



I ONLY SPOTTED THE PHOTO because Gail stopped to talk to her son's hockey coach. He was a moose of a guy, like one of our regulars in cells who required three men to restrain. Or, as the joke goes, one woman.

While they discussed Mighty Mite registration, I busied myself in a dark corner of the garage. A shoebox full of pictures was going for three dollars — cheap gold plastic frames with calendar prints of kittens, flowers, babies, plus the one that caught my eye. It was an old sepia photo of twin girls, about four or five, dressed for a formal pose in long ruffled dresses with big bows in their ringlets and black lace-up boots. It looked exactly like one my grandmother had given me of her and her sister. Hardly possible coming from a home here in rural Saskatchewan, but I couldn't resist the urge to compare them.

"I just want the one picture," I said to the large woman sitting at the cash table. Here's three dollars for it."

"Three dollars for the whole box."

"I don't want the whole box." I thought I was doing her a favour by allowing the box to sell twice, but her expression told me I knew nothing about garage sales.

Seeing us, Gail pulled away from the hockey coach and came to my rescue. "She's flying, Joyce. She doesn't need any more baggage. This is my friend Bella from Vancouver — Constable Dryvynsydes. She and Monty trained together."

I winced that Gail had to work in the "Constable," but kept a friendly smile on my face. Joyce nodded without returning the smile. When she

accepted my three dollars, I felt I had cleared customs with an undeclared pair of shoes on my feet.

“Whose stuff is this?” Gail asked.

“Multi-family, looks like Cindy Mingus,” said Joyce, distracted by a woman behind us who seemed eager to transfer a Crock-Pot and an armful of jigsaw puzzles to the table.

Gail and I moved out of the garage and down the driveway as fast as we could, leaving the carton of gilt-edged pictures behind. Before we reached the safety of Gail’s minivan, Joyce bellowed, “Don’t forget the bake sale!”

Gail let out an exaggerated sigh. “You didn’t have to buy anything. I just wanted to give you a sample of local colour. What we do for recreation here in the boonies.”

I studied the picture again. “I wanted this. It looks like one Sara gave me — you must have seen it. The only evidence she had of a twin sister. I’ll dig mine out when I get home, if I can ever find it.” I stared at the bows on the girls’ heads — one straight and neat, the other floppy. Sara said her floppy bow was the only way she could tell herself from her sister. “But there’s no way they could be the same. Sara’s was taken in Nanaimo.”

Gail nodded. Old friendships spared a lot of explanations. She had known my grandmother since we started kindergarten together in Vancouver and, like me, had called her Sara. All through elementary school, Gail and I were known as the Gold Dust Twins because of our fair hair, but in Grade Seven the nickname ended when my hair darkened to khaki brown. At the same time, I shot up like a space needle and Gail grew curves. By the time we graduated from high school, I had come to rest at 5'11" and had a few mounds of my own. Gail never did make it past 5'2", but she stayed blonde and was always the cutest in any group. When she came to visit me in training at Depot in Regina, Monty, one of my troop mates, fell in love with her at first sight, and not much later, she reciprocated. I had to sign a prenuptial agreement promising, for my part in this match, to visit them in whatever isolated place Monty ended up. Willow Point, Saskatchewan, was the third such outpost, but his corporal’s hooks came with this move, an

impressive promotion for someone with his years of service. All the while, I was swallowed up in the lower mainland, where the RCMP acts as the municipal force for several cities surrounding Vancouver. I served with the Burnaby detachment and rented an apartment on the Vancouver side of Boundary Road. It could have been worse — I could be working in Surrey.

Gail pulled into the driveway of their grey vinyl-sided, split-level home. It was more or less like their other quarters provided by the RCMP, and more or less like all the houses on the short crescent. Monty greeted us with baby Macy in one hand, a barbecue brush in the other, and their son Clancy whooping around him.

“What do you think of our town — *enchanté, non?*” Monty grinned, as Gail took Macy into the house, Clancy following. Monty’s grin had won over everyone at Depot, staff and recruits alike. Back then, he had a Québécois accent, now almost extinct under Gail’s influence. He must have inherited his sense of humour from his mother who named him Montcalm and his twin brother Wolfe.

“Terrific place. For sure you’ll want to retire here.” I followed Monty to the deck where spicy meat cubes were cooking on skewers.

“Put your feet up.” He gestured toward a chaise lawn chair and handed me a glass of cold beer. “This is recuperation time for you.”

*The best mirror is an old friend.* That line was used to introduce one of the many eulogists at Mom’s funeral, and never had anyone confirmed it more than these two. Here they were propping me up again. Macy was born six weeks before Mom’s crazy death on Valentine’s Day, but that didn’t stop Gail and Monty from flying out for the funeral. I raised my glass. “Here’s to your new home.”

