was always like this: that false efficiency he'd learned at Microsoft, completely unaware that social graces smoothed the road of human travel. Jason was a little surprised that he still had a job, but now that he thought about it, not terribly so. He and Gary had always worked well together, and it wasn't as if he'd brought a rifle to work and started picking off the drones—although that might have been the next step if he hadn't wiggled out in a small way on Friday.

There was a line of people waiting outside his office; they all started talking at once when they saw him. Jason shook his head and shouted at them to give him one minute. Jeanne popped up out of her cubicle across from his office and shouldered her way through the crowd to follow him in.

"You're still here," she said.

"Too bad, huh?"

"Lunch," Jeanne said. "Twelve-thirty. I want every single detail, minute by minute." She went out into the hall. "Next!"

* * *

They went to a nearby Italian restaurant infamous for its slow service, because Jeanne wanted him to take his time telling the story. It had dark walls, secluded booths, and waiters in long white aprons rushing around as if they were saving lives instead of delivering pasta and pizza.

He didn't tell her about the magical ad. Instead he started with the horrific drive through the blizzard, which for some reason Jeanne found hilarious. She hurried him through that to his arrival at the B&B.

"She dragged you inside?"

"I can't remember whether she grabbed my coat or my hair."

"Come on, Jason, details like that are important. Is she a cave woman or an Amazon?"

"Amazon. On Saturday she kidnapped me and hauled me up a mountainside to see a waterfall."

"Romantic."

“Yeah, we had a very nice romantic interlude, looking down the face of the waterfall, that lasted three seconds. Then she told me I could pee into it if I wanted to.”

“Oh, she did not.”

He crossed his heart and ate a piece of focaccia while she laughed.

“What are they like, the women?”

“The Amazon’s name is Sheila. She’s exactly like one of those volleyball goddesses, without the seriousness. She’s very... forward. Flighty. You’d expect her to be blonde, but she’s not.”

“What a shallow mind you have,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“When you say ‘forward,’ do you mean authoritative or brazen?”

“Brazen is a very good word for Sheila. She kissed me after our first date, which I didn’t even know was a date until that moment.”

“Really? Tell me—wait a minute, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. What about the other one?”

“Robin. She’s... different. Kind of short. Shy. I think she’s smart, but she doesn’t talk much. Spends a lot of her time trying to rein in Sheila, I think. And she actually is blonde.”

“Okay, so Sheila drags you in... then what?”

“She wouldn’t leave the room when I had to go to the bathroom.”

“She stayed in the bathroom while you—”

“No, she was in the bedroom while I...” He waved his hand.

“Already I see a pattern. She’s obsessed with peeing. Forget about her, Jason, she’s too kinky for you.”

Jeanne’s salad arrived. The waitress offered pepper but Jeanne just scowled at her. She took a demure forkful.

“What was the place like?” she said.

“Nice. Victorian, lots of heavy furniture, too many pictures on the wall. Comfortable bed. Great food.”

Jeanne got a dreamy look in her eye. “I’ve always wanted to run a bed and breakfast.”

“Are you crazy? Do you have any idea how much work that is?”

“It can’t be worse than this stupid job. No offense, boss, you know I love you, but being your assistant takes one-tenth of my brain and ten times my patience. I’m aging three years for every year I do this. It’s worse than being President.”

“Wait,” he said in a panic. “You’re not going to quit, are you?”

“Can’t afford to. My stock options haven’t vested yet.”

Jason calculated in his head. “You vest in four months.”

She smiled sweetly. Jason crossed his arms and slumped back in his seat in a funk.

“Relax, boss. I’m not leaving until you—”

She broke off. Her husband, Bob, was walking toward them through the tables. He waited patiently for a moment while a waiter unloaded a tray of food right in front of him. When the path was clear he stood beside their table, smiling, as if waiting for an invitation to sit down.

“Get your hand off my thigh,” Jeanne said in a stage whisper. “My husband’s here.”

“Where?” Jason said, looking around the restaurant in mock alarm.

That was the invitation Bob was waiting for. He slid into the booth beside Jeanne, pushing her over with his hip.

“I thought I’d find you here. So, mister, you putting the moves on my wife?”

Bob was in his mid-fifties, several years older and several inches shorter than Jeanne. He was balding, with narrow shoulders, but extremely fit. He and Jason went running occasionally, and played racquetball every Thursday at Bob's racquet club.

"I don't need to put any moves on her," Jason said. "I already own her."

"Terrific," Bob said. "I forgot."

"Just until my options vest," Jeanne said at the same time. "But until then, yes, I am your slave."

"Terrific," Bob said. "Use her as you will. What's for lunch?"

"What are you doing here?" Jeanne said.

"Interrupting something torrid, it looks like. There's nothing pressing going on at work so I thought we could have lunch, but you weren't at the office, so I figured you'd come here."

Jeanne and Jason both stared at him. They hadn't told anyone where they were going, which meant that Bob had to have deduced both that she was having lunch with Jason and where they would go. That was more perception than either of them would have credited him with.

Their waitress, surprisingly, had noticed that they had a guest and come to see what he wanted. "Can I get you something to drink, sir?"

"San Pellegrino," Bob said. "One of these salads. Whatever your pizza special is. Love your hair."

She frowned as she wrote down his order. Jason hadn't noticed her hair: it was black with very prominent purple highlights. Why hadn't he seen that before?

"I guess you can give me the rest of the details later," Jeanne said. "What I really want to know is, are you going back?"

"Back where?" Bob said.

"Jason went to a B&B on the coast this weekend," Jeanne said. "One of the owners tried to hump his leg. The other is a woman of mystery."

"I'm assuming the leg humper is not a dog?"

"Female human."

"Hell, yes, go back. I didn't know you were even allowed to take weekends off, Jason. Two women, one a leg humper, the other mysterious? Terrific. Go back tomorrow. Take me with you."

"Let me ask you a question, honey," Jeanne said. "Do you think you could you score with beautiful women if I knocked all your teeth out?"

"Can I have a bite of your salad?" Bob said. "I'm starving."

Jeanne pushed it over to him and he began wolfing it down. She and Jason watched in amusement as he finished it.

"Do you think I should call them?" Jason said.

"No. I think *I* should call them, since I keep your schedule. How are you going to get away?"

"Gary said I can take off one weekend a month."

She was speechless for a moment. "With our schedule, he said that?" Jason nodded. "I hope you took advantage of the moment. Did you ask him for a raise, a company car, and a kept woman dripping with diamonds in a permanent suite at the Governor hotel?"

"Hey, honey," Bob said, "remember that time we stayed at the Governor on New Year's Eve ___"

"Later," she shushed him. "Well?"

"I thought one weekend a month was plenty."

"I'll book you for the first weekend in April," Jeanne said.

"Food's here," Bob said happily.

* * *

There was no set day for Jason to visit his parents. Occasionally they would schedule a dinner out, or an evening at the theater, but usually his visits were impromptu. As far as his mother was concerned, Jason could have visited every evening that she wasn't working as an usher at the concert hall, but after a day at work he usually wanted some quiet, and he didn't really want to see them that often. He wished sometimes that they'd stayed in Seattle.

On the Friday evening after his return, Jason walked the three blocks to his parents' house. The sun was long since set, so the streets were deserted. The flickering blue light of TVs shone through almost every window. He turned right at the end of the block and walked past two more houses, then up the driveway to the two-story, brick and wood house that looked just like every other one on the street. He walked in without knocking.

"Mom?" he called.

"She's out back," his father said, coming out of the bedroom. George was in his mid-sixties and his hair had gone almost totally gray, but otherwise he and Jason could have been twins. They were both a few inches short of six feet, of average build, with pleasant if not handsome faces.

They shook hands and George clapped Jason on the shoulder. "Drink?"

"Coke, thanks."

They went into the kitchen. A moment later, Jason's mother Beth came through the sliding glass door from the patio carrying a sprig of rosemary.

"Jason!" she squealed, as if she hadn't seen him for months. She tossed the herbs onto the counter and gave him a hug, then stood back without releasing him and scrutinized his face. "What is it?"

"What do you mean?" Jason said.

"Something's happened. Something's different. Tell me."

"What are you talking about?" George said.

"Nothing's happened."

"Liar. Tell me." Beth was three inches shorter than Jason, but her grip was unbreakable.

"Okay, okay, Mom, don't tear my arms off."

She let him go and looked him up and down. She was just a touch overweight, with shoulder-length brown hair—expertly dyed, with attractive silver streaks.

"You've met someone," she said.

"Yes, I met someone, but it's not serious, they're not even friends yet, and I'm not ready to set a wedding date."

"They? *They*? There's more than one?"

"If I promise to tell you everything, can we have dinner? I'm starving."

They grilled salmon steaks for Jason and Beth, beef steak for George. "Don't get any of your juice on my fish," Jason said as he watched his dad work the grill.

"You'd be a lot healthier if you ate some good, red meat now and then instead of that mercury-poisoned cesspool-raised finny."

"Wrong," Jason said. "You should read something besides the sports page now and then."

"I read plenty."

"Really? Have you read about cholesterol, omega-3 fatty acids, and mad cow disease?"

“Don’t believe in any of that. These are ready.”

Jason did not tell them everything; he omitted the moving ad, the dinner with Sheila, the kiss, the conversation with Robin in the kitchen—most of the details, in fact. He could tell that his mother knew he was leaving something out, but she didn’t press him too hard. Although she had plenty of questions as he told the story over dinner, to his surprise, all she said when he was done was, “They both sound like nice girls.”

She was up to something. He didn’t understand what it was until he was about to leave after the apple pie and ice cream.

“Jason,” Beth said. “You didn’t tell us the name of the B&B.”

He stopped halfway through the door and turned back. He suddenly got it. “Not a chance, Mom.”

“What?”

“If I give you the name, you look up the number and before I know it you’re trying to talk one of them into marrying me.”

“What a ridiculous idea. Good night, silly boy.” She turned away and went to the kitchen to start cleaning up.

George gave Jason a significant look and closed the door. Jason walked back home. He was off the hook for another week.

* * *

March went by in a blur of gray days and work. Jason rarely thought about his weekend getaway except when Jeanne or his mother would bring it up. He couldn’t let himself think about it—not if he wanted to stay employed. Because if he thought about it too much, he’d find himself in his car, crazy like last time, driving through whatever nature could throw at him to get to that blue Victorian house on the beach.

Chapter 4: Fugue #2

Jason stepped out of his car into a light drizzle and shut the door. Night had fallen during the drive from Portland—just a normal drive in light rain, nothing like the ordeal he'd passed through the first time. The porch lights of the B&B made spherical halos in the mist. He walked up to the steps, at the top of which Robin and Sheila were waiting for him. Robin's arms were folded across her chest, Sheila had her fists on her hips.

"Pay up," Sheila said to Robin.

"What?" Jason said.

"A little in-joke. Come on in."

"We gave you the same room," Robin said.

"That's fine."

He had forgotten how strong, and how pleasant, the smells were: fresh flowers, potpourri, and something baked with cinnamon.

"You said you didn't want dinner," Robin said. "If you want, we can make reservations somewhere, but you probably don't need them at this time of year."

"No, thanks, I thought I'd just wander around town a little and stop in somewhere when I get hungry."

"Want a guide?" Sheila said with a ferocious smile.

"Um... Not today, thanks. I didn't get to see much of anything last time. I'd just like to stroll."

"Strolling again," Sheila muttered.

"You can borrow an umbrella..." Robin pointed to a wrought-iron stand by the door, filled with umbrellas.

"Thanks. I brought a hat." There was an awkward silence. "Um, I'll just go put my bag... Oh, do you have a fixed time for breakfast? I was so spaced out last time, I just wandered down when I woke up."

"That was fine, but we have other guests this weekend. Breakfast is at 9:00."

"Nine o'clock. Good. I'll, um, I'll see you then."

He grabbed his bag and hurried up to his room. He could feel Sheila's eyes boring holes in his back all the way up.

After a quick bathroom break, he went back downstairs. The hallway was empty, so he hurried on outside, grabbed his hat from the car, and walked into town.

It was farther than he'd thought to the shopping district, about half a mile. The houses on the way tended to be small cottages. The older ones were rather attractive, but many looked to have been built in the sixties and seventies: boxy, functional, and utterly without charm. He came around a sharp bend in Hemlock Street and suddenly there were shops. On the left they were converted houses, on the right was a two-story, curving plaza with parking inside the bend.

Closer to the center of town the house-shops gave way entirely to commercial buildings, for the most part just one story and unremarkable, but there was a large log cabin on a corner that appeared to be a restaurant. He crossed over to check the menu, but it was mostly fried food, so he kept going.

Scattered among the storefronts were several little malls. Each of them was U-shaped, with the opening facing the street and little parks inside the U. One of the parks had a fountain that

made him stop and walk up for a closer look. It was a nearly life-sized bronze statue of a young woman, in a dancer's pose with one leg drawn up, wearing a cowgirl hat and not much else. The water cascaded from the top of an umbrella that she held high above her head. Jason smiled and glanced around to see if anyone was watching him admire her, but the area was deserted.

The shops were all closed, but he found a restaurant with an intriguing menu: Italian entrees and both Scandinavian and Creole fish dishes. There were half a dozen couples in the dimly-lit dining room. A crisp waitress seated him immediately.

The fish was excellent, but Jason's mind wasn't on the food. Now that he was back, he couldn't ignore the problem any more. He was attracted to both of his hosts. Sheila was like the cowgirl fountain come to life, sexy and bold, but he could actually talk to Robin. He didn't know which was more important to him, Sheila's brash energy or Robin's quiet charm. He turned down dessert and walked back outside without coming to a conclusion.

He took his time on the way back, stopping to look in shop windows at jewelry, paintings, and pottery. It was quite late by the time he returned, and he made it up to his room without seeing anyone. He set the bedside alarm for 8:00 and lay awake for a long while with his arms behind his head, staring at the dark ceiling, and imagining that he could hear the surf.

* * *

"We come back every year in the spring," the earnest woman said. Her husband nodded as he sipped his coffee.

Jason's small talk was a little rusty. The couple were in their late thirties, and their daughter looked about fourteen. The girl had smiled politely at Jason as she sat down and not said a single word since. Her parents made up for it, chatting constantly. He wished Sheila would bring out the food; he was hungry, and he wanted to get away from these noisy people. It reminded him too much of work—yak yak yak before he'd had a chance to finish his morning coffee.

"Do you always stay here?" he said.

"Ever since they opened," the woman said. "This is our fourth time. We were one of their first guests, you know. We love this old house, and we think Robin and Sheila are the sweetest hosts. Wouldn't you agree, dear?"

"Absolutely," her husband said. There was a gleam in his eye that Jason didn't like. He wondered if it was due to the pastries or the person who served them.

"It must be a big change from—Fairbanks, was it?"

"Yes, Fairbanks. We love how mild it is here in the spring. We won't get spring for another three months, you know."

"If then," the husband said with a laugh. "You never know."

The daughter piped up suddenly in a thin, whispery voice. "A polar bear camped out by our pond for a month after Christmas."

"Really?" Jason said. The parents looked embarrassed. The girl showed no inclination to say more, and whatever the problem might be, it remarkably shut up her mom and dad, too. Was the polar bear imaginary, or had they had to shoot and eat it?

Sheila came out then with her platter full of goodies. Jason watched the man's eyes and decided that it was *both* the pastries and the server. He looked as if he wanted to eat muffins off Sheila's bare abdomen.

As Sheila passed behind Jason, she nudged his shoulder gently with a swing of her hip. It could have been an accident, but he doubted it, and Mr. Earnest obviously did, too. He glared at Jason before turning to the cinnamon swirls.

Robin brought out another tray with plates of frittatas and—sausages?

“Um... I don’t eat red meat,” Jason said.

“Good,” Robin said. “These are vegetarian sausages. Everything we serve is ovo-lacto vegetarian.”

“Really?”

“Didn’t you know that?” Mrs. Earnest said. “I thought you said you’d stayed here before.”

“Just once, and it was—”

“Lovely,” Sheila finished. “But too short. Dig in, everyone.”

“Bon appétit,” Robin said. She and Sheila went back into the kitchen. Interesting. They had sat with him at breakfast last time. Did they only do that when people would otherwise eat alone, or was it just him?

The table talk during the meal was blissfully sparse. As soon as he was done, Jason excused himself and went out the front door and around to the back porch. Robin was watching him through the window. He waved, and she waved back.

The sky was still overcast, but the drizzle had stopped, and this time there was no fog. The gigantic pointed rock stood majestically in the surf, with a smaller, jagged spire to its left. Jason was determined that nothing was going to keep him off the beach today.

“Want to go see the beach?” Sheila said.

He looked at her for a moment. She was so pretty, and he really didn’t want to walk down this magnificent beach by himself.

“Absolutely,” he said.

* * *

The tide was coming in, washing away a handful of small, half-formed sand castles and millions of tracks from birds, dogs, and humans. Sheila and Jason walked on the damp, hard-packed sand a few paces above the surf line. She was quiet, making him think again that her chatter at the start of their hiking trip last time might have been nothing but nervousness.

Little dark birds ran up and down the beach on quick, toothpick legs, charging the foam and scurrying away when it reached for them, occasionally taking flight when they misjudged and were about to be soaked. Seagulls called mournfully. The sun was just a bright spot in the gray cloud cover. Jason stopped and looked out to sea. The metallic sky was reflected in the waves; it was like standing inside a huge black pearl.

Sheila hadn’t waited for him. He ran a few paces to catch up.

“What’s that?” he said, pointing to the huge rock just offshore that he’d thought was a wizard’s cap or perhaps a beached tanker.

“Haystack Rock. It’s the third largest monolith in the world.”

“Third largest, huh? What are the biggest?”

“Number one is Ayers Rock in Australia. Number two is... somewhere in Africa, I forget.”

“I thought Gibraltar would be up there somewhere.”

“It’s the tallest, but not that massive. Beacon Rock is the second tallest.”

“In the Columbia River Gorge? I’ve driven past that.”

“Ever hiked to the top?”

“No.” He thought about saying that he wasn’t much of a hiker, but she already knew that.

“In the old days, before they built the trail up to the top, they used ladders. Victorian ladies in their big skirts would climb up a series of ladders all the way to the top.”

“That’s crazy.” They dodged an incoming wave. “You know a lot about monoliths.”

“I like hiking.”

He let that sleeping dog lie.

There were a lot of people out on the beach, couples walking hand-in-hand, swarms of kids that didn't seem to belong to any adults, people on bikes and big tricycles, several old men who seemed as if they could barely walk, tottering along with their heads down. He and Sheila were walking close enough that their jackets wheezed occasionally as the sleeves brushed each other. Each time that happened Jason would slide over a bit, but then Sheila would close the gap. Her hand twitched occasionally as if she thought they should be holding hands. He wasn't ready for that yet.

It was cool and breezy, but Jason didn't feel cold. He couldn't remember the last time he had actually stood on a beach; in his teens, perhaps. His parents had taken him to one in Washington, on the Olympic peninsula, shortly after they moved there, when he was seventeen. That beach had been all pebbles and cobbles, even colder than this, but it had been sunny and people were flying kites in the offshore wind.

There were no kites out today. In the half hour they'd been walking, the incoming tide had narrowed the beach by a dozen feet. People were being squeezed into a narrower and narrower strip between the jumbled, driftwood-littered sand above high tide and the frothy waves.

They came to a place where water was flowing down across the sand into the ocean. It had carved a branching, snaking estuary that looked like the mouth of the Mississippi seen from an airplane. The flow was shallow but swift.

"What's this?" Jason said.

"Ecola Creek."

Their path was blocked. There was no way to cross the broad estuary without wading through the water.

"I guess we need to turn back," he said.

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I guess I left it in Denver."

"Yeah, and your heart's in San Francisco. I've heard that one before. Look, it's shallow. Just carry me across."

He turned to look at her to see if she was serious. She looked serious.

"I only brought one pair of shoes," he said. He looked inland. "Look, we can cross there."

Fifty feet upstream, the creek was in a deeper but fairly narrow bed. Jason backed up a few steps and took a running leap, easily clearing the channel.

"It's easy," he called.

She hadn't moved. "So, you don't want to carry me."

He had no idea what to say. Of *course* he didn't want to carry her. Was she kidding? Was she an invalid?

Sheila walked up to his crossing point and leaped across effortlessly in an impressive standing broad jump.

"Do you have a bad back?" she asked him.

"No, why?"

"Hernia?"

"No."

"Oh."

She continued walking and he fell in beside her. He stopped to pick up a scallop shell that was half white and half orange, then had to jog to catch up again.

"Have you ever been sailing?" Sheila said.

"Once. But not on the ocean."

"I've always wanted to head out to blue water. The Mediterranean, maybe; the Caribbean, or the South Pacific."

"You mean a cruise?"

"Not like the ones you mean. I'm talking about a real ship, where everyone works—all crew, no passengers." She was silent for three paces. "It would be fun to be a pirate."

"You'd make a good pirate," Jason said. "But a pirate captain needs an eye patch."

"And a sword."

"And maybe a peg leg."

"Haven't you ever just wanted to sail away and leave your old life behind? Go wherever the wind takes you?"

He decided to treat this as a serious question, so he gave it some thought.

"The closest I've ever come," he said, "was when I came here last month."

"That's not much of an escape."