Monty raised his bottle from the barbecue. “Life can start for us now that you’re here to baptize it. How are you? And your dad?”

“Confused. Both of us. Six months haven’t made it any more real. Dad’s still at a loss. He’s practically given up golf without her, and crosswords just don’t fill the days for him. I think I’ve persuaded him to take a course in cartoon drawing.”

“Cartoons?” Monty almost lost a mouthful of beer.

“He needs a project and has always been creative. Even though

Mom was the art teacher, he was the one who drew the most wonderful comic strips for me as a kid. Great fantasy stories, lovable characters. He even made up songs for them to sing.” Monty smiled, sliding the kabobs easily from their skewers into a stainless steel bowl. Whenever I tried that, they ricocheted into the barbecue lid. “And I might take a history course. Get started on the academics both my parents wanted me to take instead of becoming a cop. Aren’t I contrary? Now that Mom’s gone, I’m ready for the course she would have died to have me take.”

Mom and died. I still could not speak that combination of words without a choking feeling starting in my throat and ending up in my eyes. I saw death regularly and remember my first next-of-kin notification two weeks into the job, when I had to tell a mother her sixteen-year-old daughter had been killed in a car accident. Tears fought to get out then, but within a couple of days, more sad files had pushed that memory aside. I could not bury my mother’s file so easily. I was barely getting used to the idea that Sara was gone and that was already seven years ago. Dying seemed such a secretive betrayal, a covert operation. Each on her own, no consultation with Dad or me.

Monty shook his head. “I still can’t believe it. I’ll never forget Retha jiving with your dad at our wedding. She looked like a teenager.”

“How do you think it felt being mistaken for sisters when your mother is in her fifties and you *are* a teenager?”

Not that we looked alike. I was a Dryvynsydes in height and fine hair, whereas the petite Retha had a thick, manageable blonde bob all her life. Her size four had not changed since she was fifteen, even after she had me at age thirty-six. In her fifties she started running, first half marathons, then full, always ending up in the top ten for her age division. Perfection did not stop with her body. She regularly won awards for imparting a love of art and music to her students in an innovative way. To which could be added: first-class hostess, patient mother, uplifting wife. After Dad retired as high school principal, she made sure they took at least one enlightenment trip a year — a museum tour of Spain and France, an archeological dig in Egypt. She would never go for the idle beach vacation in Mexico or Hawaii, though she did accompany

Dad on a golf holiday to Palm Springs every year, and learned enough of the game herself to challenge him on the odd hole. Efficiency on every front. Her supreme act of efficiency was to outrun, outexercise, and outstep old age by dropping dead on her treadmill just after she turned sixty-seven. The only role Superwoman Retha Dryvynsydes could not have played was a feeble old lady, so she added an early death to her list of achievements. Congratulations, Retha.

“You ready with the meat, honey?” Gail bounded onto the deck with two bowls of salad and a basket of rolls, Clancy behind her. Two sweeps of her arms and the cedar picnic table was transformed into something out of *Chatelaine* — fruit-spangled tablecloth, glasses, plates, and napkins in assorted solid fruit colours. By the time the adults sat down, Clancy was eating quietly and neatly at one end of the table, and Macy was cooing contentedly on a blanket nearby.

“You’re another Retha,” I said.

“I wish,” said Gail, “but not with these thighs.” Monty gave her bare tanned legs an approving pat.

“So how’s Willow Point so far?”

“Pretty quiet at work,” said Monty. “A few impaireds, B&Es, gas theft from farms, vandalism. Hey, it’s a service town for farmers — the better criminals go elsewhere. Last week we got called to get a cat out of a tree.”

Gail shook her head as Monty spoke. “That garage sale is about as lively as it gets. Maybe once Clancy is in school and I start teaching skating, I might find some kindred spirits tucked away. So far it’s only been hockey mothers — Joyce was one of those. As usual, I’ll end up on more committees than I want, because there are too few women to go around.”

I thought of Gail and me as teenagers, both of us privileged — no, make that pampered. She concentrated on figure skating and I spread myself thin into everything. As an only child I was encouraged to sample both parents’ passions: dancing, figure skating, piano, art, sports, along with decent grades, which I barely and lazily maintained. In our own ways, Gail and I had both rebelled from a life where rebellion was not necessary. Though never forced upon us, a university degree was

certainly encouraged, so what did I do? Waited tables at the Cactus Club for a couple of years while waiting for my acceptance into the RCMP, which, after waitressing, was the second most unexpected line of work either parent would have considered for me. And Gail's parents, both pharmacists, had envisioned a profession for their daughter in pro skating, journalism, or pharmacy, where bake sales, hockey camps, and community skating lessons were on the edge of a rewarding career and family life, not the focus. Not that they were disappointed with Monty as a son-in-law, but they had not expected Gail to find him so soon.

"We won't be here forever, thank God," said Monty, helping himself to a second plate of food.

"If we ever get close to a large centre again, I'm going to take some courses." Had Gail heard us talking? She had started an arts degree before she got married. "In journalism. Amazing how raising a family brings out the urge to do something for your own development. Seems you're always tending to someone else's needs." She wiped Clancy's face with a napkin and released him to play in the back yard.

Monty escaped from this discussion into the house for more beer. RCMP spouses make as big a commitment to the force as the members, and he knew it.

"I wouldn't know about that," I said.

"No one setting your heart aflutter?" Just as Macy was about to fall forward on her face from a sitting position, Gail scooped her up and plunked her on her knee.

"Only as in 'How do I get rid of this loser?' There are lots around, and I could be a magnet if I don't watch it." One way I had not let my parents down was in marrying too early. In four months I would be thirty-one and had lost my only prospect.

"Is Ray still on your mind?"

"Yeah, with all the other creeps. He doesn't stray into my good thoughts anymore, but he has left me with a healthy suspicion of his gender."

Ray Kelsey was my first and only love. In high school I hardly dated and like to think it was because I was too tall for all the boys. Ray Kelsey was 6'4". He came to my rescue when I was a rookie cop going to

court for the first time. He was a rookie Crown prosecutor and helped me through my jitters. We did not get together then because he was going out with a woman he had met in law school. Too clingy, he told me when they broke up. “What I like about you, Arabella, is your independent spirit.” Three of the best years of my life later, my future was all planned in my head. We had even lingered at the ring section in jewellery stores not long before he dropped the bombshell about the blonde bombshell in his office. “The problem with you, Bella, is that you’re too independent.”

Monty reappeared with two bottles of beer. “Spoke to Chad Simmons last week. He got a corporal’s posting in Porcupine Plains. Asked how the best-looking member of our troop was doing.”

Trust Monty to give me a lift.

“Your best-looking troopmate bought something at the garage sale today,” said Gail.

“What could Willow Point offer a woman from Vancouver?” asked Monty, then looked at Gail and wished he hadn’t.

“An old photo. It looks identical to one I have of my grandmother and her twin sister.”

“Maybe it is.”

“How could it be? She told me her mother had it taken when she and her sister were four. It’s the only picture of them in existence. Just before their mother died of the flu, she gave them each a print. The girls were only eight and were sent to live with different relatives. Her sister died of the flu a year after that.”

“It still could be a match.”

I shook my head vigorously. “What are the odds of that? Both sisters ended up with aunts who didn’t want them, so there’s little chance either would keep a photo of a dead girl. These were poor families. Besides, this all happened on Vancouver Island, around Nanaimo. Almost a hundred years ago. This is Saskatchewan.”

“You’re talking in terms of odds. I took a course last month in Regina on the patterns of criminal behaviour. There are a few maybe, just enough to confuse you. More weird things happen than anyone could ever make up if he wrote a book. I guess we need guidelines to get our

leads, but at the back of my mind I'm always thinking, the solution to this case is going to be something we least expect."

"So that's why you're such a young corporal."

Macy had fallen asleep on Gail's knee, and she rose carefully to slip into the house with her.

"You'll get there," Monty said.

"I'm not sure I want to. I'm not sure about anything anymore." I had written the corporal's exam and my mark was mid-range, like all the other marks in my life. The next step was to apply for a corporal's position when one became available. Experience, references, and other qualifications played as much a role as exam results, but I was still missing one important requirement: the motivation to put my name in.

"Then you're headed in the right direction."

"Seriously. I often wonder what I'm doing on the force. Lately I feel the way I did on the basketball court in junior high." Gail returned with a tray of strawberry shortcake and whipped cream just as Clancy arrived panting at the deck. "Gail can tell you about that. The coach made me centre, captain even, because I was so tall. I was terrified when the ball came to me, because I didn't know what to do with it. Possession of the ball brought the opposing guards, waving their arms in my face, threatening me with B.O. fumes, trying to freak me out. Finally, I pretended to be busy guarding someone whenever I thought the ball might come my way. My back was always to the passer. I should never have been there in the first place."

Monty laughed and heaved Clancy and two plates of shortcake onto his big knees. "Must be a slump. You seemed a natural at Depot." In scenarios, we hated following you because you had such good instincts dealing with people.