"No, but it's the best I've been able to manage for the last seven years. I think I've been in the cage so long I've forgotten how to see the bars. My job has consumed my entire life. It didn't use to be that way. I used to like my work, but I had weekends and vacations. Now... it's just work."

"You should ditch it and sail away. You know those cruises where you sign on as part of the crew? That's what I want to do. Sun, water, and wind. Work your body, leave your mind behind."

She stopped for a moment and faced the ocean. A line of surf broke far offshore, and the rising tide brought crashing, hissing waves almost to their feet. They walked on silently for several minutes, until she stopped and smiled devilishly at him.

"What?" he said.

"Race you back." She took off at high speed.

Jason jogged regularly but his routine only included five to ten minutes of flat-out running. She beat him back to the base of the bluff, where they'd started their walk, by over a minute.

"I have a great idea," she said as he bent over with his hands on his knees, getting his wind back.

"A nap?"

"Meet me back here at six o'clock for low tide. I want to show you something."

That didn't sound dangerous. "Okay."

"Six o'clock. Don't forget." He nodded. "Gotta run. See ya."

And she did, literally, run off up the hill.

* * *

After the Harrisons and their daughter left to resume their feeding frenzy at the galleries, Robin had the house alone. She sat at her piano for a while, and even rested her fingers on the keys a few times, but she didn't really feel like playing. There was no music inside her today, not even angry music. She looked at the grandfather clock, another fixture that had come with the house. There was no point in starting anything now; Mark would be popping in soon, regular as the tarnished brass pendulum in the old clock.

She picked up the book she was reading, a disappointing autobiography by Walter Cronkite, and took it to her favorite reading chair, a wing-back armchair in the corner of the sitting room.

She tried to concentrate, but the text was rambling and pompous and she wasn't in the mood for it; she set the book back down and walked down the hall and out the back kitchen door.

The sky was solid gray, the ocean roiling and heaving, a darker color like charcoal. It was nearly high tide. Robin sat down in a rocking chair and put her feet up on the white railing. She hugged herself; it was cool and she was wearing just a light cardigan over her blouse and jeans.

Sheila came running up from the beach, waved, and called out, "Mark's here," without breaking stride.

There was housekeeping to be done, but Robin never nagged her about it. Sheila kept her own schedule, came and went without ever explaining what she was doing with her time, but she always got her chores done, so Robin let her be. When they'd bought the B&B, she'd thought they would become close friends; thought they would spend a lot of time together, but it hadn't worked out that way. The only real overlap was during meals and the cleanup after, so they spent at most a few hours together every day, and then they were usually too busy to talk about anything other than the job at hand; when they weren't busy there didn't seem to be anything to say. When things slowed down they went their own ways. Sheila did her cleaning sometime between breakfast and dinner, Robin did her baking and paperwork mostly at night, and occasionally they passed each other during the day.

"Enjoying the view?" Mark said.

Robin turned and smiled gently but didn't respond. He came up the stairs to the porch and sat on the deacon's bench beside her chair. They sat for a long time without talking. She watched the waves roll in and pretended not to notice that he was mostly looking at her.

"Coffee?" she said at last.

"Thanks."

They went inside and she got him a mug and a plate of pastries. He took a seat at the little table and she sat down across from him and watched him eat, which didn't take long.

"Do you ever get tired of running this place?" he said.

"Sometimes. But I still like it, usually."

"Ever think of doing something else?" He looked at her over the rim as he sipped from the mug.

"Sometimes."

"I always thought you'd be happier just baking and leave the hotel business to people like Sheila."

"What do you mean, people like Sheila?"

Mark set his mug down and leaned back in his chair, hooking one arm over the back. He was like a big cat, so supple he seemed almost boneless. She could see him struggling to find an inoffensive way to say...

"Bossy. Loud. Not afraid of meeting new people."

"I'm not afraid. I meet new people every week."

"I know... That's not what I meant."

He pushed his coffee mug around with one rough finger, frowning. He looked as if he would spring up at any moment and run out the door.

"Do you think I need to be protected, Mark?"

He really looked at her then, an unusual thing. Normally he looked *around* her, never quite meeting her eyes; but now he did.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think you *need* to be protected. But I wouldn’t mind doing it, if you wanted me to.”

She met his intense gaze. After a moment her serious expression melted into a smile.

“I know,” she said. “Let me think about it.”

* * *

After he caught his breath, Jason spent the rest of the day in town, browsing in the shops. He had never seen so many art galleries crammed into so few blocks. He lost count around twenty, and that was only on the west side of the main street. In a small, narrow store with paintings and sheet metal sculptures on the walls, he bought a spiraled blue and yellow paperweight for his mother’s collection. He looked for something for his dad, but never saw anything that he thought he’d like; his father didn’t collect anything, and his only known hobby was working on Jason’s house.

He had a slice of pizza for lunch and finished the west half of town. Although he took his time, he still arrived fifteen minutes early for his rendezvous with Sheila.

Jason looked out to sea from a landing on the wooden stairway leading from the street down to the beach. The sun was just a bright spot in the solid clouds, still well above the horizon. The beach at low tide was very deep. At the base of the dunes the sand was hummocked and pocked with driftwood. Farther down it was smooth but nearly dry, and a long, glistening stretch of it was damp and nearly unmarred by footprints.

He heard Sheila before he saw her, clomping down the stairs behind him. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail and she was wearing shorts, a sweater, and hiking boots.

“It’s kind of cold for shorts, isn’t it?” he said.

“What are you, a lizard?” she said. “It’s not cold.”

It was probably around fifty degrees. Not exactly frigid, but definitely too cold for shorts.

“Follow me,” she said, and headed off down the beach.

They walked on hard-packed sand toward Haystack Rock. As they got closer, Jason could see that the tide had fallen below the base of the monolith. He’d thought of it as out in the middle of the ocean, but now they could walk to it. He remembered that the water receded before a tsunami hit, but this was clearly due to low tide, not a “tidal wave.”

Seagulls and other, smaller birds swarmed around the rock, landing on its higher reaches, falling off and taking flight, swirling, flocking, and calling. Hundreds of other birds ran around the base, leaving tiny W-shaped footprints in the wet sand.

As they approached the foot of the rock, it loomed over them like a cliff, the nearly vertical walls that had seemed smooth from a distance now showing details: fractured planes, raw, sharp spikes, tufts of vegetation, and every horizontal surface was caked with guano.

Signs warned them to be careful not to step on anything alive, and not to climb above the barnacle line, which was at least eight feet off the ground. Sheila marched right up to the rocks and started clambering over the boulders at the base.

“What are you doing?” Jason said.

“You have to see this from above.”

“You’re going to climb it? The sign says not to.”

She laughed and kept going. “Coming?” she said without looking down. He didn’t answer and he didn’t move.

“Sheila!” someone called. Jason turned and saw a middle-aged, overweight woman wearing a parka bearing down on them. Sheila either didn’t hear her or chose to ignore her. “Sheila Karczewski! What are you doing?”

Sheila stopped on top of a large boulder and looked down. Her head was now above the line of barnacles that marked the high-tide line.

“Hello, Melissa,” she said.

The woman pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and flipped up the lid. “Don’t make me call him,” she said.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming down.” It only took her a few moments to hop and climb down to the sand.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” the heavy woman said. “It’s bad enough the tourists ignore the signs, but you live here. How many times have we told you—”

“This makes twenty-one,” Sheila said.

“You’re setting a bad example.”

“It’s just a rock. Rocks were meant to be climbed.”

The woman snapped her cell phone shut and stalked away. Sheila grinned at Jason.

“I wasn’t going to hurt anything,” she said. “I knew I wouldn’t get above the line before one of them stopped me.”

“One of who?”

“HRAP.” She pronounced it Hurrap. “Volunteers. They try to keep the tourists—and a few locals—from messing with the ecology around the rock. Usually they just answer questions and remind people not to pick up the anemones. I like to give them something more interesting to do.” She leaned toward him and whispered, “They think I’m an anarchist.”

“Are you?” Sheila just laughed. “Who was she going to call?”

“Police chief. He’s always threatening to throw me in jail, but since I never actually do anything wrong, both of us know he’s bluffing.”

She jerked her head and led him around the back of the rock. Although over half of the circumference was accessible, the seaward side was still underwater. Other tall shards of rock, small only in comparison to Haystack, stuck up from the surf on each side.

“They call these little guys the Needles,” Sheila said. “I just love Oregon’s sense of humor, don’t you?”

Jason found the entire incident confusing. He didn’t know what to think about her; he wondered if she were manic-depressive, although so far all he’d seen was the manic side.

It was getting dark and a wind was coming up. Sheila took Jason’s arm.

“Let’s go back home,” she said. “Robin’s making you dinner.”

* * *

Jason tentatively pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen. He’d seen the light and heard her working inside, but he couldn’t be sure he would be welcome.

“Come in,” Robin said warmly. “I see you’ve come better prepared.”

He looked down. He was wearing pajama bottoms and the Wild Sands robe, as before, but he’d brought slippers this time. Bear raised his head, then leveraged his big body up, snuffled at Jason’s slippers, and immediately turned and went back to bed.

“What is that incredible smell?” Jason said.

“Apple strudel. It’ll be coming out in about... five minutes.”

“I love apple strudel.”

"Everyone does. I think it's as popular as apple pie." She set a plate of sweets down in front of him and poured him a glass of milk. "Sorry about dinner," she said.

"What do you mean? It was great."

"The food might have been all right, but the company..." The Earnest couple had blathered all through dinner about the seventeen pieces of art they'd bought so far this trip. "It's the nature of the business, you know. I don't get to pick my guests." She took off her red apron and sat down across from him. "Probably a good thing, too. I'd be too picky and then I'd starve."

"Maybe you wouldn't have picked me, and then I'd never have met you."

"Or Sheila, either."

He smiled and picked up a slice of lemon poppy seed cake. "How much longer are the Earnests staying?"

"The... Oh, you mean the Harrisons. They leave on Tuesday."

"That'll be a relief."

She watched him finish. A timer went off and she got up to take the strudels out of the oven. They were in the running for the most beautiful strudels the world had ever seen, crisscrossed with flaky dough that was sprinkled with coarse sugar; and they smelled like apple cinnamon heaven. Jason thought about asking for a preview, but he squelched the idea.

"Did you know," he said, "a hundred years ago, apples were used primarily to make cider? Especially hard cider. People ate pears the way we eat apples today."

"Interesting. I don't suppose pear pie was as popular as apple pie is now."

"I had a pear pie once. Custard in a shell with pears on top. Ugh."

"What? It sounds good."

"I don't really like custard. Or pears, either. They're too... grainy. It's not the American fruit."

She sat down again. "Are you saying it's unpatriotic to eat pears instead of apples?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "I've got one for you. Did you know that apples and pears are both in the rose family?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No, really. Also cherries, peaches, plums, and berries. They're all roses. Or rose cousins."

"That's berry, berry interesting."

"Just for that, no strudel in the morning."

"Sorry, sorry. It'll never happen again."

"Don't you think it's fascinating that many of our favorite fruits are closely related to each other?"

"Yeah," he said. "What if there hadn't been any roses? We'd be having kiwi strudel in the morning."

"Better than pear."

Jason shifted in his seat. "I had a friend once who was a pear grower. In central Oregon, near the Gorge. His wife made the pear custard pie. He's the one who told me about pears being popular in the past. I haven't seen him in years. I wonder if he's still doing it?"

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"The orchardists there are always on the verge of bankruptcy. He was living hand to mouth most years. Way in debt."

"Why?"

“Imports, mostly. And people don’t eat fruit the way they used to. My grandmother used to bring out a bowl of fruit for dessert. Just plain fruit, or if she was being fancy, fruit salad. No one does that anymore.”

“If your friend had grown chocolate brownies and french fries instead of fruit, he’d be doing fine.”

“Maybe. I’ve heard the potato farmers aren’t doing so well, either.”

“You know who’s doing really well these days? Professional athletes, movie stars, and rap singers.”

“Oh, ick. Rap isn’t singing. I have a theory that rap is the modern equivalent of Gregorian chant, except that the chanters are definitely not monks.”

“I don’t like Gregorian chant,” Robin said, raising one eyebrow.

“Me neither. What kind of music do you like?”

“I’ll listen to just about anything. But I just play classical.”

“That’s your piano out there?” She nodded. “I don’t know much about classical music, but I’d like to hear you play some time.”

She gave a little fluttery laugh that sounded more nervous than amused. “Sorry, I don’t play for people. It’s just to let off steam.”

“Oh, sorry.” He felt as if he’d touched a sore spot and cast around for something to say. “I used to play guitar, a long time ago.”

“Acoustic or electric?”

“Acoustic. I’d like to pick it up again some day, but there’s never any time.”

“Too busy working?”

He made a face. “Six or seven days a week for the last two years.”

“Sheila said you’re some kind of manager?”

“Project lead. I’m supposed to be in charge, I guess, but it’s kind of like being the driver of a runaway stage coach. Everyone’s expecting you to slow the thing down, but you’ve dropped the reins, so you’re just hanging on to your hat like everyone else.”

“Well, what’s the project? Internet?”

“No, it’s kind of a secret. Government contract.” She got a look on her face. “Not weapons,” he said quickly. “But it’s complicated. I’m not sure I could explain it, even if I were allowed to talk about it.”

“Try me.”

“Have you ever heard of a heuristic genetic learning algorithm?”

She thought for a second. “Sounds like a child.”

“Close enough. We want to make computers learn the same way children do.”

“That sounds fascinating.”

“It ought to be, but really it’s just a nightmare.”

Robin looked at him for a moment, then got up and put her apron back on. “I need to...”

“Sure. Do you want me to—”

“No, you can stay.” She started measuring and mixing into two different bowls. “Did you have a nice walk with Sheila today?”

“Two walks, actually, one at low tide, one at high. She wanted me to carry her over the creek.” Robin laughed. “Then she got shouted at for climbing the big rock. Other than that, not much happened.”

“That’s not what she said.”

“Really.” He turned his chair so he was facing her. “What did she say?”

Robin smiled. “I think she likes you.”

“I like her, too.”

“I think she really likes you.”

“She doesn’t know anything about me. I’m not sure if she even knows my last name. And I know for sure I can’t *spell* her last name.”

“Karczewski.” She pronounced it “Car-*shoe*-ski” and spelled it for him.

“And what’s your last name?”

“Eastburn. Do you want me to spell it?”

“No, thanks.”

She dumped one bowl of stuff into the other bowl and mixed them together. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Sheila’s talked herself into getting serious about you. She’s not known for taking things slowly.”

He watched her stir for a moment. “Well, I do take things slowly. I’ve fallen off too many cliffs from rushing in when angels were fleeing.”

“You might want to be careful, then.”

“You said that last time.”

She started spooning the mixture into muffin tins. “It goes double now.”

* * *

Once again Jason was left alone with the acquisitive and boring Harrisons. They were done talking about what they’d bought yesterday; this morning they talked about what they hoped to buy today. Jason nodded politely and ate his quiche and two pieces of apple strudel without trying to interrupt the flow. There was no more discussion of the polar bear, which was what he really wanted to hear about.

He retreated to his room as soon as he was done eating, because he didn’t want Sheila to snag him. When he heard the Harrisons leave, he went back down and into the kitchen. Sheila was stacking plates in the dishwasher, Robin was putting leftover pastries into round tins.

“Um,” he said, and they both turned to look at him. “Robin, I was wondering if, I mean if you’re not going to be busy, if you’d like to go for a walk on the beach or something this morning. The sun’s trying to come out, it might be...” He trailed off, because a mini-drama was playing out between the two women.

Sheila was scowling at Robin, who looked flustered—pleased but also apprehensive. She glanced at Sheila and went back to her work.

“Sorry,” she said, without looking at him. “I can’t. I have some scheduling that has to be finished this morning. Maybe Sheila would like to go.”

“Oh, okay,” Jason said just as Sheila said, “Absolutely.”

Jason watched Robin for a moment longer, then looked at Sheila. Her expression radiated possessiveness, triumph, and perhaps a glimmer of hurt.

“I’ll meet you outside,” he said.

After he left, Sheila turned on Robin. “What the hell was that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it looks like you’re making a move. I thought we agreed that he was mine.”

Robin put the lid on the tin she’d been filling and looked up at her. There was no such agreement—there was only Sheila bullying her. She wondered if Sheila remembered that, or if once again she’d built her own SheilaWorld, in which everything revolved around her.

"I had nothing to do with it," Robin said. "It was his idea."

"Really? Out of the blue, he asks you to go for a romantic walk on the beach?"

"What makes you think it was romance he had in mind? Anyway, you went for two walks with him yesterday. Maybe he thought it was my turn."

"It's not fair, Robin. You want all the guys."

Robin drew in a sharp breath at the injustice of that. If there was ever a woman who thought she was entitled to every man on the planet, it was Sheila.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You've already got Mark. Leave Jason for me."

"I don't have Mark. What are you talking about?"

"He's over here every single day. I'm not blind, you know. I don't think he's inspecting the roof. It's something lower he's got his eye on." Sheila let her eyes drift down from Robin's face. Robin turned away in disgust and opened another tin.

"Jason's mine," Sheila said.

Robin didn't look up until she heard Sheila leave the house. She looked at Bear, who was watching her from his bed.

"Next time you see her, bite her on the ankle."

She finished putting the breakfast food away. She couldn't wait for Jason to leave, so Sheila would go off on her daily whirlwind and leave Robin in peace with her piano.

* * *

They walked down the wooden steps from the end of Tanana Street to the beach. Jason turned left, away from Haystack Rock. The tide was out again and he didn't want a repeat of the climbing incident.

"What was that?" Sheila said when they reached the packed sand.

"Sorry?"

"Why did you ask Robin instead of me?"

"I just... She spends all her time working, I thought she might like to get out."

"Oh, like I never work."

"I didn't mean that, Sheila."

She stopped and turned to him. "If you want her instead of me, tell me now, and I'll bow out."

Jason was utterly flabbergasted. He just gaped at her for several seconds before anything at all came into his head. "Wait a minute," he said. "Slow down. I'm not choosing anyone yet. We've just—"

"Maybe this will help," Sheila said. She grabbed him and kissed him. For a moment Jason didn't know what to do, but his body decided for him. He put his arms around her and kissed her back.

Okay, he thought to himself. It's like fighting an earthquake; maybe a 7.0. I'm just going to roll with it.

"I'm a nice person," Sheila said. "I love animals, I don't smoke or take drugs, never drink too much, never been married. I was born in Sacramento. I have one brother. I went to UC Davis for one quarter. I love hiking, skiing, and all kinds of surfing. What else do you want to know?"

How do you surf an earthquake?

Chapter 5: Interlude #2

The next morning, Jeanne handed him his coffee and said, "Which one is it?"

He pretended not to know what she meant. But then he relented and said, "Well... I guess it's the Amazon."

She pursed her lips and said, "I have to get back to work."

Coming back from the men's room later in the morning, he overheard her on the phone.

"Oh, he didn't!" Jeanne said. "The bastard. Get out, now. No, come and stay with me for a while."

They went to lunch at Jeanne's favorite Mexican place. Jason didn't think the food was very good, and he hated the music, but he liked their virgin daiquiris.

"Is someone in trouble?" he said when they'd been seated in a small booth.

"What?"

"I heard you yelling on the phone."

"My sister and her asshole boyfriend. You don't want to know."

He nodded and they ordered. He'd heard the horror stories of her sister's dating life before, and she was right: he didn't want to know.

"Tell me how you picked the Amazon," she said.

"I didn't. She picked me. I think they drew straws or something. There was something..."

She waited. Jason dipped a chip in salsa and ate it, then another.

"What?" she said.

"I'm not sure. I'd spent a lot of time with Sheila, and I thought maybe I should try to balance it out a little, so I asked Robin if she wanted to go for a walk."

"Don't tell me Sheila was in the room when you did it."

"Sure."

"You dope."

"Thank you. When I asked her, Sheila gave her a look I didn't really understand, as if Robin had stolen something from her, but Robin hadn't done anything."

"Maybe from Sheila's point of view, she did."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Sheila sounds like the possessive type. Tell me something. Did you have another late night chat with Robin?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Yes."

"Was it nice?" He nodded. "Do you think Sheila knows you're having these *tête-à-têtes*?"

"I don't see how."

"Maybe she senses something. And maybe the talks with Robin balance out the Amazon activities with Sheila."

He chewed on that until the food arrived. Jeanne took a little bite of her enchiladas and looked at him thoughtfully.

"My advice," she said, "since you didn't ask, is to take friendship where you can get it, and leave it at that if that's the way it has to be. And personally, I think you picked the wrong girl." She took another bite. "Or she picked you, as the case may be."

* * *

Jason managed to get away from work before dusk that evening. The backlog of e-mail and interruptions wasn't as bad as the first time he'd gone to the coast. Maybe if he left more often they'd learn to do without him altogether.

The sun was shining weakly as he walked the four blocks from the train station to his house. When he turned onto his street, he felt a momentary disorientation: all the houses looked alike, each with its carefully-tended lawn, its neighborhood-approved earth-tone paint, its cedar shake roof. But a few steps later the small differences reasserted themselves: the Johnson's yard was cluttered with tricycles and abandoned toys, half of the Cheever's grass had been ripped out for curving perennial beds, the Kealings had three BMWs parked in the driveway, and a brace of colorful nylon flags—Snoopy, butterflies, and flowers—hung from the eaves of Mrs. Waterman's porch.