"Maybe since Mom died I've been questioning everything. Did I join for the right reasons? I can't even remember why now."

"I can," said Gail. "I remember the exact day. It was fall. We were in Grade Eleven, walking home through dry leaves. We came to that old house with all the junk in the backyard, and a crowd of people were standing along the sidewalk. The ambulance was already there and two police cars drove up. A male and female officer jumped out of one and

went into the house; a third man kept the crowd away. A few minutes later the paramedics brought a covered body out on a stretcher and we heard someone behind us say, 'Suicide. She blew her brains out.' The female officer went back and forth between house, car, and ambulance, and you were awestruck. You said, 'That's what I'd like to be, because you get into places no one else does.' You wanted to know what the dead woman was wearing, what was in her fridge, if she had left dishes in her sink. You hoped she had at least spared herself some housework."

"What recall. You should be a reporter," I said, setting my empty plate down. "Or a chef."

Monty slid Clancy off his knee and came back with a thermos pot of coffee and three cups. "And I'm witness to another reason you gave at Depot. You were the only one in our troop who said you had joined to help lost children."

I covered my head in my hands. "Right. Aren't those two solid motives for upholding law and order: nosiness and pity. Remind me to watch what I say around you two."

The sun was casting carnival-coloured flames in the evening sky, so brazen you wanted to stop talking — even breathing. Gail lit a citronella candle at our feet. I almost said I had joined the force so I could meet Monty, and Gail could marry him, and I could nourish myself forever with moments like this in the company of these two. But my tear ducts had been working overtime recently so instead I said, "Whoever said the most beautiful sunsets in the world were in Saskatchewan and some corner of India was at least half right."



WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY APARTMENT in Vancouver, there was a message waiting. “Bella, hope you had a good trip. Call when you get in. Love, Dad.”

My father so seldom phoned for fear of disturbing me, that he signed off on my answering service as if he were writing a letter. In response to this rare occasion, I called immediately.

“Hi, Dad. Everything okay?”

His Hello voice lifted. “Fine, fine. How’s Gail?”

“Doing well. They send their love.”

“Monty? Does he like his new posting?”

“Their town is small and remote, but they’re making the most of it, the way they always do.”

“You must be tired. You on the early shift tomorrow?”

“No, I’m not really tired at all. Do you want me to come over?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. I probably should not have bothered you with that message, but your Aunt Janetta had a heart attack. She’s okay, so don’t worry. I thought I might go over to Nanaimo on the weekend to see her. I don’t imagine you have the time off.”

I wondered lately how a man in full command of a large school for twenty-five years could be so hesitant and apologetic. Since my mother’s death, he made me think of a collapsed drawstring bag, requiring someone to tighten the straps to give him a purpose again. I had to remind myself he was ten years older than Mom, and a surprise blow like that would leave anyone close to eighty helpless. “As a matter of fact, I do have Sunday off and I’ll be happy to go over with you. How is Janetta?”

“Still in hospital, but Lawrence said she is recovering steadily. Well, thanks. I’ll let you get back to your unpacking now.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Unlike my parents, I did not require absolute order, so the notion of unpacking my suitcase before I needed the items inside had not occurred to me. I thought about Aunt Janetta instead. Considering the fact she was Dad’s only sibling, we did not see much of her and her family.

Mom planned the few get-togethers we had when I was young, and they were always on the island. The only time I remember seeing Janetta in our home in Vancouver was after Sara’s funeral, and then Mom’s. She and Uncle Lawrence and their two sons and wives were all in attendance for those. Aunt Janetta was nice enough in her reserved way, but I could never get over the letdown of her looking just like Sara but not acting like her. Not fair of me, because no one acted like Sara.

Sara had named her daughter after her lost twin Janet, who was named after their mother Jane. I thank my mother for insisting on my name — awkward and old-fashioned as Arabella is in its full form — or Dad might have tried to wring out one more version. He admitted later he had Janine in mind. He argued that Arabella was too long for Dryvynsydes, having been stuck with a mouthful himself all his life. He pointed out that Llewellyn Dryvynsydes contained only one “y” fewer than that long Welsh place name with fifty-eight letters. And if it were spelled the Welsh way, “Llewyllyn” or “Llywyllyn,” it would have been tied or had even more. From what Sara could recall of her eight-year-old sister, Janetta had carried on the name in a fitting manner. Janet was always quiet and careful, Sara said — *she* was the defiant one who spoke her mind.