His own house lacked the individuality of the others, but that was its distinction. He could read the bachelorhood of the house as easily as anyone could tell that the Johnsons had children. No flowers in the professionally-weeded beds, no blade of grass out of place in the professionally-mowed and edged yard, and no cars in the driveway. Here lives a single, tidy, well-to-do man who spends too much time at work.

Someone was banging on something in his back yard. He walked around the house, past the heather beds and the St. John's wort. His father was prying up one of the boards from his deck.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Ah, Jason." George wiped his forehead and set his hammer down. "You've got some bad boards here. Why didn't they use pressure-treated lumber?"

"They did. The neighbor's dog chews on that spot."

George peered at the damage. "Stupid dog. That could kill it."

"One can hope. Dad, don't you have anything more fun to do than to putter with my deck? Why don't you work on your own house?"

"I did. It's done."

Jason tossed up his hands in defeat. "Want a beer?"

"Absolutely."

Jason fished his keys out of his coat pocket and unlocked the patio door. George followed him in and sat on a stool at the kitchen bar. He picked up a chef's knife from the counter and turned it over in his hands, flipped it into the air and caught it by the handle.

"You're going to cut your fingers off," Jason said.

"Good, then I'll have an excuse to stop working on your house."

"I never asked you to work on it. You can stop now, if you want to."

"These counters need to be regrouted," George said as he set the knife down. "I'll get to that next week." Jason handed him an opened bottle of Full Sail and took a swig of his own. "Where were you this weekend? Your mother called you about eight times. She was starting to get worried."

"I went back to that B&B on the coast." He sat down on the other stool and swiveled to face his father.

"You liked it that much? Or... could it be the women?"

Jason shrugged.

"Come on, boy," George said. "You're dating one of them, aren't you? Which one? Let me think... One was tall and pretty, the other was short and smart, was that it?"

Jason just smiled, shook his head, and took another pull on his bottle.

“Have you set a date yet?”

Jason sputtered. “What? You sound like Mom!”

George laughed. “Just trying to loosen your tongue. Come on, spill it. I’ve been trying for years to get you to start dating again.”

“Well, it’s complicated.”

George laughed again. “Of course it’s complicated. There are women involved. What are their names, again?”

“Robin and Sheila.”

“Robin and Sheila. Which one’s which?”

“Robin’s the short one.”

“So which one are you seeing?”

“I—” Jason stopped. How could he explain this? “I seem to spend the days with Sheila and the nights with Robin.”

George gaped like a fish. “You’re dating one and sleeping with the other? God damn, boy!”

“No, no, no, I’m not sleeping with either of them.”

“Why not?”

Jason glared at him and got up. He opened one of the cupboards and got a bag of Fritos, which he dumped into a bowl and set on the counter. He settled himself on the tall stool again before saying, “You know why not.”

“When are you going to learn to let go of the past, son? Patty was, what, four years ago? You’ve got to move on.”

Jason ate some Fritos and drank some beer.

“Okay, sorry,” George said. “Let’s get back to Robin and Sheila. What did you mean about the days and nights? Explain yourself—if you can.”

“Sheila is... exciting. Athletic, really hot, and she seems to like me. We took some walks on the beach. But she’s kind of a maniac. Robin...” He swiveled back and forth on his stool. “I’m not sure what to make of her. She couldn’t be more different from Sheila. She’s quiet, intense... she bakes all night. Her dog dances with you in the kitchen. When I can’t sleep she gives me chocolate cake.”

“Sounds like your mother.”

“Really? She’s nothing like her.”

“I mean the way she was when we were young. You’re attracted to both of them, aren’t you?”

Jason ate a chip and shook his head, not in negation but in confusion.

“You know what your problem is, son?”

“Mom thinks my problem is that I’m not married.”

“Well, that’s her opinion. But this is me talking. Your real problem is, you don’t know how to say no.”

“I say no all the time.”

“Sure, at work. I know you’re a hot shot, you’re a big boss, and you’ve fired plenty of dead wood. I’m talking about your life, now, not your stupid job.” Jason just looked at him. “Listen, get to know these girls better. Pick one of them, and say no to the other one. And if you happen to marry the one you like, I won’t object and your mother will be thrilled.”

He finished his beer and stood up. “I’m going back to work,” George said. “Want to help?”

“No.”

“Very funny. You got a crowbar?”

Jason followed his father outside.

* * *

The project schedule predicted a major milestone at the end of the month, and for a change it looked like they would make it on time. Jason had Jeanne book him into Wild Sands for the second weekend in May.

Chapter 6: Fugue #3

He arrived just after nightfall. Although it was cloudy, there was enough light left in the sky to see scaffolding around the right side of the house, like a gigantic, sinister spider web. Sheila stood alone on the porch, her hands on her hips and a playful smile on her face.

“Welcome back,” she said. Jason walked up the steps and dropped his bag so he could put his arms around her. When they stopped for air, she said, “You sure know how to say hello.”

He went upstairs for a few moments and came right back down. The table was set for one. Sheila came out of the kitchen carrying a small basket of bread.

“No other guests this weekend?” he said.

“Two couples. They’re eating in town.”

“Carnivores,” Robin said, coming out with a plate of salad. She set it down on the table.

“Hi,” Jason said.

“Hello yourself. Would you like some wine?”

“Yes, please. Red.”

Robin went back into the kitchen. Jason and Sheila sat at the table.

“Eat,” Sheila said.

“It feels a little strange eating in front of you like this.”

“We’ve eaten already. Go ahead.”

The salad was a mix of baby greens and julienned vegetables in a lemony dressing, with large, chewy croutons arranged around the edges. Robin came back with a snifter of wine for him, and a smaller glass for herself. She sat on Sheila’s other side.

“I’d like some wine too, please,” Sheila said.

“Sorry.” Robin jumped up and returned quickly with another small glass.

“How’s work?” Sheila said.

Jason swallowed. “Same as usual. Well, not really, we actually made a milestone almost on time—only ten days late. Today, in fact.”

“What’s a milestone?”

“Um... When we schedule a project, we break it up into big pieces so we can tell if the schedule is accurate. We call those milestones. If we miss one, we can adjust the schedule or cut features. This is the first time we were even close.”

“So, another good reason to celebrate.”

“Sorry? What’s the other reason?”

Sheila waved her hand as if erasing a blackboard. Robin was looking at her curiously.

“Never mind,” Sheila said.

“I’ll get your main course,” Robin said.

It was artichoke risotto, the spice of black pepper balanced with chunks of a soft, buttery cheese.

“Are you having some work done on the place?” Jason said after he’d tasted it. The rice was so flavorful he couldn’t believe it was vegetarian. “I saw the scaffolding when I came in.”

“Just painting,” Robin said. “The salt air’s tough on houses here. We’ve been having a run of mild weather, so Mark was able to fit us in.”

“Who’s Mark?”

"The guy who remodeled the house for us," Robin said.

"Yeah," Sheila added, "he's also Robin's boyfriend."

Jason choked on a mouthful of rice. Sheila reached over and slammed him on the back with the palm of one hand.

"Sorry," Jason said, and sipped some water. "I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

"I don't," Robin said. "Sheila's just being melodramatic."

"He comes to see you every single day," Sheila said, "and you feed him and give him coffee. You never go out together, but he's sweet on you and he wants to marry you. I'd call that a boyfriend."

Robin shook her head and looked away.

"We rented a movie," Sheila said to Jason. "Want to watch it with us after dinner?"

"Sure." He sipped some wine. He might need a second glass.

The movie was *Sense and Sensibility*, a Jane Austin romance that Jason had not bothered to see in the theater. He thought it was slow and boring in places, but he liked it more than he'd expected to. He and Sheila sat together on the love seat in the sitting room, while Robin sat in a wide armchair behind them and to their right. The TV had been hiding in a cabinet in the far corner.

Halfway through the movie, Sheila reached over and took Jason's hand. By the time it ended, she was leaning her head on his shoulder and his hand was asleep. When the credits started rolling over the happy ending, Sheila hit the remote to turn off the TV. Jason stood up and looked at Robin. Because of the way the seats were placed, he hadn't been able to see her the entire time the movie was playing. She was like a child in the large chair. She looked up at him and gave a tiny smile.

"I'm going to bed," she said.

The front door banged open and four loud, obviously drunk people barged in.

"Hello, Robin and Sheila," one of the women sang.

"I'm for bed," a gruff voice said.

"...real food," another man muttered.

The four clumped and staggered up the stairs. Two doors opened; one slammed, the other closed more quietly, and the three of them were left standing together in the center of the silent room.

"Goodnight," Jason said after a pause, and followed the drunks upstairs.

* * *

"It's insane to run a restaurant on the coast and not serve fish." The man wouldn't let it go. Jason poured himself more coffee and wished he would just shut up.

The four of them were sober now but no less loud. The fish lover was a red-faced man with a head that looked too big for his stocky body. The women were alike enough to be sisters, both thin and tan, with puffy hair and too much makeup, and they chattered incessantly, ignoring their husbands.

"Now last night, that slab of shark, that was real food. Not rice, for God's sake, rice is a side dish, not a main course."

"I had the risotto," Jason said in exasperation. "It was excellent."

They all shut up. The florid loud-mouth lowered his brows at him, as if he'd thought Jason was a mute and now realized it was just the sneaky pretense of a spy. "I didn't say it wasn't. It's just not real food."

“You mean it’s not meat.”

“Right. You eat meat, right?”

“I eat poultry and fish. No red meat.” That puzzled him long enough for Jason to continue. “Did you know that during Elizabethan times, the word ‘meat’ simply meant food? Poor people were lucky if they had a few shreds a day to add to their porridge. It was only after the price of livestock fell that meat became synonymous with animal flesh.”

The man’s face was getting redder. “What does that have to do with the price of tuna?”

The kitchen door opened and Sheila came out with her overloaded tray of goodies.

“Megacalories, anyone?”

The harangue was put on hold as everyone helped themselves. Both women took such tiny slivers of each offering that Jason doubted they’d be able to taste what they were eating. When Robin and Sheila carried in the plates of eggs Benedict, the fish guy looked sourly at his plate and muttered, “No bacon.”

Sheila stopped and leaned over Jason’s shoulder on her way out of the room. “Meet me in the kitchen when you’re done.”

The second man, who had been silent for a while, buttered a piece of pound cake and laughed. “Have to wash the dishes for your breakfast?”

“Nope,” Jason said, “just kiss the staff.”

The man sputtered and the women looked at him speculatively, smiling without showing their teeth.

“Wish I had a ham steak,” the loud carnivore said.

* * *

The kitchen looked very different with the thin spring daylight streaming in the windows—less cozy, more functional. Sheila was washing the dishes while Robin cleaned up her work table. Jason felt vaguely guilty standing there, as if he were revisiting the site of a crime. Robin smiled at him, a reminder of their shared secret, then bent her head back to her work.

“I’m going to be a few more minutes here,” Sheila said. “I was thinking we could do the shops in town if you want.”

“Sure,” Jason said. “Um... I’ll wait for you outside, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jason took a step toward the kitchen door, but Bear was lying on his bed in front of it and didn’t seem inclined to move. So he took a chance and ran the gauntlet of the hallway, past the dining room where the other four lodgers were still sitting at the table, arguing about something, and out the front door. He nearly collided with a very tall man who was crossing the porch.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“No problem,” the man said. He was solidly built but not heavy, with a craggy face and big hands. “You staying with the girls?”

“Yes. You’re—are you Mark?”

“Mark Hammer.” He held out his hand and Jason shook it. It was like grappling with a grizzly bear.

“Jason Day.”

“Oh, so you’re Jason. I’ve heard about you.”

“Really? From who?”

“Robin.”

"Oh." He would have paid a month's salary to have eavesdropped on that conversation. "They told me you're repainting the place."

"Yeah. The salt and sand will strip it down to the bare wood if you don't keep after it."

"Robin said you did the remodel, too."

"Well, it wasn't much. Couple of months' work." Mark looked up at the grooved porch ceiling appraisingly. "I hear you're going with Sheila now."

"Yeah." He felt like he should say something else, but nothing came to mind.

"Must be rough, only coming down here once a month. Portland, is it?"

"Yes."

"Keep you busy there?"

"I had to fight to get one weekend off a month."

Mark tsked. "Not for me, big cities. You have to wear a tie to work?"

"No, I don't think I own a tie. I dress like this." Jeans and a casual dress shirt.

"Well, there's that anyway." Mark bent over to examine the porch railing. He ran a hand across the spotless white paint.

"So are you from here?" Jason said.

"Born and raised right here in Cannon Beach. Never wanted to live anywhere else. You?"

"Denver."

"Ah. Rocky Mountains. I prefer the sea, myself." They both nodded and looked around for something else to talk about. Nothing presented itself. "Guess I'd better get back to work," Mark said.

"Nice to meet you."

"See you around." He walked toward the scaffolding, just visible to the right side of the porch, and vanished around the corner.

He seemed like a nice enough guy, but still Jason felt something like irritation. So this was the guy who came every day, and probably sat in the same chair Jason used at night, and ate the same little plate of baked goods. This was his Doppelgänger: Mark was Robin's day ghost, Jason was the night ghost.

Sheila came out the front door. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Are you ready?"

"Ready. Let's go."

* * *

Nothing had changed in the shops since he'd wandered them alone a month ago, but he saw everything differently because of Sheila. She picked up things he would not have noticed, crude wooden animal sculptures and bars of soap with flecks of colored gel in them; she stopped in front of paintings that had not caught his eye; she peered intently at the jewelry he had barely glanced at, and so the stores seemed completely different.

They discussed *Sense and Sensibility* as they browsed. Sheila didn't seem to think highly of any of the characters.

"All right," she said, "take that guy, what's his name, that Hugh Grant played."

"Edward."

"Right. Now, they're standing in the barn, and he wants to tell Eleanor that he loves her but that he's secretly engaged to some bimbo he met in high school or something, so there's nothing he can do about it."

"Okay, I remember that."

“His sister comes in and tells him he has to go to London right now, this minute.” She picked up something shapeless made of shells glued to a piece of coral and snorted. “And he does it, he just walks out without telling Eleanor his big secret.”

“Right.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Well...”

“Come on. He couldn’t say, ‘Okay, sis, thanks, I’ll be there in a minute?’ No, he just walks out and leaves Eleanor pining for him.”

“I don’t think the moral codes of the time would let him brush off his sister like that. Chivalry—”

“Don’t you bring up chivalry again. This isn’t Lancelot we’re talking about, it’s landed gentry in Empire England.” Jason stopped and looked at her. She laughed at his expression. “You think because I’d rather hike than read that I’m stupid?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Okay, then. Is he an idiot or not?”

“I give up. He’s an idiot.”

“Thank you.”

It was hard to believe that they were only two blocks from the beach, but the design of the street seemed intended, consciously or not, to force one’s attention away from the ocean and back to the serious business of laying down one’s credit card. Jason wondered what it would be like to live in a place like this all the time. Would the ocean disappear into the background, or would the beauty of it always be there, a constant distraction from the pettiness of everyday life and the need to make a living?

He’d bet that you got used to it. But he suddenly felt that he’d be willing to test the theory.

Sheila led him into a women’s clothing shop that he’d skipped before. Jason looked around idly while she flicked through a rack of filmy dresses. The regular clack of the hangers stopped.

“Do you like this?” She held up a silky, filmy, lace-covered confection that would have made a good wedding dress for a tart.

“Not really. I don’t look good in that color.” It was one of those colors that he was sure women had a name for, dusty peach or summer coral or something else unhelpful: it was a soft pinky orange.

“It’s for me, silly, but if you’re good I’ll let you wear it on holidays. Want me to try it on for you?”

He suddenly felt nervous. “Maybe I’ll wait outside.”

“Come on, Jason, it’s my birthday. Humor me.”

“It’s your birthday? Today?” She nodded, tilted her head, and shook the dress, which fluttered like a butterfly’s wings. “Okay.”

She took the dress into the changing room nearby. He didn’t know where to wait; standing too close might seem prurient, walking away might seem rude. He ended up hovering about ten feet away from the door.

“Is Robin throwing you a party?” he said.

“No.”

“What kind of cake is she making you?”

"I don't like people to make a fuss over my birthday." She opened the door a crack and stuck her head out. "But I'll make an exception if *you* want to make a fuss." She closed the door. "I don't need a cake. And I already gave myself a present."

"What was that?"

"I gave myself a week off from volunteering yesterday."

"Volunteering? Where?"

"I work one day a week at the animal shelter in Warrenton."

"Warrenton? Never heard of it."

"You pass it coming and going from Portland. It's across from Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia."

He was pleasantly surprised—maybe even shocked. He wouldn't have predicted that she would do something like that.

She came out looking like a sherbet fairy. The dress hung in uneven folds and shimmered in the light. It was beautiful. She was too. It must have showed in his face, because she smiled at him and went to the wall mirror. As she twirled, the skirt rose up and settled again, twisting and showing off her legs.

"Let me buy you that dress for your birthday," Jason said.

She turned and smiled at him, a blinding, beaming flash of a grin. Jason reached for his wallet and wondered what he had just done.

* * *

He had hoped for another quiet dinner with Robin and Sheila, but the two women from the loud group were waiting at the dinner table when he came down. He greeted them with what he hoped was good grace and took the empty seat between them; he would rather have sat at the other end of the table, or in another room, but he didn't want to be rude.

"I'm Eleanor," one of the women said, and held out her hand as if he should kiss it. He shook it instead.

"I'm Gretchen," the other one said.

He would never be able to remember which was which. The names were easy—Eleanor like the character in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Gretchen was unusual enough to be memorable—but the women were interchangeable. Both wore cotton blouses and slacks, and similar, short but poufy hair. They looked enough alike to be close sisters. Then he realized that they were sitting in alphabetical order, Eleanor to his left and Gretchen to his right.

Sheila came in with a basket of bread and frowned at them. She huffed back out without saying a word. It was probably the seating arrangement that had her so testy, or perhaps it was just the fact that the women were there at all.

Jason watched Sheila leave. When he turned his attention back to the table, both women were leaning on an arm, watching him.

"She's very pretty," Eleanor said.

"In an Amazonian sort of way," Gretchen added.

"You're sweet on her, aren't you?"

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"Why, indeed?"

"We saw you in town today."

"Very romantic, buying her that dress."

"There was something..."

“Missing though, something...”
“Beyond romantic, something...”
“More intimate. I wonder...”
“If two of something...”
“Very, very nice, very...”
“Spicy, might not be more...”
“Interesting than something sweet.”

It took him a second to catch up. He wasn't sure he'd heard what he thought he'd just heard. The pair were gleaming at him with seductive smiles that had just a hint of predatory tooth in them. Why couldn't things like this have happened to me in college, he thought, when I'd have been too young and stupid to worry about the consequences?

“Excuse me a moment,” he said. He got up and walked into the kitchen. Robin looked up in surprise from the stove. Sheila was just finishing the salads. “I'd rather eat in here, if you don't mind.”

“Why?” Sheila said.

“The, uh...” He shrugged. How could he put into words what he was probably just imagining, anyway? Why would two women like that proposition *him*?

“Oh, the piranha princesses are at it again,” Sheila said. “Wait here. I'll be right back.”

She left with two salads. Jason sat down at the little table. Robin's back was facing him; it looked as if she were laughing, or maybe crying. Bear sauntered over and rested his head on Jason's knee. He gave the dog a pat on the head. Sheila came back with his place setting and set it up in front of him, then gave him his salad and sat down across from him.

“Bon appétit,” Robin said without turning around, and now he knew she was laughing.

* * *

He tapped on the kitchen door and pushed in. Robin was kneading dough in a circular motion, with flour halfway up to her elbows.

“Come on in,” she said. “Give me a minute.”

He sat down again at the table where he'd had dinner a few hours ago and watched. There was a grace to the rhythmic movements of her arms, the spinning of the dough under her palms, that seemed oddly familiar—then he placed it. It was like a hula dance.

In one swift motion, Robin swept up the dough and laid it gently in a large bowl. She covered the bowl with plastic wrap and washed her hands and arms. After she gave him a plate and a glass, she sat down across from him.

“That dinner thing was embarrassing,” he said.

“Doesn't that happen to you all the time?”

“Never.”

“Well, don't get a big head. They come here twice a year, and as far as I can tell, the girls have propositioned *someone* every time.”

Jason stopped with a piece of banana bread halfway to his mouth. “There are so many things wrong with that, I don't know where to start.”

“Take them one at a time.”

“They've been here before? Why did they come back? That one guy did nothing but complain about the food.”

“He just likes to complain. They love the location, I think he actually likes the breakfast, and there are plenty of places he can go for dinner. What else?”

Jason finished the banana bread. "They hit on someone... together... every time?"

"They've never taken anyone upstairs, so I guess most guys have the same reaction you did."

"That's hard to believe."

"Why? I think they only come on to guys they know will turn them down."

"Why?" Robin shrugged. Jason ate a tiny blackberry turnover in two bites. "Don't their husbands get suspicious that they want to eat dinner alone?"

She laughed. "You haven't been around a lot of married couples, have you?"

"Not really."