I thought of the picture and fished it out of my handbag. The wide-eyed curiosity of the floppy-bowed twin did contrast with the stoic look on the face of the girl with the neat bow. Or was I just imagining this now, thinking about Sara and the two Jane derivatives? And what was the original Jane like? I would have to look for that picture to see how far off I was. A quick survey of my sparsely furnished one-bedroom apartment told me it wasn’t here.

Being at Gail’s confirmed how much of a homemaker she was and

I wasn't. Within minutes of her arrival anywhere, she surrounded her family with pottery, candles, pictures, cushions, fluffy quilts. On the contrary, I realized I had gone for the prison-cell look. Why else had I chosen the striped mattress ticking sofa from Ikea years ago? And the block end tables to go with it? My one item of elegance was Sara's gold brocade love seat I had claimed when her apartment was dismantled. Janetta had taken a few things and Dad had her Queen Anne chair in their little den.

Three posters hung on my living room wall — Serengeti zebras (more stripes), *Cats* (the first big musical Mom took me to as a teenager), and a colourful Caribana poster I had picked up in Toronto when I went there once with Ray for a law conference. In my bedroom I displayed my photo collection — Mom, Dad, Gail and family, my graduation, party shots with friends making faces. Those were the trappings of my present life. All my other belongings, including the photo from Sara, had been left in the family home, which Dad still occupied. Was I poised all these years to move back?

I realized I had lied to Dad: I was exhausted. I had also lied to Gail. Ray Kelsey was still an open wound. The dumper often said it wasn't the breakup itself that hurt, it was the way the dumper handled it, yet I had never heard anyone complimented on his breaking-up skills. As if there could be an easy way to receive such news. I remembered Ray picking me up from my shift to take me to a bar in downtown Vancouver, but beyond driving out of the detachment parking lot, the evening was a blank. I could not really say how he handled it. I do know that later in the elevator going back to my apartment, I could not understand how the other passenger — a teenager with a baseball cap — could stand there so calmly when the entire world had suddenly become a disaster zone. Why wasn't someone screaming for help?

And then when my mother's relentless encouragement had almost convinced me there was a reason to keep on living, she dropped dead. So I had probably averaged three or four hours of sleep a night for the past nine months, not enough when it comes to cuffing a two-hundred-pound guy who doesn't want to be cuffed. Especially the one last week who decided to take all his clothes off in his car before surrendering. A

delicate procedure, to say the least. And one where there was no question of back or front cuffs. I fell into bed hoping to feel functional by 4:30 A.M.

Strange dreams filled the night. I was in uniform in a coal mine to protect two little girls in frilly dresses from disaster. While we waited for the cage to come down the shaft to take us out, thunder from collapsing tunnels raged around us. The lively twin became quiet and curious, ready for adventure. The quiet one began wailing because she was getting coal dust on her best dress. Their faces then turned black, and although I knew it was from soot, I also knew it was permanent. I woke up feeling powerless and full of terror because I realized we would not get out of there. As haunting and disturbing as it was for the rest of the day, the dream served a purpose: everything at work was lessened by comparison. While taking statements at two domestics, and from a hype with stolen goods, flashes of that mine scene kept coming back to me. The trouble at hand seemed almost refreshing. Even Jake, the most annoying person on our watch, made only one reference to his Volvo and abstained from his contempt for domestic vehicles when we went for breakfast. All of us felt sorry for anyone Jake stopped who was driving a Dodge or Chev. He believed they should be given a ticket for stupidity.

My four twelve-hour shifts went quickly. Sleep, work, supper with Dad twice at Wendy's on Cambie and Broadway — his kitchen since Mom died. No more upsetting dreams. I wanted that picture, but was resisting the memories that would come from the search. When I pulled up in front of the house early Sunday morning, I was verging on rested. Dad was pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, always ready an hour early.

"The ferry leaves at eight forty-five," he said, opening the door of my little Mazda before I came to a complete halt. He had given me that information at least once each of the past four days.

"We'll make it with time to spare, Dad." I sped away, screeching my tires, partly to make a point and partly because sometimes off-duty, I got unexpected impulses to act like the people I arrest.

"Did you have breakfast?"

“I’m fine.”

“I brought you an egg and some toast.” Carefully he unwrapped a paper napkin from the pocket of his jacket and handed me a peeled boiled egg. He opened another napkin, which I spread across my capri pants and set the buttered toast on it. He had taken over where Mom left off trying to change my habit of not eating for three hours after I got up. I nodded thanks and pointed to the two travel mugs of coffee in the holder. “Yours is in front.”

As anticipated, we were first in line at the ferry and had forty-five minutes to walk around the parking lot. Once on board, I calmed down. When you drive all day for a living, it’s a break to have someone else at the helm. Dad suggested we walk around the deck. We watched the Gulf Islands loom and recede, the sea breeze bringing new light and colour to Dad’s face, causing his nose to drip. It was as if his island bloodline surfaced when he got close to Nanaimo, even though he was a born and bred prairie boy until he moved to Vancouver in his late teens. I took a tissue from the pocket of my pants and handed it to him. I always kept a supply for my own chronic nasal drip, which I had inherited from him, and he from his mother.

“When did you last speak to Janetta?”

“Easter maybe. And Canada Day. She called to see how I was doing.”

“She isn’t much for keeping in touch, is she?”

“No worse than I am. When your grandmother was alive, she was the pipeline to both families. She did such a good job we never learned to do it for ourselves.”

“Sara’s been gone for seven years.”

“In other words, Janetta never felt totally comfortable with your mother. She intimidated her or something, though I don’t think your mother intended it that way.” Dad had a habit of starting explanations with “in other words” even before he had offered any on the subject.

“A lot of people are intimidated in the presence of perfection. I know I was at times. Especially as a teenager.”

Dad grinned wistfully. “She couldn’t help herself. We would never have lasted if I had tried to match those standards of hers, so I decided early that I had to be my own lackadaisical self.”

“Hardly. Don’t forget you’re the one who *did* last.”

A gull groomed itself on the railing next to us. “The only one in my family who could hold a candle to your mother’s drive and passions was your grandmother. Whatever she had got diluted in Janetta and me.”

Dad was slipping into his cozy cove of inadequacy. “Some people accomplish just as much as others, only not with the same intensity. Sara is remembered as the flamboyant one, but that doesn’t mean she outdid Grandpa never missing a day of fifty years working at the bank.” I then switched to diversion tactics, as I had seen Gail do with Clancy when he had his mind set on something hazardous or unnecessary. “Do you remember that picture of Sara and her sister as little girls?”

“Vaguely.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Probably in one of those boxes in the bedroom closet. Your mother looked after those things.”

That’s what I thought. The memory corner.

I brought two more coffees from the cafeteria and by the time we finished them, we were pulling into Departure Bay. A wave of vertigo hit me as we descended the steel staircase to the vehicle deck and I grabbed Dad’s arm for balance until we reached my car. I hoped it wasn’t a killer headache coming along for the ride, because they often struck when I was supposed to be relaxed. We drove off the ramp onto roads unknown to me, but Dad said he knew how to get to Uncle Lawrence’s house, and in his usual prepared fashion, held a Nanaimo street map as backup. He had called his brother-in-law to say which ferry we would be taking, and the front door opened the minute we pulled up to the neat green and white bungalow. I had a hazy recollection of the place when I was last here as a teenager, but a family room and extra bedroom had been added, changing the shape of the house.

Uncle Lawrence met us on the front steps. He was a short, bald, pudgy man who laughed too quickly and too long to have a real sense of humour. He shook Dad’s hand and went to shake mine before I gave him a polite hug, squeezing another laugh out of him like an accordion. “Doug and Lenny were here yesterday with their families. Too bad you missed them.”

“Lenny too?” I asked, immediately regretting I had shown my preference for one of his sons. Lenny piloted small planes out of Prince George and had an easy way about him. Besides Dad, he was the only relative on either side who made me feel short. Doug was foreman of a sawmill in Campbell River and a replica of his father, so by standing here talking to Uncle Lawrence I had not missed seeing Doug. Because Mom and Dad had waited almost ten years for my arrival, I was much younger than all my cousins — a grand total of four. Doug and Lenny were in their forties, and the two daughters of Mom’s older sister were more like fifty. They each had families and successful careers as a lawyer and bank manager in Toronto. Of course.

“Best to go to the hospital about 12:15,” Lawrence said. “She’ll have had her lunch and they’ll be done their procedures. We can get something to eat at the cafeteria partway through the visit. She can rest that way.”

We declined Lawrence’s offer of coffee, but accepted his tour of the garden. A retired electrician, he kept busy in winter making Christmas candles out of fluorescent light bulbs for friends and in summer and fall, experimenting with prize-winning pumpkins. Janetta’s pansies, gladioli, roses, and marigolds rimmed his rows of corn, peas, beans, carrots, and potatoes, and he walked us around the whole plot. “I killed a hundred and twenty-seven potato bugs this morning. Three hundred and fourteen yesterday.”