"It was the *men* who wanted to eat without their wives, not the other way around. I think the proposition was just a kind of harmless revenge. And maybe... maybe they wanted to take a swipe at Sheila just to see what she'd do."

"Thanks. You've just helped my ego a *lot*."

Robin laughed again. "I saw the dress you bought Sheila for her birthday. That was a sweet thing to do."

"I'm not sure it was such a great idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't want her to read too much into it. It was just a birthday gift."

"It's a shame you had to pick this year to buy her a flouncy dress."

"I didn't know her last year." Robin gave him a look that was not quite a smile. "So what's so special about this year?"

"She turned thirty yesterday."

"Uh oh."

She frowned at him. "Don't tell me you think that's—"

"No, I was thirty last year. I don't care about that. It's just that it means too much to some people."

"Like Sheila. She wouldn't let me throw her usual birthday party. Last year I think everyone in town came. But this year... she said no. I think she's afraid everyone will think she's old. Or worse."

"Worse?"

"Old maid."

Jason folded his arms on the table and dropped his head onto them. "Oh, boy."

They were quiet for a moment, until Robin said, "Sometimes I think Sheila would be happier as an animal. She'd make a great dolphin, I think."

He sat up again. "You don't think everyone would mistake her for a shark?"

Robin laughed. "Be nice. Well, okay, maybe they would at first. But then she'd stand up on her tail and laugh at them, and they'd know the truth."

Jason rotated his milk glass. "I met Mark yesterday." Robin looked wary. "He seems like a good guy."

"He's just a friend."

"Not by his choice, I'd say."

"Maybe so, but he's not the only one with a choice."

Robin looked embarrassed that she'd said that. Jason was too tired to try to figure out exactly what she meant. He filed it in his head to think about on the way home. She got up, put her apron back on, and started puttering at the baking table.

"I've got a good one for you," he said after a moment. "When I was paying for the dress, I heard a woman in the shop tell her friend that she was literally coming apart at the seams."

Robin stopped. "Was she talking about her clothes?"

"No, she was talking about going nuts because her mother-in-law was coming to visit and bringing her three teenagers with her."

"So she meant she was metaphorically coming apart at the seams?"

"Exactly. Sometime in the last few years, the word 'literally' has come to mean its exact opposite."

"I suppose that's literally true." Robin went back to measuring ingredients into a bowl.

"Well, yes, in a metaphorical sense."

"I suppose it's television's fault. I'd blame Jerry Springer or Oprah."

"Tell me one bad thing that television is *not* to blame for."

"Traffic jams."

"Sorry," Jason said, "I have to disagree. TV encourages people to want things they don't need. Therefore the people who work need better jobs, which are inevitably not in their neighborhood, so they have to drive a long way to get to them. On their lunch break they go out hunting for those things they don't need, making more traffic. Meanwhile their spouses have to work too, because they can't afford any of that stuff even with their better jobs, meaning twice as many cars on the road."

"So TV is responsible for air pollution, the decay of the inner cities, the paving of the wilderness, job outsourcing, and, in fact, global poverty."

"Well, to be fair I'd have to say that TV is just the intermediary. Runaway capitalism is the ultimate cause."

"Jason Day, you're a communist!"

"No, I'm not," he said. "Communism is a beautiful idea that's never been tried. Therefore *no one* is a communist, and never has been."

"Except for Karl Marx."

"And his partner in crime, Friedrich Engels."

She chuckled and started mixing the batter. Jason watched her, smiling to himself, and suddenly felt something like a sharp pain in his chest. He gripped the table and tried not to show it.

There was nothing wrong with his heart, except for the abrupt realization that he and Sheila would never, ever have a conversation like this in their entire lives.

* * *

All the loud people ignored him at breakfast; the men because he was almost an herbivore, the women because he'd snubbed them last night. Jason finished as quickly as he could and wandered outside. As he came around the corner of the porch, he saw Robin walking into the side door of their garage. He went down the front steps and followed her in.

It might have been a garage once, but though it still had the drive-through door, no car would have fit inside. The space was filled with neatly organized shelving units full of cans of food, paper products, cleaning supplies, wicker baskets, and linens.

"Wow," he said. "It looks like Costco in here."

Robin appeared from behind one of the shelves. "That's where a lot of it came from."

"Economies of scale?"

"If we can get it cheaper, we buy it in bulk. We don't go into the city very often. When we do, we load up."

He walked between the rows of shelves and saw that the far back corner was set up as a studio. Beside a large window that looked out toward the sea stood a drawing table and easel, waiting but empty.

"Is this your studio?" Jason said. "I didn't know you were an artist."

She ducked her head as if she might try to deny it. "I don't have much time for it lately. But I have a degree in painting from NYU."

"I'd like to see your work sometime."

"I don't have a portfolio anymore."

"Well, just anything you might want—"

"Ah ha," Sheila said. "Skulking in the storage shed, I see." She walked up to them and glanced dismissively at the art supplies before linking arms with Jason.

"No," Robin said. "Lurking maybe, but not skulking."

"Oh, well then, that's all right. Come on, Jason, let's go for a *stroll*."

She led him down the wooden stairway to the beach. The sky was clearing; it looked as though it might be a nice, sunny day.

"Since when do you stroll?" Jason said as they strolled toward the water.

"Since I met you. I can still learn new things."

"Of course you can."

They stood just above the foaming high point of the surf. A pack of screaming children ran behind them, pursued by several harried-looking adults who didn't bother with more than a brisk walk. Gulls cried as they dipped and swooped above the waves. Haystack Rock loomed to their right, surrounded by hundreds of swirling birds. It was cool, but not cold enough to need a jacket. Jason shifted on the damp sand. Sheila still clutched his arm.

"When are you leaving?" she said.

"Before noon. There's some work I have to get to this evening."

"Do you think you'll ever get to spend more than a day and a half here?"

"Maybe when our project is finished."

"When's that?"

He laughed. "One year or three, depending on who you ask."

She let go of his arm and faced him. "I want you to stay longer. And more often."

"I'm sorry. I can't do that."

"Sure you can. Quit your job."

He studied her face. She was serious. He was about to explain why he couldn't do that, but she kissed him before he could say anything.

It was a fabulous kiss. It went on for a long time. When it was done, she said, "Think about that."

But he knew that he didn't need to think. Her kiss, and the promises behind it, just weren't enough to make him even consider giving up his career.

Chapter 7: Interlude #3

On the Friday after he returned, Jason sat in his office looking out the window. The vacant two-story brownstone across the street, once a factory or warehouse of some kind, was streaked with rain. Portland was nearing the end of its long, gray winter, and Jason was glad. He was sick of cloudy skies and rain.

"Wake up," Jeanne said from behind him. Jason swiveled his chair to face her but didn't respond. "Look, you have to at least pretend to be busy. What if someone else had come in and seen you daydreaming? You'd get fired, and I'd have to quit this lousy job, and I haven't had time to loot the treasury yet." That earned her a weak smile. "Better. What's going on in that thick head of yours?"

"If I'm going to pretend to be busy," he said, "maybe you could pretend to be deferential."

"Hey, if you want kinky stuff, it's going to cost you more stock options."

"I think I'm in trouble with Sheila."

"Oh, my god, she's pregnant." She sank down into the other chair.

"Not physically possible. But I think she's got wedding bells in her eyes."

"Yikes. Nice metaphor mixing."

"Meanwhile..."

She waited. Then she got tired of waiting. "What? No, don't tell me. You're falling for the other one." He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. "That could get complicated."

"I know."

"You can't be that deep into it yet," she said. "Just tell her you like Robin."

"And then what? Switch from one to the other? It'd be like a slap in Sheila's face every time I showed up."

"She's a grownup. She can handle it."

"I'm not so sure. And even if she could, I don't think I'd be comfortable dating Robin with Sheila hovering around, watching us." He swiveled his chair from side to side. "Then there's Mark."

"Mark? Who's Mark?"

"Sheila says he's Robin's boyfriend, but Robin denies it."

"What's he like?"

"Tall, quiet, rugged-looking. Good with his hands."

"Ooh."

"I like Robin—I like her a lot, but I don't know if she's interested. And if she's really seeing Mark, what's the point of dumping Sheila?"

"Why don't you find out if Robin likes you first?"

"How?"

"What do you mean, how? Ask her, you big dope."

Jason leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. "Maybe I should just stop going."

"Coward."

"Maybe. But this is getting too weird for me."

Someone knocked on the door. It was Patrice, one of his team leads.

"I've got the papers on Ted," she said.

"I'll call security," Jeanne said. "And about that other matter, I'd discuss it over lunch, but you have the weekly team lunch today." Jason groaned. "Let me think about it over the weekend." She walked out.

Patrice sat down and handed him a manila folder.

"You cut your hair," he said. It had been shoulder length and now it was very short, layered with ragged bangs. It looked good.

"Last month," she said mildly.

"Of course." He looked over the papers she'd handed him. "Are you sure we followed procedure? I don't want to get sued."

"We gave him a dozen chances. He's worse now than when we started. Everything's documented."

The folder included copies of dozens of e-mails between Patrice and Ted.

"Okay, he's off your shoulders. Have a margarita at lunch today."

"Maybe two," she said. She went out and Jeanne stuck her head back in.

"Get him for me, please," Jason said.

Ted knocked on his door a few minutes later. He was in his late twenties, with wild blond hair and a thick mustache, wearing clean but nearly worn-out jeans and a "Frodo Lives... With Elvis" T-shirt.

"Jeanne said you wanted to see me," he said.

"Come in. Close the door, please."

Ted shut the door carefully and sat down. He looked Jason in the eye, not defiantly, but innocently.

"Ted," Jason said, "you remember the Performance Improvement Plan we set up six months ago?"

"Sure. I look at it every morning when I prioritize my day. I've improved a lot."

"Well, no, you haven't."

Ted leaned back in his chair as if to put some distance between himself and a snake that was crawling around on the desk. "What do you mean?"

"You had specific goals to meet within six months. You haven't met a single one of them."

"I'm here twelve hours a day, Jason. I'm working my tail off."

"I know you've been working hard, Ted, but you're just spinning your wheels. Half of the active bugs are yours, and your regressions are the highest we've ever recorded. Every single task is behind schedule, and you single-handedly delayed our last milestone by a week."

Ted's mouth was open but he didn't say anything.

"You haven't fulfilled even the tiniest part of your PIP. We're letting you go."

"What?"

"Hand me your badge, please."

In a daze, Ted unclipped his security badge and handed it to Jason. "So, I'm fired."

"Yes. I'm sorry, but we gave you six months and you didn't use it well. You need to go back to your office now and clean out your desk. Security is there already. They'll help you decide what's yours and what's ours, then they'll escort you out of the building. Your e-mail account is already closed."

"That's it?"

"I'm sorry."

Jason stood up and Ted followed suit. Jason waited until Ted got the hint and walked out of the office. Jeanne looked in the open door.

"You okay, boss?" she said.

"Yeah, just great. Call security again and let them know he's on his way."

"Will do. That wasn't so bad, huh? No shouting, at least."

"I've seen a lot worse. He was in shock, I think."

"He'll be better off now. He'll have a chance to find something he's actually good at. And we'll be a *lot* better off."

"Uh huh." He sat down again.

"You can go back to dreaming about your harem, now."

"Get lost, okay?"

* * *

That evening, after everyone else had gone home, Jason sat in his office with the lights off. It wasn't really dark: light dribbled in from the street and streamed in from the hallway. He picked up a silver photo frame from his desk that held the ad for Wild Sands, surrounded by a marine blue matte. He stared at the picture of Robin and Sheila standing on their porch until his eyes went dry, but it stubbornly refused to animate again. He had an idea in the back of his mind that if they moved, they'd give him a sign, just a hint perhaps, that would tell him what to do. But nothing happened.

The phone rang.

"Jason?" his mother said. "Why are you still at work?"

"I'm just finishing up."

"Well, we're waiting for you."

"Get a table and I'll be there in ten minutes."

"You work too hard. Don't you—"

"We can discuss it when I get there, Mom. Bye."

He looked at the ad for another moment. It remained static. He set it down, grabbed his pack and his coat, and left.

The Chinese restaurant where he had arranged to meet his parents was an easy walk from his office. He breezed past the smiling hostess and a huge aquarium that contained many plants and a single, large fish; he wondered if the fish was on the menu. The main dining room was crowded with potted palm and fig trees that blocked his view of the tables. He found them at a table in the back of the room.

George was wearing a sport coat and a tie. Beth looked much more formal in a long cocktail dress. Jason kissed his mother's cheek, clapped his father on the shoulder, and sat down next to George.

"I thought you said ten minutes," Beth said.

Jason looked at his watch. "Sorry, I meant twelve."

He took a sip of water from his glass. A young Chinese woman came over from the bar and stood with a notepad ready, but she didn't speak.

"Tsingtao," Jason said.

"Same for me," George said.

Beth just shook her head and the girl walked away. "I wish you wouldn't work so hard," she said.

George cut off his reply. "How did it go today?"

"Not bad. I fired a slacker, had a long, painful project lunch, and Jeanne called me a coward."

"You should fire *her*," Beth said.

"I couldn't do the job without her."

"So much the better. Find another job that will let you have a life."

Their beers came. Jason took one sip of the cold, thin, bitter brew and immediately felt better.

"You look nice," he said to Beth. "It's kind of dressed up for Friday night dinner, though."

She smiled and preened. "I'm ushering at the Schnitz after dinner."

"Lecture or music?"

"Lecture. You know I don't like concerts."

"Who is it?"

"No one you'd know. Why did Jeanne call you a coward?"

A very tall, very thin Chinese man stood at Jason's elbow. Jason hadn't had a chance to look at the menu yet.

"Can you give us a few minutes?" Beth said. The man bowed slightly and walked away stiffly. Jason opened his menu and scanned it quickly. "Well?"

"She thinks I should ditch Sheila and start dating Robin."

"What a ridiculous idea."

"Why is that a ridiculous idea?" George said. "Maybe he likes Robin better."

"Well, then the three months he's spent on Sheila would be wasted."

"Mom," Jason said in exasperation, "my biological clock is *not* ticking. There's no deadline here." He looked at her face and saw what she really meant. "Oh, there is a deadline, isn't there? You want to see me have kids before you go." He knew by the way she stiffened that he was right. "Mom, you're only fifty-nine."

"People my age drop dead every day."

"Not people your age who are as stubborn as you are."

The waiter returned. George looked up at him and shook his head and the man left again.

"Do you remember when I was in high school," Jason said, "I went through a rebel phase where I refused to do any chores? You said you were entitled to the same treatment, and you never cooked for me again. Or did my laundry or cleaned my room."

"You learned some excellent life skills. What's your point?"

"You've been so busy ever since then that I have to schedule my impromptu dinners with you."

"That's where you get your workaholic genes," George said. "Definitely not from me."

"That's beside the point," Beth said. "Of course I want to have grandchildren. They're the prize for the struggle a mother goes through to raise her children. But mostly what I want is for you to be happy."

"Maybe I'm happy with things the way they are."

"Do you remember what I used to do when you lied to me?"

"They don't have bars of soap in public bathrooms any more. Just those pump dispensers, and they're usually empty."

"When can we meet your girls?"

The waiter returned again.

"We'd better order," George said.

"I'll have the singing bird basket," Beth said.

"Hot and sour soup," George said, "and General Tso's Chicken."

“Spring rolls and black bean scallops,” Jason said. After the waiter left, he said, “Why do you want to meet them?”

“Are you ashamed of us?”

He locked eyes with her. They had a spiritual wrestling match. She pinned him.

“No. But why do you want to meet them? You don’t usually take this much interest in the women I see.”

“How do you know?” she said. “It’s been so long you might be remembering it wrong.”

“That was a cheap shot. It’s because there are two of them, isn’t it? You think the odds are better with two targets. Or do you want to choose one of them for me?”

“Don’t be silly.” She looked embarrassed. That was probably it.

“Mom, if you want grandkids so badly, maybe you should adopt some.”

“Maybe I should just adopt a new son who’ll get married and give me some of his own.”

“Maybe you should have adopted instead of having me.”

“Who says I didn’t?”

“I do,” George said.

The waiter brought his soup and Jason’s spring rolls. Jason offered one to his mother, but she declined.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said as a peace offering. “If things get serious with either one, I’ll take you down there with me some time. Okay?”

“Okay,” Beth said. Then she reached over and stole one of his rolls.

Chapter 8: Fugue #4

Sheila was waiting for him on the porch, sitting in a wooden Adirondack chair with her feet up on the railing, wearing a denim jacket. When Jason reached the top step, she unfolded and stood up with a lithe grace that was so unbelievable he wanted to ask for an instant replay. Without a word, she grabbed his bag, tossed it through the front door, and took his arm.

“Let’s go out,” she said.

Other than Sheila giving directions, they didn’t exchange more than a dozen words during the twenty-minute drive. She directed him out of Cannon Beach, back the way he’d come, past Route 26 to a town called Seaside. On a brightly-lit highway past the historic town center, she pointed out a small restaurant and he pulled into the crowded parking lot.

The place seemed full but there was a table ready for them, place settings already down and a lit candle in a jar. The cloth napkins and the surprisingly good murals of the Italian countryside painted on the walls gave Jason some hope that the food would be good. Sheila shucked her jean jacket to reveal a sleeveless white blouse. Her biceps looked bigger than his. They ordered glasses of Shiraz and Jason studied her face. She gazed back placidly.

“You’re quiet this evening,” he said.

“It was your turn to say something.”

“How about: it’s nice to see you again?”

“Good start.”

The food was, unfortunately, unexceptional Italian, and they both seemed to be struggling to find something to talk about until Sheila finished her second glass of wine, when she went off on a riff about Captain Kirk versus Mr. Spock—who was stronger, who would win in a sword fight, who was a better 3D chess player, who loved the *Enterprise* more, who was a better friend to the other. She seemed to know every episode of the original series, and every scene of the original-cast movies, by heart, and she used the boundless trivia to buttress her argument that Mr. Spock would cream Kirk in any fair fight, namely one where he wasn’t handicapped by racist human writers who had to ensure that the home team won. Jason didn’t have to speak during this monologue, just grunt occasionally.

They both turned down dessert and Jason paid the bill. When they returned to the car, she told him to continue on down the highway, directing him to a movie theater.

They were just in time for the previews. The theater was almost empty; Sheila led him by the hand to the back row, so the nearest other couple was ten rows away. The movie was *Addicted to Love*, but Jason didn’t see much of it—the moment the titles started rolling, she was all over him. He saw Meg Ryan doing something weird with rotten strawberries, and a strange-looking guy doing something even weirder with whipped cream, and Matthew Broderick making a chart of different kinds of smiles, but that was all. The rest was necking with Sheila.

She was very good at it—she’s done this before, he thought, but then so have I. It was exciting, and fun for a while, but then something in him began to withdraw, and he found himself thinking about necking instead of simply doing it. He would have slowed down, but every time he pulled back she pressed forward. When the credits began, she kissed him once more for good measure, buttoned up her blouse, and pulled on her jacket.

“Ready to go?” she said.

He straightened his clothes and they went out. No one spoke on the drive home.

Robin was reading in the sitting room when they walked in the front door. She put her book down and smiled at Jason, but she must have seen something in his face or Sheila's, or perhaps in the way they were standing, because the smile faded until it was merely polite.

"Did you have a nice evening?" she said.

"Very nice," Sheila said.

Jason thought it would take a gallon of wine to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth, but he managed to croak out, "Well, good night," and went upstairs. He could hear them walking into the kitchen together as he closed his door. He got ready for bed quickly, then lay there staring at the ceiling for a long while, expecting and dreading a knock at the door, but it never came.

* * *

There were four couples sitting in the dining room when Jason came down the next morning, talking energetically like maddened crows, as if speed had been slipped into the coffee. Some of them seemed to know each other and the rest were becoming acquainted excitedly, and the conversation flowed so wildly that he was dizzy before he even sat down.

"Ate you going to see the sand castles?" the young woman sitting to his left asked him.

"What?"

"Yes, he is," Sheila said. Jason hadn't seen her come in. She started unloading a dozen plates of sweets onto the table.

"I am?"

"You are. He is," she said to his questioner. She walked back out.

"I guess I am," he said, "but I don't know what you're talking about."

All eight of them tried to tell him at once, then they settled down and explained more or less sequentially that every June Cannon Beach held one of the greatest sand castle contests in the country. Grand master sand carvers always participated, and they were probably at work at that very moment.

"It's perfect weather for it," the young woman said. "Cloudy and cool but not raining."

"Sun ruins the whole thing," her husband said. "Dries it out."

Jason drank coffee, ate a cinnamon roll, and listened to them chatter. By the time Robin and Sheila carried in the eggs and sausages, it was all starting to make some sense, but he was still having trouble visualizing teams of adults seriously constructing sand castles on the beach. He was just finishing when Sheila showed up at his elbow again.

"Done?" she said. He nodded. "Hurry up and get ready. We don't want to miss it. Dress warm."

The beach was swarming with people of all ages and kinds. From above it looked like a seething mass of confetti: nylon windbreakers and raincoats of every color. At regular intervals as far as he could see down the beach toward Haystack, groups of people toiled at roped-off plots of sand, surrounded by the restless crowd.

Jason and Sheila walked down the wooden steps and entered the throng. He would rather have done it systematically, starting at one end, but Sheila dragged him to the nearest sand pile, which was about a third of the way from the end.