Back in the house, I looked at the photos on the dining room wall. A close-up of me in a brown Stetson and red serge hung among duplicates we had of weddings — Sara and Grandpa, Mom and Dad, Janetta and Lawrence, Lennie and Doug and wives. Sara’s antique tea wagon and silver tea service had ended up here as well as some framed petit points and Royal Doulton figurines that were once part of her apartment. Besides these pieces, the order and organization of this household were familiar to me. Filling my nostrils was a special aroma I had not inhaled since Sara died — a clean, yeasty mixture of freshly-baked bread and Sunlight bar soap. My head insisted I did not have the connection with this house my senses were transmitting. For one thing, the large puffy sofa and recliner in patterned velvet were completely alien

to the contemporary furniture I had grown up with or the period style Sara liked. And the absence of original paintings on the walls got rid of any further notion of déjà vu. Uncle Lawrence broke into my thoughts, reminding me among other things that my dizziness was gone.

“Might as well get going. They eat early in the hospital. We’ll take our car.” He led us through the kitchen to the garage. Dad sat in the front seat with him and I sprawled in the back, a luxury for me. As he backed out, I waited for the usual joke from someone new. “I’d better watch my speed, eh? I hope you won’t give me a ticket.” I managed a laugh for the ten thousandth time.

We reached the hospital in less than ten minutes so I did not get much of an impression of Nanaimo. Vancouverites have to fight the urge not to feel superior to their island cousins — or to anybody anywhere — and I had opened my mind to a task that never presented itself. Dad and I marched through the polished corridors behind Lawrence to Aunt Janetta’s doorway; we entered slowly, passing a nurse carrying a lunch tray on her way out. Aunt Janetta was sitting up, a smile on her pale face.

We each gave her a careful hug, then pulled up chairs and sat at the side of her bed. Lawrence perched on the edge of the vacant bed in the room, cap in hand, feet barely grazing the floor.

“How nice of you to come, Lew. And for you to take time from your busy job, Bella.”

She recounted the story of her heart attack. How she finished the supper dishes, how she felt tired, how she pushed herself to water her posies because it had been so dry lately instead of sitting down to watch the news as she normally did. “She could have asked me, but oh no,” said Lawrence on cue. Then she described her indigestion, thinking it was because she had met a friend for lunch and ordered her first Thai salad, which was spicier than she liked. Then the heartburn got worse, so she went and sat in the kitchen. “He was putting the lawnmower away when the pain really started. I could barely get to the door to call him.”

“Fortunately, the ambulance came right away or the damage could have been a lot worse.”

The two of them had relived these details so many times they were now in slow motion and perfect unison. Ordinary events that would not bear repeating except for their consequences. Something like my dream where those underground tunnels were collapsing while everyday life went on above. I sat captivated by the story, mainly because Janetta became Sara in the telling. They had always looked alike, though Sara was considered pretty, feminine, and vivacious, and her daughter, neat and pleasant-looking. Today Janetta's grey hair, not yet fastened into a roll, fell around her thin face and shoulders and transported me back to the Vancouver General and my final visits to Sara. Maybe it was because I had so recently lost my mother that I suddenly saw Janetta as a necessary member of my world. A woman I hardly knew became my mother and grandmother. "You have to get better," I blurted out. At the same time my nose started dripping and it probably looked as if I were crying.

"Thank you, dear," she said, surprised. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. They want to do more tests and then I'll be released."

Dad appeared oblivious to this blurring of identities going on in my head. He knew this was his sister and not his wife or mother and continued talking to her about Lenny and Doug and how he had been doing on his own for the last six months. "Don't know how I would have managed without her," I heard him say before realizing he was talking about me.

"We're both starting courses in the fall," I said. "He's taking cartoon drawing and I'm taking history."

"We'll see," said Dad, embarrassed. "She wants me to start a course so I don't drive her crazy."

"That's perfect, Lew. You know, Bella, I used to love it when we were kids and your dad had to look after me if Mother and Dad were out. He'd draw fantasy figures the whole time. Better than the funnies, by far. What did you name your comic strip again? *The Ratchet Family*, that's it. They all looked like tools. Mrs. Ratchet had curlers in her hair, so her head looked like a ratchet wheel. Her husband was Hatchet Ratchet and he had a hatchet jaw. The son was Hammerhead and the daughter was Naillie, thin as a nail. The town they lived in was called

Latchtown, and all the doors and windows of all the houses had huge latches. The province was Patchton, so everything anybody owned was covered with patches.”

“How come you didn’t draw the Ratchets for me?” I demanded. “But I was pretty happy with Cedric the Cockroach and Thump the Butterfly.”

Janetta began to shake with laughter, more relaxed and merry than I had ever seen her.