"They're starting late this year," she said. "High tide was just an hour ago."

"How long does it last?"

"They have two or three hours until the judges come by."

They worked through the crowd until they could see what was going on. Two barefoot men, dressed in shorts and tank tops despite the chill air, were piling bucket after bucket of sand into a heap in the middle of their roped-off square. One would scoop up the sand and toss the bucket to the other, who would tamp it down hard and throw the bucket back downhill for reuse. Their pile was already four feet high and growing rapidly.

"These guys are beginners," Sheila said. "Let's go."

Heading south down the beach, Jason began to see what she meant. Several groups were far ahead of the first pair, already beginning to carve their piles into rough shapes using mortar trowels, shovels, or pieces of wood. None of them were far enough along to guess what the final form would be. The groups ranged in size from solitary carvers to a pack of eight women, and in age from school children to gray-haired adults.

They retraced their steps and headed back toward Haystack. Roughly in the center of the long line of contestants were two groups of at least ten people each, swarming over their sand piles with the determination of paper wasps. Both of these had larger sand plots than the rest, and the mounds of sand they had constructed were impressive in themselves. While some of the troops continued to move and pack sand, several carvers were already at work in the center of the piles.

"Sand Masters," Sheila said. "Both of these teams have won national contests."

They spent a while watching the hive activity as the sand piles took shape. It was obvious from the start that these would not be anything so pedestrian as actual sand castles. The mounds sloped and humped, with isolated peaks separated by low areas. One of them had a low ring encircling the plot, and two women were busily shaping it into a neat simulacrum of a shin-high brick wall, using small wooden tools to carve the individual bricks.

Farther down the beach, the smaller groups were farther along. About one in three entries was actually a castle or something like it. Some of these were quite good, with buttresses, free-standing arches, leaning towers, and mysterious tunnels that Jason would never have believed you could form out of such a loose, amorphous medium as sand.

The rest of the carvings were fish, starfish, gnomes, bears, and a profusion of other surprising subjects. Cars seemed to be a very popular theme: they saw at least three, including one rather good rendition of a Mustang convertible with a waving shark behind the wheel. The work by the youngest kids tended to be shapeless and unidentifiable, but a few of the adults' pieces were no better. Almost two hours after they had arrived, Jason and Sheila ended up back at the first plot they'd seen, where the two young men were almost finished: a mermaid using a trident to spear a cringing, bearded fisherman.

"Okay," Sheila admitted, "that's not bad."

The masters' plots looked nearly done, but the level of activity had not slowed down. Both of them were still crawling with men and women smoothing, shaping, and in one case sweeping the floor of the walled enclosure. That one was a gingerbread cottage surrounded by flower bushes, with a witch waving from the doorway, a sign that said "Free Cookies," and two pudgy young children just stepping through the gate. The other was a sort of roller coaster on which small fish were pursued by larger fish and yet larger fish, with a penultimate great white shark about to be swallowed whole by an obese woman.

The experience was one that Jason could never have imagined. He had had no idea that such intricate forms could be constructed in the monochrome medium of sand and water, or that building sand castles was an occupation that could consume adults as well as toddlers, or that anyone would be willing to commit so much time to planning and executing a thing of beauty that would be swept away by the sea in a few hours.

It was just like software, he realized—only its life cycle was faster.

They came back in late afternoon, after lunch at the log cabin fried food emporium and a walk through town. The sculptures were beginning to crumble—drying out despite the damp air—and the waves were already beginning to lick at the edges of some of the plots.

They stayed longer for the demolition than they had for the construction. It was fascinating to watch the sea chew its way toward the mostly-smooth shapes. Sunset was still a few hours away when half the fish roller coaster fell into the surf and the fat kids had been eaten by the waves before the witch could get them. Sheila took his hand and led him off toward dinner.

Now that he knew what they were talking about, it was easier to deal with the exuberance of the other guests. Jason chatted with them as if he'd been coming here for years.

When Sheila finished her chores, she and Jason sat in the Adirondack chairs on the back porch and watched the stars try to shine through the patchy clouds. The surf was loud below them as it consumed the remnants of the day's contest. After half an hour, to his surprise, she stood up suddenly, kissed him, and announced that she was going to bed.

Jason tilted his head back to try to look into the kitchen. The lights were still on, but he was sitting too low to see anything. He sat alone for a few minutes more, then stood up. No one was visible in the kitchen. He went inside and up to his room to read.

* * *

His bedroom door opened and let in light from the hallway. Jason rolled over and saw someone slip in and close the door. He half sat up; hadn't he locked the door?

"Who's there?" he said groggily.

"It's me. Sheila."

He looked at the bedside clock. Eleven thirty. He'd been asleep for only half an hour.

"What is it? Is there a fire?"

"Not yet. Slide over."

That woke him up all the way. "What?"

"Scootch over." She sounded closer than before. The room was utterly dark.

"Wait a minute, Sheila. We have to talk first."

"You are so romantic. We can talk if you want to. But slide over first, I'm freezing."

"If you slide in, I'm sliding out."

There was a moment of silence. "I thought you liked me," she said.

"I do like you."

"Then what's the problem?" He didn't say anything. She was quiet for over a minute. "You know, my first boyfriend, in second grade, was John McMacken. He didn't want to kiss me at first, but with a little encouragement he turned into a pretty good kisser."

"I don't need any encouragement."

"I don't understand. Wait... you don't have some kind of..."

"No, I don't have a disease."

"I know you're not gay."

"I'm not gay."

"It's not a performance issue is it? I've heard there are drugs—"

"I'm not impotent."

She was quiet again. "I'm confused, and I'm cold."

"My robe is on the chair."

He heard her fumbling across the room, the swoosh as she swirled the robe around her shoulders, a fainter sound as she lashed the belt. “Ah,” she said, “slippers.” The springs in the chair creaked as she sat down. “I’m waiting. Make it good.”

Jason sat up and pulled the covers higher. He thought about turning on the light, but it was probably better to do this without it.

“You had your first boyfriend in second grade?” he said.

“Before that it was just meaningless flings, really.”

“I wasn’t that precocious. I started dating in high school. The last week of high school. It lasted a month, then her family moved away. And things haven’t gone all that well since then.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s just been one disastrous relationship after another. College was like a fireworks display: boom, that’s pretty, now the cinders float down.”

“Wow. Nice attitude.” She didn’t sound very sympathetic.

“Culminating four years ago with the biggest boom of all.”

“What was this rocket girl’s name?”

“Patty.”

“So Patty did a tap dance on your heart and that’s why I’m sitting in this uncomfortable chair instead of introducing you to unimaginable bliss.”

“Sarcasm isn’t going to help. I’ve learned something about myself, and that’s what I need to tell you.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

He shifted, trying to get the pillows to support his back. He’d never told this to anyone before.

“I... I don’t want to have sex again until I’m married.” He could hear her listening alertly. He wasn’t sure if it was the word “sex” or the word “marriage” that had caught her attention. “I’ve just been burned too many times. Sex just... complicates things.”

“Maybe you’re not doing it right.”

“I know *how*. I just don’t know why. Every time I get intimate with a woman, we break up.”

“Then you’re definitely not doing it right. I can tell you what you’re doing wrong.”

He could hear her getting up. “Stop. That’s not it.”

She settled back in the chair. “What is it, then? And if you say, ‘You’re a nice girl, but,’ I’m going to have to kill you.”

He sighed and tried to think of how to say it. “Look, let’s say I’m dating a girl and I know she’s not the one, but we’re having sex anyway. Then I’m just using her, and I can’t do that, so I leave. But if she is the one, it takes a while to figure that out—but then we’ve already had sex, and somehow the relationship has become all about the sex, or else the sex has complicated it past the point where I can say that I love her, so she leaves.”

“Don’t you just like to have fun sometimes?”

“I’ve had enough fun.”

“Well, that’s sad. What did this Patty bitch do to you?”

“She left me the day before I was going to propose to her.”

“Ouch.”

“I don’t want to go through that again. Next time I find Miss Right, I want it to work. For good. If we have sex before I know one way or the other, I’ll never be sure.”

She was quiet for so long he wondered if she’d fallen asleep.

“Anyway,” he said, “thank you for offering. I’m flattered. But you should go now.”

“Okay,” she said. A moment later the door opened and he saw her leave, still wearing his robe and slippers. He almost reached out to stop her, but she was already gone.

He couldn’t go back to sleep after that. He threw back the covers and looked down at himself. Pajama bottoms, and no robe or slippers. He couldn’t go downstairs like this. He started to get up to get dressed, but then he sat down on the bed again.

If he went down to the kitchen early, or dressed in his normal clothes, he’d have to explain why. He didn’t want to see the look on Robin’s face when he attempted that.

He got back under the covers, but he didn’t fall asleep. Maybe it would have been easier to just tell Sheila that he preferred Robin. But was that the truth? He wasn’t absolutely certain of his own feelings, and he had never even kissed Robin. He didn’t know whether Robin could think of him that way. And anyway, she had Mark.

He felt a pang when he thought that she might be disappointed that he wasn’t coming down. Then he thought that she would probably hardly notice. She was busy, what would she care if her once-a-month moocher didn’t show up in the middle of the night? She had her everyday moocher even when Jason wasn’t around.

Jason’s thoughts whirled around faster and faster without getting anywhere. It was long after his usual time to go down to the kitchen when he fell into an uneasy sleep.

* * *

Robin sat at the kitchen table, depressed and tired. A small plate of sweets sat waiting at the chair across from her. She had finished her baking half an hour ago, and she really needed to get to bed, but she kept hoping she’d hear that tap at the door and see Jason shuffle in with his tousled hair and sleepy eyes, wearing her robe and his silly, striped pajama bottoms.

She wanted to go play the piano. The thought made her smile: that would wake him up for sure. She could imagine Jason and the other eight guests stumbling down the stairs in outrage, half-dressed and shouting, while she blithely went on with her Chopin.

“Come on, Bear,” she said. He raised his big head and snuffled at her. “Let’s go to bed.”

* * *

When Jason came down the next morning, the dining room was empty. He’d woken up early despite getting only a few hours sleep, and he’d rushed to get ready, hoping he could say something to Robin alone. How he was going to get Sheila to leave the kitchen so he could apologize was beyond his powers of cognition this morning. He was just going to have to wing it.

He knocked on the kitchen door and stepped in. Robin was just pouring a mug of coffee and she handed it to him without a word.

“Robin,” he said, “I’m—”

“Did you sleep well last night?” she said.

Sheila wasn’t in the room, thank goodness. He drank some of the coffee. He wished he could have a whole pot or two of the stuff before he had to do this. His head was ringing in a muffled way, as though there were a church bell inside half-muted by straw.

“I’m, uh, sorry about last night. I wanted to come down and visit, but...” She looked at him blankly. He felt something like panic swell inside his chest. He had to say something. “But Sheila took my robe and slippers,” he said.

The look in her eyes changed and her face went rigid. She turned away and fussed with something on the stove. Jason replayed that last sentence in his head and shook his head in frustration. That was not what he’d meant to say.

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t—”

Through the back window, he saw Sheila walking back toward the house from the storage garage, carrying something in her arms.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and retreated in despair to the dining room.

* * *

Sheila dropped the bag of potatoes on the work table. “Can I tell you my news now?”

“Of course,” Robin said without turning around.

“I don’t know why I had to go get them right now. You don’t need them for breakfast.”

“Sorry, I just wanted to be sure I didn’t forget to do them today.”

“Do what? Oh, never mind. Listen, you won’t believe what happened last night.”

“I’m certain of that.”

“Jason said he wants to marry me!”

Now she did turn around. “What?”

Sheila was beaming. “I know, isn’t it great?”

Robin looked at her ring finger. “He proposed?”

“I don’t have a ring yet, but yeah. He proposed.”

Robin felt a slow burn start in her stomach. “He actually proposed.”

“Well, he didn’t get down on his knee or anything. He was lying in bed and I was... Well, never mind.”

“You went to his room?”

Sheila looked at her face and got a sheepish expression. “Come on, Robin, it’s not the first time I’ve given room service. You knew that.”

“No, I did not. For God’s sake, Sheila, I’m trying to run a B&B here, and you’re running a...”

“Don’t you say it,” Sheila said coldly. “You know I’ve never taken money, and this has nothing to do with you. Who I sleep with is my business.”

Robin turned back to the stove. “Sorry,” she said. “You’re right.”

“It’s okay. Anyway, don’t burn the toast over it, it’ll never happen again. I’m spoken for now.”

Robin turned up the heat on the stove. She could hear their guests gathering in the dining room. “I think they’re ready,” she said.

Sheila picked up her tray and carried it out. Robin could hear her cheerfully introducing the sweets. She leaned her head against the exhaust vent over the stove and stifled a sob. What did it matter? Nothing had changed. She summoned her courage and picked up the carafes of juice and the thermos of coffee and followed Sheila out. She didn’t look at anyone as she set them down on the table and retreated immediately to her kitchen to cook the French toast and sausages.

When the meal was over, Sheila came back and sat down at the table.

“He’s leaving,” she said.

Robin didn’t need to ask who, but she wanted to ask her why. Instead she said, “When?”

“Now. Work again. He works too hard.”

She nodded silently and they got on with the business of cleaning up.

That afternoon she was hammering away at her piano, not even sure who she was playing, but doing it loudly and, as her piano teacher had always urged, “with feeling.” She felt someone touch her shoulder and cried out. She didn’t realize until that moment that her eyes were closed and that she was crying. She looked up through bleary eyes. It was Mark.

“Are you okay?” he said.

She nodded. "Music does that to me sometimes."

"I don't know anything about piano, but I'd have said you were doing it to the music, not the other way around."

"Can I get you some coffee? Something to eat?"

"No thanks. Can you come out on the porch for a minute?"

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and fumbled in her pockets for a Kleenex. Mark handed her a red cotton handkerchief. When she was cleaned up she followed him outside. They sat beside each other in the Adirondacks. The tide was out, and all traces of yesterday's competition were completely gone. Except for a few pieces of driftwood and the running birds, the beach was smooth and clean.

She had nothing she wanted to say, unlike Mark who seemed to have something to say but couldn't get started. So they sat quietly for a while. She was grateful for the chance to pull herself together. She felt like an idiot. She didn't even know why she'd been crying, and she hated that he'd seen her like that.

"I guess I've been coming over here every day for three years now," he said. She looked at him and nodded. "Except the vacations and that time I had to go to Chicago for the funeral." Robin waited. "I suppose I was thinking that sooner or later you'd figure out what I had in mind. But it occurred to me this weekend that you can't read minds any more than I can."

"No," she said. "Sometimes I wish I could."

"I don't think it would be a blessing," he said. "People's thoughts ought to be private. No one can help what skips through their heads, can they?"

"No, I guess not."

"It's actions that count, not thoughts, and not words."

She nodded again, with no idea what he was getting at. He looked away from her, smiled, and reached into his pocket. He set a small box down on the arm of her chair.

Robin felt her face flush, not with delight but perhaps a bit of surprise, mixed in with a dash of satisfaction and a slight spasm of dismay. She rubbed her finger over the slightly fuzzy surface of the box.

"Open it," Mark said.

The ring was beautiful, delicate and golden, with a small diamond sparkling in a discreet setting. It was utterly unlike the sturdy, clunky thing she would have expected Mark to buy.

"Robin Eastburn," he said ponderously, "I love you. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you standing on the porch of this dilapidated old house. Will you marry me?"

What is going on? she thought. Everyone's proposing this weekend. The sand castle contest doesn't usually affect people this way.

She was crying again. She touched the ring. It was beautiful, but when she touched it, she felt nothing.

"I don't know," she said through her tears.

Chapter 9: Interlude #4

The racquetball court looked like a brilliantly lit operating room: pure white walls and ceiling except for the rear wall, which was transparent glass. Jason and Bob, Jeanne's husband, sat on the bleachers outside waiting their turn for the court. Two women in sweaty white tennis outfits were finishing up a brutal game. Jason's count of the score was 24-24. Game was 21, but you had to win by at least two points, and these women had been in overtime for almost ten minutes. They were eating into his time slot but he didn't care. It was a great match, and it was more than worth the wait to be able to watch such an exciting game.

The black woman dropped a serve dead into the corner, making it 25-24. She served again, they volleyed hard for several seconds, and then her opponent, a ponytailed brunette, lobbed a soft return into the back wall. It looked as if the black woman would lose the point and give up the serve—there was no way she could get behind the ball in time. But she charged the ball and smashed it back into the glass wall when it was only a few inches away. Jason flinched: if the glass hadn't been there, the ball would have embedded itself in his skull. Somehow she got her racquet out of the way of the rebound, and the ball flew like a lightning bolt on a flat trajectory across the court, hit the front wall an inch off the floor and dribbled away. Game over.

Jason and Bob stood up and waited outside the glass door. The women gathered up their ball cans and gear and came out.

"Great game," Jason said.

"Thanks," the brunette said. "Thanks for letting us finish."

"Are you kidding?" Bob said. "I'd chew off my own arm before I'd interrupt a game like that."

The black woman smiled.

"Killer shot," Jason said as she passed him. She threw another smile over her shoulder and they walked into the court.

The air conditioner was blowing hard but the room still smelled like sweat and rubber. Jason took one of the soft blue balls out of the can and set the can in the corner. He hit a soft one against the front wall.

"Let's get back to the story," Bob said as he returned it gently. They had stopped talking when they saw what was happening on their court. Jason batted the ball backhand. "What did she do after you told her you didn't want to sleep with her?"

"She walked out. In my robe and my slippers."

"Two things." Bob leaped up to return a high bounce off the front wall. "First, you let her go?"

"Yes."

"Stupid. And second—did you get your slippers back?"

"They were sitting outside my door the next morning." Another backhand, this one a little harder.

"You know, this is exactly the kind of mistake you regret for the rest of your life. Especially after you're married."

"Maybe I'll always be glad I did the right thing."

Bob hit one hard and Jason ran to intercept it. They volleyed half-heartedly for a minute or so until Bob swung and missed at a low return.

“Let me remind you,” Bob said, panting a little, “that you’re a guy. Guys do not think like that. Deliberately turning down an opportunity to make it with a beautiful chick is not something you will look back on proudly. Twenty years from now your ass will have a callus where you’ve been kicking yourself.”

Jason picked up the ball and stepped into the server’s lane. “Are you ready?”

Bob crouched and spun his racquet to tighten the cord. “Go.”

They weren’t evenly matched players. Bob was fit but he wasn’t aggressive and his serves lacked power. Jason usually only lost the last game or two, if that, after Bob had worn him down. He won the first game 21-15 on a charge toward the front wall to slam a return from just a foot away. It dropped dead and Bob leaned over to catch his breath.

“If you played life the way you play this game, you’d be king of the world.”

“What a lousy job that’d be,” Jason said. “Long hours and billions of people whining at you.”

“How is that different from the job you have now?”

“Point.”

“Why’d you come home early? Don’t tell me you really had work to do.”

“No. What was I supposed to do after that, hold hands on the beach with Sheila? And I don’t think I could have faced Robin again after I blew it by admitting that Sheila took my robe and slippers.”

“So it was abject cowardice.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, glad we got that straight.”

“I think Robin thinks Sheila and I did it.”

“Of course she does,” Bob said. He picked up the ball and bounced it between the floor and his racquet a few times.

“What do you think I should I do?”

“You’re off the map, my friend. You’ve already violated half the rules in the Guy Manual. I can’t help you.”

“What do you mean, the Guy Manual?”

“The owner’s manual that comes with all brand new guys.”

“I must have missed that one. What rules did I violate?”

“Number one: while you’re young and single, sleep with every woman you can. You cocked that one up.”

“What if she’s the wrong girl?”

“That’s not part of the rule. Look it up.” Bob took up his serving stance. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

Bob’s first serve was a fluffball. Jason nailed it to the wall. They changed places and Jason dropped a rocket into the back right corner, where it quivered at the speed of sound for a second and died.

“That’s what you need to do with Sheila,” Bob said.

* * *

Jason walked into his house after work one day to find his kitchen torn apart. All the countertops were emptied—the canisters, toaster, coffee maker, and mixer had been moved to the dining table—and the floor was covered with clear plastic sheeting. George was mixing grout in a bucket, grayish plaster spotting his arms up to the elbow.

“What are you doing?” Jason said.

“Regrouting your counters, like I promised.”

“When did you promise that?”

“Couple of months ago.”

Jason got a beer from the refrigerator. “Want one?”

“Not now, I’m up to my armpits here.”

Jason hopped up onto one of the stools and watched his father begin applying the grout to the tiles. “It must have taken you all day to strip the old stuff out.”

“Pretty much.” He worked in silence for a while. “What’s happening with your women?”

“I think Sheila wants to get married.”

“Is that good news or bad?”

“I don’t know. But I’m worried.”

“You’re worried that she wants to get married? I remember when men used to worry that women wouldn’t want to marry them.”

“When was that, when our ancestors were still hiding from the dinosaurs?”

“Close. When I asked your mother to marry me.”

Jason watched him work. George’s hands moved rhythmically, spreading, filling, scraping. You’d have sworn he’d done this a million times before, but Jason was pretty sure this was his first countertop.

“You asked Mom to marry you without knowing what her answer would be?”

“I loved her,” George said without looking up from his work. “That didn’t mean she loved me.”

“I think I have the opposite problem.”

“What do you mean?” Jason told him about Sheila visiting him in the middle of the night. “I’m proud of you. I think. But you’re crazy. I’m not sure I’d have done the same thing.”

“What?”

“Well, I guess if your mother had come creeping into my room when we were dating and said, ‘Slide over,’ I’d have known how she felt about me.”

“So you’d have...”

“You’re crazy, son. Don’t be stupid, too. Of course I would.”

* * *

Jason struggled to stay awake as he read a thick memo from one of his boss’s technology wonks. White papers plopped sporadically out of the offices surrounding Gary’s throne room like thick, fluttering wads of bird poop falling out of a tree. Jason was supposed to read them, understand them, and comment on them; the first was difficult, the second nearly impossible, and the third unthinkable. If he could speak freely, his only comment would be, “Stop killing trees for these pompous, pretentious monographs.”

His phone rang. He picked it up in relief.

“Yeah?”

“Is that how I taught you to answer the phone?” his mother said.

“You didn’t teach me office phone etiquette at all. I can’t say, ‘Day residence, Jason speaking,’ because I don’t live here.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What can I do for you, Mom?”

“Your father told me that one of your little friends wants to get married.”

“Little friends? They’re not six years old, Mom. It sounds like you’re talking about a puppy.”

Beth said softly, "Ooh, that's a nice one."

"Nice one what? What are you talking about?"

"Have you actually proposed to this girl, or are you waiting for her to do it?"

"Mom, we're not getting married. We're not even really dating."

"That's ridiculous. You ought to be dating the girl you're going to marry."

"We're not getting married."

"Oh, that would work," she said softly.

"Mother! Are you looking at one of those bride magazines?"

He heard a dull thump from the other end of the phone. "I'm sorry, dear, I was distracted by something. What did you say?"

"Is there a point to this conversation?"

"Have you started looking for a ring, yet?"

"I'm hanging up now."

"Jason, wait a minute. Give me her phone number. We have a lot of planning to do."

He dropped the phone back onto its cradle. Jeanne stuck her head around the corner of the door.

"Which one is it you're *not* engaged to?" she said, grinning.

He threw the memo at her, but it fluttered to the floor three feet shy. He could hear her laughing from her cubicle across the hall.

* * *

Robin was heading toward the front door, intending to walk into town to have lunch at her favorite little bistro, a block off the tourist strip. She glanced into the sitting room on her way past and saw Sheila sitting in the reading chair, holding a magazine thicker than the local phone book.

"Hey, Robin," Sheila called. "What do you think about veils?"

"Vail? Skiing?"

"No, wedding veils. Too old fashioned? Or retro hip?"

Robin sat down on the ottoman facing Sheila. "Are you actually planning the wedding before he proposes?"

"That's just a technicality. I haven't seen him since that night. Well, not alone, I mean. He'll be back in two weeks and two days, and he'll have a ring."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know men."

Robin gently lifted the magazine out of Sheila's hands and set it on the coffee table behind her.

"You've known a lot of men," Robin said. "A lot more than I have. How do you know that Jason's the one you've been looking for?"

"I have a feeling." Robin gave her a look, and she said defensively, "A really strong feeling."

"Sheila," Robin said, "you hardly know him."

"I know him a lot better than you do."

Robin sat back. "Do you?" she said coldly. "Did you know that he doesn't like hiking?"

"That's not true—"

"He likes running in the city. He plays a mean game of racquetball. He watches professional football and hockey, but not baseball or basketball. He has an older brother he hasn't seen for ten

years who lives in Vienna. He likes dogs but not cats, old jazz but not the fusion stuff, he used to play the guitar, and he thinks Citizen Kane is the most over-rated movie of all time.”

“What are you doing?” Sheila said warily.

“When he was four, he got separated from his mother in the farmer’s market in town. He wandered all over the park, crying, looking for her, and he wouldn’t let anyone help him. Suddenly he bumped into someone’s legs, and he looked up. It was his father, who hadn’t even been with them. His dad picked him up and they went and found his mom. Did you know that?”

“You made that up.”

“No, I didn’t. He told me that story himself.”

“When?”

“The second time he came here. Sheila, you don’t know him.”

“I know enough.” She was on the verge of tears. She looked past Robin’s shoulder, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Have you even talked about getting married?”

“He said he wanted to marry me. He loves me. Why are you being so mean?”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said. “I’m not trying to be mean. I’m trying to help.”

“This isn’t helping,” Sheila said. “If you want to help, you can come to Portland with me tomorrow to look for a dress.”

“A dress?”

“A wedding dress.” Robin closed her eyes in pain. “Will you come? We can look for one for you, too.”

Robin’s eyes snapped open. “What do you mean?”

“I know Mark proposed to you. Why haven’t you given him an answer yet?” Robin looked at her glumly. “It’s because you’re waiting for Jason, isn’t it?”

“I—” Robin stopped and looked away. “I don’t know why. I like Mark, and he deserves an answer. I just don’t know what answer I want to give.”

“I think you two make a good match, but that’s your business. Just don’t be hoping Jason is going to change his mind, because he’s marrying me.”

Robin looked at her bleakly.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to buy a dress? What about the dress Jason got you for your birthday?”

“It’s not white,” Sheila said. Robin gaped at her. “I’m going tomorrow. Will you come?”

Robin tried to think of a coherent counter-argument, something that would convince Sheila to slow down, but she couldn’t come up with anything that wouldn’t just make Sheila more angry. So she nodded, got up stiffly, as though she’d aged forty years in the last few minutes, and went out to lunch.

* * *

They took a break so Sheila could eat a granola bar. She sat sideways on an overstuffed armchair, one that was obviously intended for mothers of the bride or maids of honor, not for brides-to-be still wearing their potential wedding gowns. The billowing froth of white lace and satin puffed up around her, almost obscuring her face, as if she’d fallen into a vat of cold marshmallow cream. She wolfed down the snack daintily, without dropping a crumb, while idly swinging her legs.

The shop staff were getting more frantic by the moment, but Sheila didn’t seem to notice. Three of the women were huddled together like diminutive football players. Robin wondered

when they would break and rush the line of scrimmage. She was sitting where Sheila was supposed to be, on the dais in front of three angled mirrors.

"Which one do you like best?" Sheila said.

"Honestly? The one Jason bought you. Everything you've tried on here seems rather... puffy."

Sheila stopped licking her fingers. "You don't think puffy suits me?"

"No."

"Well, I haven't found that perfect one yet, but I can't wear a coral dress to my own wedding. Your wedding, maybe." Robin snorted. "What? I don't understand you. You could get married next week if you wanted to. Why are you waiting?"

"Would you marry Mark if he asked you?"

"Hell, no!"

"Then why should I?"

"Because..."

"Just getting married is not the point, Sheila. Has anyone ever proposed to you?"

"You mean other than—"

"Yes, I mean for real, other than Jason."

Sheila pouted a protest, then said, "Sure. Two or three times."

"But you didn't marry them."

"Of course not," Sheila said. "They were dweebs. Lots of fun, but who'd want to live with them?"

"Why shouldn't I feel the same way?"

"But I thought—"

"What do you think, this is my last chance? No one's ever going to love me again? This is the best I can do?"

Sheila stopped swinging her legs and looked away. She didn't speak for a long moment. Apparently the dress ladies had been waiting for a lull in the conversation, because they came out of their huddle and converged on Sheila.

"Please, madam," the smallest one said. She had an elfin face that looked forlorn without the smile that had graced it all morning.

"What?" Sheila said crossly.

"They're worried about the dress," Robin said.

"What?"

"You're bending the dress."

"Oh. Sorry." Sheila stood up and smoothed down the back. The three relieved clerks fussed and adjusted, straightening and patting.

"Would madam care to proceed?"

"In a minute," Sheila said. "I thought you liked him. He's a nice guy, quiet like you, really good at his work, like you. I thought you made a good couple."

It was an apology, as much of one as Robin had ever heard her make. Robin nodded her head in acceptance.

"I have an idea," Sheila said. "After we're done here, let's go visit Jason at work."

"Oh, Sheila, I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Why not? It'll be fun to surprise him."

"You don't even know where his office is."

“Yes, I do. I’ve got a business card.”

“He gave you a business card?”

“Of course not. I took it from his wallet when he was in the bathroom.”

Robin blanched. “You shouldn’t—”

“Oh, give me a break,” Sheila said. “It’s not like I took any money. What do you think? It’s a great idea, right?”

“No. I think it’s the worst idea I’ve heard this year. You know how busy he is at work.”

“How busy can he be? He’s a manager, for Pete’s sake.” Robin just bit her lip in frustration. “Please?” Sheila made cow eyes.

“Seeing Jason was really the point of this whole trip, wasn’t it? The dresses were just an excuse.”

“No, I really need a dress.” She turned to the tiny woman, who had been waiting patiently with her composure restored now that her dress was no longer in peril. “How many more?”

“Five, madam.”

“Let’s get going, then. I have a date with my fiancé.”

* * *

Jason was moderating another tedious, pointless, and loud argument between Bryan and Patrice, leaning back in his chair with his feet on the desk, wishing he had a pair of noise-canceling headphones. The two had competing schemes for dealing with what they each thought was the other’s problem. They were both right, and either of their solutions would work. He didn’t care which one they chose, but he couldn’t get them to listen long enough to tell them he didn’t care. At this point he was just waiting for them to run down so he could order them out of his office.

Jeanne walked in, ignoring the shouting team leads, and leaned her head in close to Jason’s.

“Someone’s here to see you,” she said just loud enough for him to hear.

“Who?”

“I think it’s safe to say they’re not encyclopedia salesmen.”

“They?”

Jeanne smiled and slithered out of the room. Robin and Sheila stepped into view, obviously confused and daunted by the shouting match.

“What are you doing here?” Jason said.

Bryan stopped in mid-rant and turned to look at the women. He blinked as if he’d never seen a woman before; in fact, he’d probably never noticed that Patrice was female, or anything other than an obstacle to his career.

“Is this a bad time?” Robin said.

Sheila didn’t bother with words. She slid between Bryan and Patrice to get behind Jason’s desk and kiss him on the cheek. Jason rubbed the spot, embarrassed, but Sheila just smiled. At least she hadn’t tried something more demonstrative. His team leads were staring at him.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” he said. They didn’t move. “Look, either solution would work. Go toss a coin or write a random number generator or something, and I’ll talk to you *later*.”

Bryan still stood mesmerized. Patrice whacked him on the arm, which woke him up, and they scuttled out.

“Sit down,” Jason said. “What are you—”

Jeanne rolled in a second guest chair. She smiled broadly at the women, obviously delighted, and left, closing the door behind her.

“Who’s that?” Sheila said suspiciously.

“Um. That’s Jeanne, my assistant.”

“Like a secretary?”

“Something like that. What are you guys doing here? Who’s watching the inn?”

“It’s the middle of the week,” Robin said. “No guests. We were doing some shopping and...”

“And I said we should stop in and see you,” Sheila finished.

They settled into the chairs and Jason put his feet on the floor. Robin looked around the office curiously. There was obvious organization underlying the surface clutter; the bookshelves and credenza were neat. A framed Sarah McLachlan concert poster hung on one wall. The ficus tree in the corner was thriving. A Stiffel lamp threw golden light that augmented the weak, grey sunlight coming in the window.

“Nice office,” she said.

“Thanks. So you’re just in for the day, then?”

“I guess,” Sheila said, smiling.

Robin threw her a fierce look, as if to say there was no way she was driving home alone.

Jason didn’t know what to make of that exchange. “How did you know where I work?”

Robin turned to face Sheila, curious how she’d answer that.

“Zebra’s in the phone book,” Sheila said. “Hard name to forget.”

“So...” Jason began, but he didn’t know what he wanted to say.

Jeanne knocked and stuck her head in the door. “Your meeting starts in five,” she said.

Robin stood up abruptly, causing the chair to roll back and hit the bookcase. “You’ve got work to do,” she said. “We should’ve called first.”

“No, you don’t need to call.” He waved at Jeanne, and she closed the door again. “Well, actually, yes, it’s probably better if you call. I’m in meetings all the time. Um...”

“Come on, Sheila,” Robin said.

“Maybe we can meet for dinner after you get off?” Sheila said. “Or you could cook for us for a change. I’d love to see your house.”

Jason felt as if he’d stepped through an elevator door and just realized there was no elevator car there. Robin looked disgusted.

“Well,” he said weakly, “that would be great. I don’t have any plans this evening. I guess we could...”

“We could meet you here,” Sheila said. “And follow you home.”

“I take the Max to work,” Jason said. She stared at him blankly. “The train.”

“Even better. We’ll drive you home. We can kill a few hours until quitting time, right Robin?”

Robin glared at her. Jason looked back and forth between them. There was something going on between them that he couldn’t figure out. Robin looked like she wanted to strangle Sheila.

“Okay.” Jason looked at his calendar and tried to add up some times. “How about 6:30? I can leave a little early today, I guess.”

“Great,” Sheila said. “Come on, Robin, let’s go find a shoe store.”

Sheila darted back for another quick kiss, on the lips this time. The moment her face pulled away, Jason’s eyes locked with Robin’s and something passed between them. Even after they left—Sheila jaunty and Robin smiling ruefully in apology, embarrassment, and perhaps fury—Jason had no idea what that silent communication had been. But it made him feel hopeful and somehow relieved. He gathered up the papers he needed for his meeting.

* * *

Sheila pulled the Subaru wagon into Jason's driveway and parked it. He unfolded from the somewhat cramped back seat and stretched.

"I told you to sit up front," Sheila said.

"I'm fine," he said for about the tenth time.

"You're taller than Robin. She should have sat in back."

"It's my car," Robin said crossly. "You should have sat in back."

"You know I always drive in the city."

Jason walked away from the ongoing argument and fumbled for his keys. The sky was still bright but the sun had already dropped behind the trees and it was starting to get chilly. He unlocked the front door and waited patiently for them to go in ahead of him.

He watched them look around inquisitively, Sheila openly and Robin a bit more discreetly. He didn't think they would learn much. This was just a place to sleep, watch TV, and store his stuff.

"Can I get you a beer or some wine?" he said.

"Beer," Sheila said. Robin nodded. They followed him into the kitchen. "Who's that guy?"

Jason looked outside and felt his guts clench. George was messing around with his backyard fence. He looked up and waved at them, dropped his tools and peeled his work gloves off. This was about to get a lot more complicated.

"That's my father," Jason said.

George let himself in the sliding glass door. He smiled at the women.

"Afternoon, Jason. I thought I'd take a crack at your fence, there."

"Is it broken?"

"It will be. Introduce me."

"Robin Eastburn. Sheila Karczewski. This is my father, George Day."

"Nice to meet you, ladies. I've heard a lot about you and your little inn."

"It's lovely to meet you, too, George," Sheila said. "I'm Sheila, Jason's fiancée."

"What?" Jason said.

"Sheila!" Robin said. "For heaven's sake!"

"Well, congratulations," George said, "I know Jason's mom will be thrilled to hear that."

"We are not engaged," Jason said.

"That's only because you haven't had a chance to ask me yet."

George frowned. He looked back and forth between Jason and Sheila.

"What's going on, son? Are you trying to put something over on this girl?"

"No, absolutely not. Sheila, what the hell are you talking about?"

"What you said that night in your room," she said.

Robin's face fell as her worst fears were confirmed. George's expression went blank.

"What?" Jason said.

"You said you wouldn't—" She glanced at George and self-edited. "You know... until we were married. Wasn't that a proposal?"

Now Robin looked very confused.

"No, it wasn't," Jason said.

"Really? I thought it was. Well, I guess it doesn't matter. If there's something particular you want to ask me, you know where I live. Can I have that beer, now?"

"Jason," Robin said, "can I use your bathroom?"

“Sure. It’s down the hall there.”

Robin grabbed Sheila’s arm. “I need your help for a second, Sheila.” She yanked the taller woman out of the room.

George watched them go. “Your mother always does the same thing. She won’t go near a bathroom unless there’s another woman with her. I think it’s fear of toilet snakes.”

Robin pushed Sheila into the bathroom, closed the door behind them, and leaned against it. She noticed fleetingly that it was nicely decorated, with pillar candles and silk flowers, before she brushed all irrelevant thoughts aside.

“Did you sleep with Jason that night you went to his room?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“You dragged me into this, Sheila—coming to Portland to buy a wedding dress, shanghaiing Jason and inviting yourself to his house. You made us both look like fools. That makes it my business.”

“Calm down. Nobody looks foolish. Anyway, what difference does it make?”

“Did you?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Sheila!”

“Okay, okay! No, I didn’t. He said he wouldn’t sleep with me until we were married.”

Robin sagged a little in relief, but also disbelief.

“Did he say he wouldn’t sleep with *you*, or did he mean anyone?”

“Who else could he have been talking about? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“And that’s why you think he wants to marry you?”

“That’s one reason,” Sheila said.

“What are the others?”

“The way he looks at me. How much fun we have together. You know.”

“Has he ever mentioned marriage other than that night?”

“No. I don’t think he’s had a chance to buy a ring yet.”

“Sheila, has he *ever* phoned you?”

“No. But you said yourself that he’s busy at work.”

Robin closed her eyes for a moment. The girl was insane.

“Sheila, try to stay with me here. He refused to sleep with you. He used abstinence before marriage as an excuse. He hasn’t asked you to marry him. In the four months you’ve known him, he’s never called you. Are you following me?”

“What’s your point?”

Robin huffed in exasperation. “He doesn’t want you. He doesn’t love you. That was a brush-off, not a proposal!”

She expected Sheila to get angry, but she just looked confused. Robin could read her mind: “Robin just doesn’t get it. She must be crazy!”

“I actually do need to pee,” Sheila said. “Do you mind?”

Robin flung up her hands and left the room. Jason and George were sitting on barstools in the kitchen, each holding a beer bottle.

“Is everything okay?” Jason said. She looked angry.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “we need to go now. We shouldn’t have imposed on you.”

“You don’t need to go.”

“Yes, we do. Coming into the city was a really bad idea.”

"I don't think so," George said. "I'm glad we got to meet at last."

Robin smiled at him weakly. "Thanks. It was nice to meet you, too." She turned to Jason. "I'll cancel your reservation for next month."

"Why?"

She frowned. "Well... Sheila..."

"I know. She thinks we're getting married. But I never proposed to her."

"I know."

"You're not getting married?" George said.

Jason glared at him. George put up his hands in surrender. Sheila walked into the room, smiling until she took in the atmosphere of tension.

"What's going on?" she said.

"We're leaving," Robin said.

"I haven't had my beer yet. Jason was going to cook us dinner."

"Some other time. We can stop at that fish place you like on the way home."

"I don't want to go."

"Thanks for the ride home," Jason said firmly. "I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

Sheila was too flustered to think of anything to say. She allowed Robin to herd her outside. Then it dawned on her that Robin must have said something in those brief moments while Sheila was in the bathroom alone that soured the whole evening. She glared at Robin as she got in the passenger side. Robin gave Jason one of her infuriating little waves and got behind the wheel.

Jason watched them drive away. George put an arm around his shoulders and guided him back into the house.

"I'll make a pitcher of margaritas," he said, "and you can tell me what the hell is going on."

* * *

Sheila fumed in silence until Portland was behind them.

"What did you do?" she said when they reached the flat farmland to the west of the city.

"I didn't do anything," Robin said. "As far as I can tell, everything that's been done was done by you."

"What does that mean?"

Robin sighed but didn't answer. They drove in silence for more long miles.

"I'm not crazy, you know," Sheila said. "And I'm not stupid. Just because I wanted something desperately and now it's coming true, that doesn't mean I made it up."

"Even if you didn't make it up, maybe you should ask yourself why you want it so desperately."

"What are you talking about?"

"Everything you do—your whole life—is about finding a man."

"That's not true."

"Really? Isn't the real reason you wanted to run a B&B with me so you could meet guys?"

"Of course."

"And now I find out you've been sleeping with the customers behind my back."

"So what? I didn't scare any of them away. A bunch of them have—" Sheila realized that she was about to make Robin's argument for her and shut up.

"When you finally found Mr. Perfect, what was going to happen to me?"

"Nothing. You'd just go on..." Sheila had an "oops" moment.

"Exactly. You ditch me the moment your white knight comes riding in."

"I didn't—"

"Don't, Sheila. Don't lie to me any more. I don't like being used. I thought we were friends."

"I thought so too," Sheila said grumpily.

"Then do me a favor, okay? Spend a few minutes thinking about what it means to be someone's friend." The headlights bounced from one pine tree to the next as the woods closed in on the road. "And as your friend, I have to tell you something honestly: Jason does not want to marry you."

"You just want him for yourself. You always have."

"I don't know what I want. And neither do you."

* * *

Several days later, Jason sat alone in his dark office, staring listlessly at another screen of straightforward program code that somehow hid a bug. He was getting sick of these tricky bugs. Someone else always got to the simple ones before he could, so the ones he picked off the list were invariably killers. The phone rang and he picked it up gratefully.

"Why are you still at work?" his mother said.

"Hello to you, too. I'm still at work because I'm working."

"I don't know why you bother to own a house. You could save a fortune by selling it and putting a cot in your office."

"Good idea. I'll get Jeanne right on it."

"Your father told me the wedding is off."

"Mom, the wedding was never on."

"Your father said you were going to marry one of your girls."

Jason could hear his father in the background bellowing, "I never said that."

"So now it's off?" she said. "I haven't even met her. Either of them. You introduced them to your father."

"Don't whine, Mom. I would have brought them by, but they only stayed for a few minutes."

"Why? What did you do?"

"I'm hanging up now."

"No, you're not. Jason, I want to meet them."

"I told you if things got serious, I'd take you there."

"You've made and broken an engagement since then. I'd say things are pretty serious—seriously messed up, is what I would say."

"Mom, I'm not getting married. I was never getting married."

"Not with an attitude like that, you're not."

"I have to get back to work."

"It's 7:30. Go home."

"I'll see you for dinner tomorrow. You can harangue me some more then."

"Okay," Beth said. "It's a date."

Jeanne knocked on the door as he was hanging up the phone.

"What are you still doing here?" he said.

"I'm not, I came back. We're kidnapping you. Or rescuing you, depends on your point of view. Bob and I are going out to dinner. You're coming, and don't argue or I'll get my big ruler and rap you on the knuckles."

"I wouldn't think of arguing."

He grabbed his coat and followed her out of the building.

They took him to his favorite fish restaurant off the Park blocks, not far from the Arlene Schnitzer auditorium where his mother volunteered two evenings a week. Jeanne asked for and got a specific, secluded booth in the rear of the restaurant.

Jeanne and Bob sat on one side of the booth. Jason sat on the other, looking at them blankly. The table was dimly lit by a flickering candle in a veined glass lamp; the nearest wall sconce was twenty feet away. No one said anything until after the waiter came to take their order, and then left.

"Snap out of it," Jeanne said at last.

"I'm just tired," Jason said.

"Bullshit. They've got you pretzeled so tight that you think your heels are your ears."

"I'm trying not to visualize that."

"Did she say anything to make you think she's not interested?"

"Who?"

"Robin, of course."

"You mean Sheila. You've got them mixed up. Sheila's the one I'm not engaged to."

"Technically," Bob said, "you're not engaged to either of them."

"I know which one is which," Jeanne said patiently, ignoring her husband. "And I understand that Sheila thinks you're engaged, but you're not. My question is, now that Robin *knows* you're not engaged, did she give you any sign one way or the other that she might be interested in taking the place of that loony tune you've been dating erroneously?"

Jason tried to unravel that, but he was too tired. Instead, he flagged down their waiter and ordered a beer. Bob ordered one too.

When it became clear that he didn't intend to answer her, Jeanne said, "Okay, what about your competition."

"Who?"

"Mark."

"What about him?"

"Do you know how serious he is?"

"About Robin? I don't know. He looked like a serious guy. Steady, tough, hard-working, and no sense of humor at all."

"What we need is a distraction. A diversion."

"What are you talking about?"

"Something to take Mark's mind off Robin."

"Huh?" Jason said.

"I know," Bob said. He turned toward Jeanne. "What about your sister, Lynn?"

Jason was not following this.

"Good idea," she said. "She and Robin are about the same size. Lynn has dark hair, Robin's a blonde, but that's probably a good thing. We don't want a clone, just a decoy."

"And she's available now that her boyfriend's run off to Mexico."

"He didn't run off, he was chased across the border by the DEA."

"Right. But it's the best thing that ever happened to *her* love life."

"What are you two talking about? What has your sister's deranged love life got to do with Robin?"

Jeanne smiled sweetly. "Never mind. We'll take care of it."

* * *

Robin was sitting at her piano with her hands in her lap when Mark walked in. A sudden spasm of irritation washed over her: he never knocked or rang the doorbell. He never had. Just because he had practically rebuilt the house didn't mean he owned it.

She pushed the feeling aside. It was good that he was here.

"You're not playing," he said.

"Let's go outside."

The sun was playing hide and seek through scattered clouds and a cool, salty breeze was blowing inland. They settled in the Adirondack chairs facing the ocean. Down on the beach, hundreds of people streamed back and forth like schools of tropical fish, up and down the trampled sand.

Robin reached into the front pocket of her jeans and took out the ring Mark had given her. The light caught the small stone and it glittered. She handed it to him and he took it mutely.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to give you an answer," she said. "I had to sort out the confusion I was feeling. Part of me wanted to say yes, but I finally realized that that impulse came from loneliness and guilt. The rest of me knew that the correct answer is no. I'm sorry, Mark, I can't marry you. I admire you, and you've been a good friend. I like you a lot, but not that way."

Mark looked down at the ring in his palm. He closed his fist to hide it from the sunlight.

"I'd best be getting back to work," he said gruffly. "We're pouring the foundation on the Wyatt job this afternoon." He stood up and nodded at her politely but stiffly, then walked down the steps and disappeared around the corner of the house.

Robin felt sadness and relief simultaneously. She looked back out to the ocean and saw Sheila standing near the garage with her arms crossed, watching her and frowning.

She stood up and went back inside. Something had been nudged loose inside her chest. She knew that when she sat down at the piano this time, something would come out of her fingertips. She just didn't know what it would be.

Chapter 10: Fugue #5

He'd half-expected that no one would meet him at the door, but this time both Robin and Sheila were standing on the porch, leaning stiffly away from each other and grinning forced smiles. Their body language spelled trouble, so he told them he was planning to eat in town alone that night. Sheila didn't look happy about that, but she didn't say anything. He left as soon as he could fling his bag into his room. No one was around when he returned, around 11:00, from a long walk after dinner.

Two couples were at breakfast the next morning, one with a pair of preteen girls, the other childless. Both of them were engrossed in their own conversations—planning their time at the beach, shopping, where to eat—so they left him blissfully alone.

Sheila came in with her tray and began unloading it. "I have some options for things to do today," she said softly.

He'd been dreading this moment. "I've already made plans for the day. Sorry."

She nodded, surprisingly undisturbed, and left the room calmly. Jason watched her leave, dumbfounded that she hadn't put up the slightest fight. This might be easier than he'd dared to hope.

When he turned back to his food, he discovered that the other conversations had stopped and everyone was staring at him.

Sheila walked into the kitchen and put away the tray. "He's going to buy the ring at one of the local jewelers today," she said confidently.

Robin groaned softly but didn't stop stirring the fried potatoes.

Jason walked back into town after breakfast. Last night he'd found himself standing at a realtor's office window, reading the fact sheets taped to the window that described the available properties. His eye kept coming back to a second-story office above an art gallery right in the center of town. He had no idea why it was so intriguing: 800 square feet of empty space with an ocean view. The rent seemed high.

Now, reading the listing in the window again, he realized that the building was just a few doors down. He walked south and looked in the gallery window. He remembered this one from when he and Sheila had cruised the shops, which seemed like a year ago. Lots of blown glass in abstract shapes and bright colors. A windowed door to the left led upstairs. He tried it and found it was open. The stairway was brighter than it ought to be, and when he reached the landing he saw that there was a window looking out to sea just outside the office door. That door was locked, but it also had a glass pane.

The brightly lit space was cut almost exactly in half by a wall with an open door, through which he could see more light and a small restroom in the back. The floors were shiny, golden maple.

"What the hell am I doing here?" he said to himself. But he kept looking, and he couldn't help thinking what an amazing office this would be to work in.

* * *

Sheila was nowhere to be found when he returned late that afternoon. He had resolved on the slow walk back to the B&B to sit her down and tell her calmly to her face that he did not want to marry her. What he hadn't decided was whether or not to tell her that he wanted to go out with Robin rather than with her. He hadn't yet come up with a polite way of saying it.

“I like her better” was too blunt. So was “You’re a nut case,” “We have nothing in common,” “You remind me of a black widow spider,” and “I’m standing on the brink of hell.” He was pretty sure that if he said, “Let’s just be friends,” she’d knock him out.

She showed up when he sat down to dinner with the other two families, bringing a basket of bread, and smiled at him before she vanished back into the kitchen. During the entire meal—which he couldn’t have described; it was various kinds of vegetables and cheese layered and baked inside a thick, flaky pastry shell—she was never in the room for more than 15 seconds, refilling water glasses, taking away plates, bringing more bread. Always she smiled at him—enigmatically, he thought—but she never lingered near him long enough for him to say anything.

The two girls ignored him, but the other adults watched the Jason and Sheila *pas de deux* with undisguised curiosity and too much amusement for his comfort. When dinner was over, Jason went back to the kitchen and knocked. Robin was cleaning up but Sheila wasn’t there.

“Is Sheila around?” he asked Robin.

Her face wore a small, sad smile. “She said she’d meet you on the back porch at 10:00.”

“Okay, thanks.” He retreated in confusion and went up to his room.

He had over an hour to kill. He tried to read, but nothing in the novel he was working through made sense. When he found himself turning the page back to reread the same long paragraph for the third time, he tossed the book onto the bed, grabbed his coat, and went outside.

The sun had just set, but the moon was half-full, low in the southwest sky, and there was enough light to get down to the beach safely. Jason joined the sparse migration of people walking the shoreline. He headed north toward Haystack Rock. The air was cooling and it felt good to stretch his legs.

By the time he started back up toward the B&B, there were only a handful of other people left on the sand. He trudged up the stairs and found Sheila waiting for him, sprawled in one of the chairs. He sat in the other. When he had completely caught his breath, he turned and started to speak, but she cut him off instantly.

“Did you do any shopping today?” she said.

“Um... no.”

“Really,” she said flatly. She stood up. “I guess we don’t have much to talk about, then.” And she walked away.

He sat and watched the moon sink slowly toward the waves until it was bedtime. Then he went inside and crawled into bed.

* * *

He knocked hesitantly at the kitchen door and slowly pushed it open. Robin was turning to look over her shoulder, and he saw her face clearly as she recognized him and broke into a huge smile.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come down,” she said.

“Is it okay?”

“You’re welcome any time. Come in and sit down.”

Bear thumped the floor with his tail and came over for a pat. Jason rubbed his cheeks and ruffled his head. Bear licked his hand and went back to his bed as Robin set a plate of pastries down in front of him that three people couldn’t eat.

“Are you trying to make up for lost time?” he said.

“You look hungry.”

He ate silently for a minute while she went back to stretching, flouring, and folding a soft dough. "I tried to talk to Sheila today, but..." Robin nodded without interrupting her work. "All she said tonight on the porch was, 'Did you do any shopping today?' I don't know what she was talking about."

"She expected you to buy her a ring while you were in town today."

"Oh my god." His mouth was suddenly too dry to swallow the orange currant bread he'd been eating. He took a drink of milk and somehow forced it down. "How am I going to get through to her?"

"I don't know what to tell you. Every time I try to bring it up, she says..." She paused for several turns of the dough.

"What?"

"Um... that I'm just being mean."

That wasn't what she'd been about to say, but Jason let it slide. He popped a mini-berry tart into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "You know what I think?"

"No, what?"

"I think that this isn't my problem. It's one of the hardest things to learn in my business: what you can fix and what you can't. There's nothing I can do to convince Sheila of the truth if she won't talk to me. I'm just going to have to give her time."

Robin stopped working and looked at him. A wisp of her short, blonde hair was curled across her forehead. The fine hairs on her forearms were frosted with flour, and her hands were gloved in it. A ghost of a smile chased across her face.

"What?" Jason said.

"Just... I think that's a good idea. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can to wake her up."

"Good. Now let's talk about something else."

"Okay. You go first."

He thought for a moment. When he realized that he was about to reach for another slice of chocolate cherry bread, he pushed the plate away and finished his milk.

"How's Mark?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him for a week."

"Oh. I thought he came by every day."

"He used to. That was before... Anyway. Pick another topic."

He thought again. "How do you get enough protein without eating meat?"

"Oh ho. Are you thinking of becoming a vegetarian?"

"I'm curious about it. I've known one or two, but never well enough to ask them about their diet."

Robin told him about eggs, cheese, beans, and that most people ate much more protein than they needed. He asked when and how she gave up meat.

"It was in college, the first time I went grocery shopping for myself. I had a roommate who loved this little upscale grocer's close to the university. We were walking by the meat counter, and the butcher had molded the ground pork into the shape of a piglet. It had black olives for eyes and an apple in its mouth and little pink ground meat ears and a snout."

"Yuck."

"It was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen. I think I almost fainted. My roommate was doubled over laughing, but I had to lean against the meat case to catch my balance. That dead, flayed pig stared up at me with those flat black eyes. I never ate flesh again—which really ticked

off my roommate because it meant I wouldn't share any of the cost of the meat she wanted. She moved out a few months later and never spoke to me again."

"Carnivorous, narrow-minded, *and* cheap."

"Thank you. She was no great loss." She lay the dough gently into a flat pan. "Tell me about your parents. What does your father do when he's not remodeling your house?"

"Nothing. That's his job and his hobby, now. I think he does it just to get away from my mom. They used to get along better before he retired."

"What did he retire from?"

"Boeing. He was downsized, actually, at 62. It upset him a lot."

"What did he do there?"

"He ran a production team, making 747s and then 767s. I think he really wanted to make spaceships, but he settled for big jets."

"What about your mom?"

"She's never worked. But she's always had things to do. She used to volunteer at the church we went to in Washington. Now she's an usher at the Schnitz—a big, fancy auditorium in downtown Portland. And she plays viola in a string quartet that gets together a few days a week. She keeps busy, but not so busy that she can't bug me all the time about not having a life. She wants to meet you."

"Me?"

"Well, both of you. I think she wants to pick one of you on my behalf."

"Ah." Robin busied herself stirring something in a bowl. "You should bring them with you next time."

"She's pawing at the ground to get down here. She wanted Sheila's phone number when she thought we were engaged."

Robin laughed. "I would have loved to have heard that conversation."

"Not me. Raving maternalism meets romantic schizophrenia."

"Sounds like Championship Wrestling."

"They would have had something in common, though." She raised her eyebrows at him. "I bet they were both reading the same bridal magazines."

She laughed again.

"What about *your* parents?" he said. "And you have a brother, right?"

"Yeah, that's something Sheila and I have in common. Both of us are only daughters with one brother, but mine's older and hers is younger."

"Where does your brother live?"

"Sausalito. His wife doesn't like me—"

"What? Why not?"

"When we first met, I had a bad feeling about her. She wasn't good for him, and I told him so. She found out about it somehow, and she's never forgiven me. I don't think he'd admit it even now, but I believe that he knows I was right."

"So you don't see him too often?"

"Not since before I moved here. We haven't been very close since he got married."

"That's too bad. Do your parents live near them?"

"No... they died when I was in college."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't—"

“No, it’s okay. They were on their second honeymoon in Italy. It was a narrow, high road, and it had been raining. Someone ran them off the road.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. But at least they got to see Italy. It happened the day before they were due to fly back.”

“Oh, man!”

“I’d feel a lot worse if it had happened on their first day.”

Jason was tired and he couldn’t think of anything else to say that wasn’t talking about their situation.

“I guess I’ll go up to bed now,” he said.

“Thanks for visiting.”

She smiled at him again. It was almost enough to make him sit back down, but he smiled back and went upstairs.

* * *

Breakfast was a repeat of dinner: Sheila bustled about, smiling a bit chillier than before and still refusing to linger to talk. Jason left early, as he had last month. He had a lot to think about on the drive home.

When the other two families were gone, the kitchen was cleaned up, and Sheila was off on her perennially mysterious personal business, Robin went into the sitting room and sat at the piano. Before she knew what was happening, before she had a chance to decide what she wanted to play or to find the sheet music for it, her hands found the keys and coaxed slow, happy notes from them. She closed her eyes and listened to the tune that was pouring directly from her heart to her fingertips, leaving her brain as a delighted bystander.

Sheila spent the day on the beach, waiting for the tide to go out. When she could walk out to Haystack Rock, she sprinted across the sand, scrambled up the loose rocks, and worked her way around to the sea side. She climbed higher than she’d ever gone before and perched on a flat, guano-splattered ledge that faced out to sea, ignoring the indignant gulls and the HRAP volunteers who screamed at her from around the corner to come down this instant; they couldn’t get far enough out on the sand to actually see her.

She pulled a torn-out magazine page from her back pocket and smoothed it out on her thigh. It was a bird’s-eye view of a tall, four-masted sailing ship that had to be nearly 300 feet long. The crew was hoisting sail for unknown lands.

When the sheriff came she ignored him, too. There was nothing they could do as long as she stayed up there; not without endangering the thing they were trying to protect. She climbed down eventually, when the light was failing, and she pretended—as they handcuffed her and took her off to jail—that she was a prisoner being carted off to work as a galley slave on a pirate ship.

Chapter 11: Interlude #5

It seemed that Beth was trying to make some kind of point, but what that might be was a mystery to Jason. They usually ate in the kitchen, but tonight the formal dining room was lit by half a dozen tapers in cut glass candlesticks. The flickering light sparkled off the crystal goblets, the best china, and the real silver silverware. Soft classical music was playing, something with strings and a harpsichord that Jason couldn't identify.

He filled the wine goblets with the chilled Australian Semillon his mother had handed him. George came in from the kitchen with two side dishes and Beth followed him carrying a roast chicken on a china platter. His parents sat at the ends of the table and Jason sat alone on the long side that would have seated three or four.

"What's the special occasion?" he said when they were settled. "Looks like you're expecting royalty."

"Just the Prince of Denmark," George said darkly.

"I am not Gertrude," Beth snapped. "And neither one of you is any kind of Hamlet. Shut up and carve the chicken, George."

She passed Jason a plate of roasted potatoes. They both had to stretch to do the hand-off.

"Why are you obsessed with Wild Sands?" Jason said.

"Don't be insulting. I'm not obsessed. I'm just... very interested. You almost got engaged to that girl—"

"Did not."

"—and now you seem to be interested in the other one. I'm curious, and concerned. And besides, you know I love the ocean."

"We haven't been on a trip in over a year," George said. He gestured with his carving knife and Jason took his mother's plate down for a slice of chicken, then got one for himself.

"Not since that dreadful Texas disaster," Beth said.

"Yechh," Jason said. "Let's not talk about that."

"Agreed," George said.

They started eating. There was a long silence, longer than necessary to get the refueling process started. Jason decided to take pity on his mother.

"Well, Robin told me I should bring you two along with me next time."

"I knew I would like this girl."

"It'll probably be the second weekend in August. Does that work for you?"

"I'll make it work."

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

"You mean you'll have Jeanne take care of it."

He ducked his head to hide a smile and paid attention to his food, which was excellent as usual. Beth didn't cook often, but when she did, she did it well.

"I can't wait," George said, "to see how this little *ménage à trois* is going to work itself out."

"Oh, George, shut up," Beth said. "And pass Jason the asparagus. He looks like he could use some more."

* * *

Jason sat in front of his computer, but he wasn't seeing the project plan spread across the screen like a shredded rainbow. There was critical work to be done, but he couldn't have cared

less. Sometime in the last six months he had lost his taste for the work, lost his enthusiasm for the project, and lost his commitment to the company. They were lost but he wasn't looking for any of them; he wasn't thinking about work. He was thinking about Robin and Sheila.

Jeanne stopped as she passed by his open door.

"That's just window dressing, isn't it?" she said.

"Hmm?"

She came in and closed the door. "You're supposed to be thinking deep thoughts to assure the success of the project, the brilliance of the company's future, and the fortunes of us stockholders." He nodded vaguely. "But you're not, are you? You're thinking about a short, blonde innkeeper who bakes a mean cinnamon roll."

He really looked at her then. "Yes, I am."

"Well, good for you. No, I mean it. The rest of us will starve, but you'll live happily ever after."

When he was sure that she was kidding, he laughed weakly. "I don't see how. When Sheila finds out what I have in mind, she'll go nuclear and incinerate me, Robin, and everyone else within a five-mile radius."

"How will you tell her?"

"No idea."

"It's your own fault, you know."

"How is it my fault?"

"Somewhere in the back of that Neanderthal brain of yours, you thought you could have *both* of your floozies at the same time. Didn't you?"

"They're not floozies."

"Sorry. One floozy, one shy, intellectual, muffin-baking, piano-banging, frustrated artist."

"Sheila's not a floozy, either."

"There's no word in English for what Sheila is. Swahili might have one. I'll look it up."

"So you think I encouraged her?"

"What do I know?" Jeanne said. "I wasn't there."

"What do you think I should do?"

Jeanne paused and looked at him with fond amusement. "Well. I say screw the job, and—as much as I hate to say this, being a lifelong brunette myself—go for the blonde."

"What about Sheila?"

Jeanne shrugged. "Take your lumps and get on with your life."

"I'm taking my parents down with me this time."

"I'd pay money to see that." She stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment, then the impish smile spread over her face again. "Your mom and Sheila in the same room. Wow!" She leaned over to look at the calendar on his desk. "You've got less than two weeks before Beth brokers your marriage. I hope she picks the right girl. Should I tell Bob to schedule the bachelor party?"

"You're not funny, you know."

"Oh, yes, I am. You're just too befuddled to appreciate it."

"I'm not—"

The phone rang. Jeanne raised an eyebrow at him. Jason picked up.

"Hello."

"Hi. It's me."

Jason covered the mouthpiece. "It's Sheila!"

"Put it on speaker phone."

"What? Forget it. Get out!"

"Spoilsport." But she left, closing the door behind her.

"Sorry," Jason said. He felt nervous. Why was she calling? "I had to chase a pest out of my office. What's up?" He winced. That was lame.

"We didn't get to see much of each other on your last visit," Sheila said.

"No, we didn't." And whose fault was that? Not that she would have hung around if she knew what he wanted to say.

"I just wanted to apologize if I was abrupt or rude."

Jason's brain froze up. She wanted to apologize? Was this really Sheila or some impostor playing a practical joke?

"Um... no, it's okay."

"No, it's not. Anyway, that's all I had to say. I hope I can do better on your next trip. The eighth of August, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, see you then. Bye."

He hung up the phone, bewildered. That was not what he would have expected from a call from Sheila. Jeanne knocked and threw open the door.

"What happened?" she said.

"You weren't listening in?"

"No. I have a few shreds of professional dignity left. But I did bounce right on over when the line light went out. What did she say?"

"She apologized."

"What?"

"Apologized. For being rude and... abrupt."

Jeanne laughed so hard she had to lean on the edge of his desk. She was still laughing when she walked out of his office and closed the door.

Riding home on MAX that night, Jason was suddenly overcome with the creepy feeling that all the other riders were really aliens wearing rubber human masks. At a prearranged signal, all of them would whip off their disguises and reveal him to be the only true human on board. Whereupon they would fall on him and tear him to bloody shreds with their fangs, claws, and tentacles.

He was later than usual getting home. He'd had to stay to catch up on the work he hadn't done earlier in the day, and it took longer than it should have because Sheila's phone call had messed him up further than he already was. George wasn't there, thankfully, so Jason could collapse on the couch with his mail, and have a nervous breakdown in peace and privacy.

Hiding among the bills and junk mail was a speckled, earth tone envelope with the return address "Wild Sands Bed & Breakfast." Jason groaned: not another bombshell from Sheila! He didn't think he could deal with any more weirdness in one day. But he tore it open anyway and saw that it was from Robin. She had tidy, small, angular handwriting.

Dear Jason,

I believe I owe you more of an answer to your question than I felt comfortable giving in person.

I know that you have met Mark and talked with him. Furthermore, circumstances here may be about to get even more complicated than they have been in the past. Sheila's court date is set for just before you return, but her lawyer is confident she can avoid time in prison. I've had a tentative offer to buy the B&B. These things ought to be clarified so you aren't utterly confused by them on your next visit.

It's true that Mark was accustomed to visiting the B&B every day. I was not aware, although apparently everyone else in town knew, that he was in fact courting me. He actually proposed marriage to me in June, but after some reflection I declined his proposal. He took it calmly, but he has stopped his daily visits and I haven't seen him since.

I hope that explains everything. We look forward to seeing you and your parents in August.

Sincerely,

Robin Eastburn

Explain everything? Mark had proposed? Sheila was going to prison? Someone wanted to buy the B&B? She hadn't explained *anything*!

Jason felt faint. He needed food, a stiff drink, and a lot of explanations. Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter 12: Fugue #6

Jason pulled his car up to the B&B and immediately jumped out as if it were full of hornets. He stumbled away from the car and took a deep breath of salt air. What he really needed right now was a long, long stroll down the beach—alone.

George got out of the passenger side and opened the back door for Beth. Even from twenty feet away, Jason could tell that her groaning was a sham. She made a big show of unfolding from the small back seat and stretching her back. When she saw him watching her, she groaned again and put her hands in the small of her back.

“You should have let me drive,” she said. “I’m going to have to go to the chiropractor when we get back home.”

Jason strode over to the car and furiously began to unload the trunk. He had his small duffel, his father had one small carry-on, and his mother had three full-sized suitcases. For two days.

When he straightened up, he saw Robin standing on the porch. She looked nervous.

“Oh, look,” Beth said, “it’s one of the ladies.” She called out, “Which one are you, dear?”

“That’s Robin, Mom,” Jason said. “I’ll introduce you in a second.”

Beth couldn’t wait that long. She started briskly toward the house, then remembered that she was supposed to be incapacitated and slowed down. She hobbled up the steps.

“How do you do,” she said, holding her hand out to Robin. “I’m Beth, Jason’s mother.”

“Nice to meet you,” Robin said, shaking her hand awkwardly. “Can I help you with—”

“Oh, don’t think of it. The men will bring the bags.”

They turned and watched Jason and George struggling toward them. George was fuming now, too.

“Now,” Beth said, “are you the one—”

Another car pulled up behind theirs and slammed to a stop, spraying gravel. Bob jumped out of the driver’s seat and shouted, “Ta daa!”

Jeanne got out of the passenger side, smoothed her skirt, and smiled slyly at Jason.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he said.

“You don’t think I’d miss the show, do you? This’ll be better than Cirque du Soleil.”

“I don’t believe this.”

Another woman stepped out of their car. She looked a bit like Jeanne, the same height and average build, but her black hair was cut very short.

“This is my sister, Lynn, from Boise.”

“What are you up to?” Jason said.

“What? Is it a free country or not? My sister’s never seen the ocean and we heard great things... Oh, my god, look at that.”

Jeanne had caught sight of the sea. She walked to the edge of the dunes and looked out. The ruddy sun was hanging a hand’s breadth above the water. Haystack Rock was in shadow, surrounded by a halo of swooping and diving birds that at this distance looked like a cloud of gnats. Jason knew what she was feeling, and that he wouldn’t get anything coherent out of her for a while. He turned and came face-to-face with Bob.

“What are you doing here?”

“That was a *nice* drive. I had no idea 26 was so beautiful. Never been out here before. We’ve been to the beach, of course, but down by Newport and Coos Bay, not this far north. Hey, this is a *nice*-looking B&B. Oh, which one is that?”

Jason turned and saw his mother interrogating Robin on the porch. George cursed as he dragged Beth’s suitcases up the stairs. Robin was trying gently but unsuccessfully to guide Beth out of his way. Lynn stood uncertainly by the car, waiting for her sister to come out of her trance. Bob was saying something but Jason seemed to have lost the ability to understand English. He lurched toward the house, thinking he would throw some water on his face, lock the bedroom door, and bury his head in the pillows for half an hour or so until it stopped spinning.

The white noise seemed to crescendo as he reached the porch. The door flung open and Sheila walked regally out to stand with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Welcome to Wild Sands,” she said in a loud, commanding voice. “I’m Sheila, the rapacious, demented, love-starved man-eater you’ve all been dying to meet.”

* * *

Everyone sat hushed around the dining room table as if the curtain were just about to go up on an opera.

There was nothing like aggressive lunacy to crystallize chaos into order. After Sheila’s announcement, Beth had shut up and helped George with the luggage, Jeanne had rejoined the group and led her sister and husband inside, and Sheila had simply vanished, leaving Jason and Robin standing alone by the porch steps.

“Want to get in the car and ditch them?” Jason said.

Robin took her face out of her hands and saw that they were alone. She blinked once as if someone had performed a really amazing magic trick right before her eyes. Her face relaxed and her eyes twinkled.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’ve got supper in the oven.”

“It’d be a shame to waste it,” Jason said. He held out an arm toward the door. “After you.”

Now they rustled napkins and straightened silverware, sipped from water glasses and waited for the second act.

A loud crash sounded from the kitchen, followed by shouting and a smaller crash. They could hear the swinging door creak open and a moment later Sheila walked in carrying a basket of bread.

She was wearing a little costume that Frederick’s of Hollywood might advertise as an “authentic” French maid’s uniform. A snow-white frilly collar plunged into an extremely low-cut black bodice. The gathered skirt covered her bottom, but only if she stood perfectly straight. Fish-net stockings came up to mid-thigh. She tottered into the room on stiletto heels that should have been registered as lethal weapons.

“Good evening, everyone,” she said, ignoring the open mouths and stares. “Robin bakes this bread herself, from her own recipe using a twenty-year old sourdough starter. I’m sure you’ll find it delicious. *Bon appétit*.”

She strutted back out. No one made a move for a long moment.

“Well,” Bob said, “I can see why you keep coming back, Jason.”

“You’re going to have to eat your dinner through a straw,” Jeanne hissed.

“Could someone pass the bread, please?” he said blithely.

Loud, staccato bangs like widely spaced firecrackers echoed from the kitchen. Then Sheila returned carrying a tray of salad plates. As she served each salad, she leaned over much farther than necessary to set the plate down. Neither end of her dress left much to the imagination.

George's mouth was gaping open. Beth was goggle-eyed and speechless. Jeanne and Lynn seemed about to burst out laughing, but Bob ignored the display and studiously buttered his bread.

"What are you doing, Sheila?" Jason said.

"Serving the salads, if you please."

"What are you doing in that outfit?"

"I'm living down to everyone's expectations. You could have seen this in private, you know, but I guess you had your reasons. This is probably better, anyway, don't you think?"

She set his salad plate down, leaning forward toward him. He could look down *through* her dress, from her cleavage all the way to the skirt.

"This is a wild greens salad," she said when she'd straightened up, "with caramelized pears, toasted pecans, gorgonzola cheese, and a light balsamic vinaigrette. Enjoy!"

She sashayed back out of the room.

"I've never—" Beth started to say, but was interrupted by another loud noise from the kitchen.

"What the hell are you doing?" they could hear Robin scream.

Sheila's answer was unintelligible. Robin burst into the dining room.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why she's doing this."

Sheila strode in after her like John Wayne coming through the saloon doors—except in dangerous high heels and a ridiculous wisp of a dress.

"Hush," Sheila commanded, and the hubbub that had been rising immediately fell silent. "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. Jason, everything's ready. If you can find a tux, we can get married tomorrow."

The noise rose again but died when Jason stood up.

"We are *not* engaged!"

"I know that," Sheila said. The room was totally silent. None of them had expected her to admit it. "But we can get engaged tonight and be married tomorrow. I'm willing. I've got a license, a minister, a dress, and a cake—and your parents are here. Just say the word."

Everyone turned to look at him. Jason felt himself flush. His throat was tight and his shoulders ached. He was having trouble breathing. The tension built higher and higher until he couldn't stand it any more.

"No," he said. "The word is no. I'm sorry, but I don't want to marry you." Or even know you, he thought. Sheila nodded and walked calmly out of the room.

Robin looked around at her guests, who all carefully avoided eye contact, except Jason. He looked her right in the eye, then he sat down and picked up his fork.

"This salad looks good, doesn't it?" he said.

Robin went back to the kitchen. When the time came, she cleared the plates and brought in the main course by herself. None of them saw Sheila again that evening.

* * *

Jason tapped on the kitchen door and opened it just wide enough to stick his head through. Robin was rolling out cinnamon rolls. She looked up and smiled at him; the smile transformed her face. He couldn't believe that he had once thought he wouldn't notice her in a crowd. Perhaps if she were looking down while wearing a broad-brimmed hat, he might pass her by, but otherwise she would pop out of any background, especially if she were smiling.

"I know it's not my usual night—" he began, before someone shoved him into the room from behind.

He stumbled and caught himself against the work table. Bear whuffed in warning. Jason turned, expecting Jeanne or his mother, or anyone but Sheila. But there she stood, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, seeming to fill the doorway. She looked at them blankly and silently for a moment. Jason's heart was pounding.

"You can get to your chitchat in a minute," she said. "Let me give you one more thing to talk about. I'm leaving first thing in the morning, and I wanted to do this while I had you both together."

Jason half-expected her to pull a gun, but she just walked into the room and leaned on the edge of the stove.

"You're leaving?" Robin said.

"There are some things I have to work out alone, on my own. I can't do that here."

She was staring at something on the little table by the window. Jason followed her gaze and saw that Robin had anticipated him: there was already a plate of pastries and an empty milk glass waiting for him.

"You're pretty predictable, I guess," Sheila said. "Not that I could ever figure you out." She reached over and grabbed a miniature tart. "I don't know how you stay so thin, Jason," she said while chewing, "eating all this junk every Saturday night you're down here. You must not eat at all in Portland."

"You knew about that?" he said.

She nodded.

"How long?" Robin said.

"Since the second time. Who can sleep with you two honking and chattering away down here? And dancing with the dog."

Robin blushed. Jason tried to think back to the details of their conversations. He was certain there were things he would have preferred that Sheila not hear, but his mind was full of noise and he couldn't remember.

"I'm sorry—" Robin said.

"Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong. Neither did you," she said to Jason. "I've been screwed over by guys, I've been tricked, deceived, beaten, and used. And I've done all those things back. But this time, it was me. All me. It was just your bad luck to be nearby when I had my meltdown."

"Maybe it wasn't such bad luck," Jason said.

She looked at him, glanced at Robin, and looked back. "Maybe not." She wiped the crumbs off her hands and turned to go.

"Where are you going?" Robin said.

Sheila turned back. "First thing in the morning I'm going to get my deposits back on the dress and the cake. Then I'm going to find some way to sail around the world. I want to do one of those cruises where you work as crew."

"I know some guys who've done that," Jason said. "Rich, single guys."

Sheila gave him a feral grin. "Maybe someday. First I need to get my head clear. They say the open sea is the place for that—to find out what's important in your life."

She leaned toward him a bit, as if she might hug him, or give him a good upper cut. He held out his hand. She looked down at it for a second, then smiled and shook it.

“Take care of yourself,” she said warmly. She started to leave again, but Robin rushed up and hugged her hard. “I’m sorry to leave you alone with this place,” Sheila said.

“I’ll manage,” Robin said. “Wait—you have another court date next week.”

“Forget that! Let them come and find me if they want me so bad.” She laughed like a maniac and walked out the door.

“Court date?” Jason said.

“It’s a long story.”

He sat down at the table and pulled the plate toward him. “I’ve got time,” he said.

* * *

It was a subdued group that gathered in the dining room for breakfast.

“Where’s Jeanne?” Jason asked Bob.

“Dunno,” Bob whispered. “She got up early, said she wanted to go for a walk on the beach. I haven’t seen her since.” Something occurred to him. “Do they have sharks here?”

She walked in a few minutes later with a dreamy look on her face, and people began seating themselves quietly. There was nothing more than rustles and a few whispers, and the guilty clink of silverware. Only Jason had any idea how little drama there would be this morning. Everyone else looked as if they half-expected the Devil himself to walk through the door.

Instead it was Robin, carrying the tray of baked goods. She named the pastries as she set the little plates down: lemon blueberry cake, marionberry tartlets, almond poppy seed muffins, chocolate cherry bread, raspberry turnovers, and on a larger plate, cinnamon rolls. The newcomers stared at the profusion with glazed eyes. Jason started in, but no one else had yet touched anything when Robin returned shortly with juice and coffee.

“I’ll be back with your quiche in a moment,” she said, by way of warning. No one moved. “Help yourselves.” They were deer in the headlights of her cornucopia. Jason grinned; he remembered his first time. “Eat!”

That broke the spell. Bob groaned and lunged for the biggest cinnamon roll. The rest began sampling the other things.

“So, Jason,” Jeanne said, “I hear you’re leaving Zebra.”

“What?” both of his parents said in unison.

“How did you know?”

“A little bird told me. Well, you know how I feel about that place. I’m glad you’re leaving, because now I can walk away with a clear conscience.”

“Huh?”

“Honey,” Bob said, “what are you talking about?”

“Wait a minute,” George said. “Jason, you’re quitting your job?”

“Yes,” he said, “I am.”

“Since when?”

“Since last night.”

“Oh, now, that’s quite enough,” Beth said. “What is going on here? Has everyone gone crazy? First your fiancée, or ex-fiancée, or whatever she is, dresses up like a tramp and does a strip show, and now you’re quitting your job? I’ve never seen such a loony—”

“Beth,” George said firmly. “Shut up.” Her jaws clacked together. “Son. What are you doing?”

"I'm going to move here, to Cannon Beach. There's a nice little office for lease in the center of town, with a great view of the water. I'm going to buy a house and set up a consulting company and try to have a life again."

George stared at him for a long moment. Then he leaned back in his chair.

"Well, that's the best damned idea I've heard in twenty years."

"Hear hear," Robin said from the doorway. She set a tray down on the sideboard and began serving the plates. "This is an asparagus and Gruyère quiche, with vegetarian sausages on the side."

"Vegetarian sausages?" Beth whispered, as if she'd said "chocolate-covered snakes." George glared at her and she raised her hands in surrender.

"Honey," Bob said, "what's going on?"

"We're having a mid-life crisis, dear," Jeanne said. She tried the quiche and grinned.

"We are?"

"Yes, we are. You know how much I hate my job. Jason was the only remotely nice thing about it. I'm giving notice on Monday—and screw the stock options."

"Okay. What are you going to do instead?"

"Well," Jeanne said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "I hear there's the most wonderful B&B for sale on the Oregon coast. It's in a lovely spot and it does a great business. And it has a part-time pastry chef who's willing to stay on."

Jason turned and looked at Robin, who was still standing in the doorway, leaning on the doorframe. She smiled at him.

"You didn't say anything about this last night," he said.

"She didn't decide for sure until this morning."

Jason turned back to Jeanne. "How long have you been cooking this up?"

"A while. Don't look at me like that, it's your fault. You were the one singing its praises. When I called Robin to make your reservation a few months ago, I suggested I might be interested and we've been talking ever since."

"Great," Bob said. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to run an investment counseling business from the maid's room upstairs."

"I am? That sounds nice. Does the maid's room have a view?"

"It has a wonderful view," Robin said. "Looking straight at Haystack Rock."

"Okay, I'm in." He helped himself to a slice of the chocolate cherry bread.

Jason turned in his seat to face Robin again. "She said part-time pastry chef."

Robin smiled shyly. "I think it's time to start painting again."

Jason grinned back at her and everyone went back to their food. Robin pulled up another chair and sat at the corner of the table. Jason offered her a slice of the chocolate cherry bread.

"No, thanks," she said. "I don't like sweets. Especially chocolate."

He gaped at her. She laughed, broke off a piece of the bread, and stuffed it in his mouth.

A few minutes later there was a thump from outside on the porch. Jeanne caught Robin's eye and Robin nodded.

"Lynn," Jeanne said to her sister, "could you do me a big favor, please?"

"Sure," Lynn said. She had finished eating, leaving half her food untouched, and was bemusedly watching everyone else pack it in as if they were about to start a two-week fast.

"I left a folder with some information on the B&B deal on the front seat of the car. Could you grab it for me, please?"

“Okay.” Jeanne handed her the keys and turned back to her food.

Lynn walked out the front door and collided with the biggest guy she’d seen in years. He barely moved, but she completely lost her balance. A moment later she realized that he was holding her by the elbows and her feet weren’t touching the ground. He set her down gently and stepped back.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. “Seems like I’m always walking into people when I’m working here.”

“W-working,” she stammered. “What are you doing?”

“This porch railing has a bad spindle. I turned a new one yesterday, now I’m just installing it.”

She looked at the fluted, painted wood post in his hand. It precisely matched the ones in the porch railing.

“You made that?” she said.

“Sure.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Not really. I made all of them. One more’s no big deal.”

“Did you build this house?”

“Me? No, this house is a lot older than me. Older than my grandfather. I just fixed her up a bit.”

She held out her hand and smiled for the first time in months. “My name is Lynn.”

His rough, strong hand engulfed hers. “Mark. Mark Hammer.”

Chapter 13: Coda

The sun shone down on the circling, calling birds from a pale, cloudless sky. A light breeze ripped the tops off the waves as they broke. The buildings that hugged the top of the dunes receded until they were lost in hazy distance. Jason and Robin walked north past Haystack Rock, down the featureless beach that was swarming with people. They might as well have been alone.

After a few minutes, Jason reached over and took her hand. It was soft and cool. They strolled without speaking until they reached the little creek with its wide, shallow, twisting delta. Jason smiled to himself and stopped on the edge of the rushing water. He turned to face Robin without letting go of her hand.

“What?” she said.

Without a word, he scooped her up into his arms and waded across the cold stream. She laughed and squirmed at first, but stopped when she realized that she didn’t want to be dumped in the middle of the creek.

“Why did you do that?” she said when he set her down on the other side. “We could have crossed upstream without even needing to jump.”

“I did it because you didn’t ask me to.”

“All right, then.” She laughed again. “I think you’re going to fit right in, here.”

“Me too.” They continued walking north. “I’ve been thinking. There are so many galleries in town, you shouldn’t have any trouble getting your paintings in one of them.”

“We’ll see. My paintings aren’t painted yet. I’m not going to worry about selling them. I just want to see what they’re going to turn out to be, first.”

They passed a gang of children digging furiously in the sand, and veered landward when a spray of excavated material landed at their feet.

“I can’t wait to move here,” Jason said. “When we live in the same town, I can come over every night while you’re baking. We can talk, I’ll get fat, and we can dance with Bear.”

She laughed and stopped, letting go of his hand.

“You are something else,” she said.

“What?”

“You don’t understand how it’s going to be between us, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m going to bake during the day from now on. And neither one of us will ever have insomnia again.”

The wind blew her hair into and then out of her face. It took him a moment to get it. Then he laughed, and she smiled. And then he kissed the smile right off her face.

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About the Author

Chris Mason is a software engineer who would rather have been a writer. He worked in the corporate world for 18 years, including ten years at Microsoft. After leaving Microsoft for good he founded GrowlyBird Software, which develops free applications for Macintosh users.

Wild Sands is his fourth novel. Three other novels, all completely different, are available as ebooks on obooko.com