Dad too laughed in spite of himself, then pointed out the absurdity of thinking he should attempt cartoons when there were so many young talented artists and animators in this digital age. He said he was going to work on a children’s book instead, using cartoon-type illustrations; he already had a rhyming text in mind. The courage to make this announcement to me when I had other plans for his grief therapy obviously came from having his sister and her husband in the room with us. Mob mentality — I saw it all the time on the streets. To make his point, he got up and started toward the door. “We’re tiring Janetta. We’ll go to the cafeteria and let her rest.”

Janetta looked wistful as Lawrence, Dad, and I filed out, but when we returned later, she was asleep. Her eyes opened at our approach, her face drained of the liveliness it had held earlier. Lawrence rolled up her bed so she would not have to lift her head from the pillow.

“We’d better go,” Dad said, reaching over to take his sister’s hand by way of goodbye.

“You just got here,” she murmured.

“We don’t want to undo all your treatment in one visit.”

“I wish you lived closer. It’s so good to see you both.”

“When you’re feeling better, we’ll come back again.”

The resemblance to Sara continued to amaze me and I told her so. She smiled and said Lenny had said the same thing yesterday.

“Do you have any pictures of Sara as a child?”

“The only one I’ve seen is of the two sisters with bows in their hair. Don’t you have it?”

“Somewhere. I have to search.” I decided not to bring up the look-alike photo.

“She wanted it handed down through the girls in the family and I didn’t have daughters.”

“I don’t suppose there are any photos of her mother.”

“Not that I remember. I have some of Jane’s letters — Mother gave them to me before she died. They were written to Jane’s sisters in Wales, so I don’t know how Mother ended up with them.” Janetta put her hand to her mouth and shook her head the way Sara did. “Isn’t that the limit? They’re in a trunk downstairs and I haven’t even looked at them. There was so much to sort I forgot about them.”

I could feel Dad pacing around the room behind me, a signal to get going. “I’d like to read them some day. I’d like to learn more about my great-grandmother.”

“Jane Hughes had a short, sad, hard life, that’s all I know about her. Why don’t you come back and we can go through them together.”

I kissed Janetta on the forehead and followed Dad into the corridor. Uncle Lawrence lingered a moment to inform his wife of the potato bug count and the Sears bill amount. He wanted us to stay for an early supper. He had steaks to barbecue and new carrots, peas, and the potatoes he had rescued. I was agreeable because I could see the empty house was torture for him. Dad, however, did not hesitate.

“Next time,” he said as Lawrence pulled into his garage and he headed straight for my car. “Bella has to be up by five tomorrow. Morning shift, you know.”

“I’d like to hear more about your job sometime,” Lawrence said.

Instead of looking at my uncle’s disappointed face, I stared at my lying father. I had just come off my block and he knew that. I was to be the fall guy. When I saw him take a cigar from his shirt pocket for the ferry ride home, I remembered where those cigars were most enjoyed. Douglas Park. Dad was planning to watch a recreational baseball game this evening while sitting with his pocket radio tuned into the major leagues. I gave Uncle Lawrence an extra sympathetic hug because I did not want him to know his brother-in-law’s real motive in getting away so quickly. It brought no laugh this time.

And as we pulled away, my mind too was on the mainland: wondering which box of photos in Dad’s closet would hold the two little girls.



FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS I was too busy at work to go through the boxes. After hours there were barbecues. Our watch was pretty tight despite some squabbling that went on behind backs. Being non-confrontational myself, I had come to the conclusion that this method was as good as any to deal with a grievance. Eventually it disappears, and you haven't left two parties with words in their heads they won't forget.

When I was free and not too tired, I'd meet Dad for a quick meal at Wendy's. Keeping my distance from the kitchen where Mom ruled was becoming selfish and impractical. Sometimes I would go back to the house with him and watch *Jeopardy!* until the emptiness was too much to bear. How could Dad sit and watch TV in the basement room surrounded by Mom's exercise equipment?

"I'm going to put a sign up at work to sell this stuff," I announced suddenly after we realized we were watching a rerun of a show we had seen with Mom when she guessed the final answer none of the contestants knew. "You'll never use it."

"You don't want it?"

"It wouldn't fit in my place."

"You could use it here."

"It's too much Mom. As soon as it's gone, I'll probably buy myself a set."

"Do what you want." Dad shrugged, rightly confused by my logic.

By the weekend, I had sold Jake on the deal, and he swapped his precious Volvo for a friend's truck for an hour to pick up the works — treadmill, trampoline, bicycle, Ab Master. After he left, I stayed to

watch a baseball game with Dad, but now I couldn't stand being there because the equipment was gone. What kind of daughter was that? I reminded myself Dad was faced with this empty house all the time; at least he was in it when I was there.

For me, it was more than missing Mom. In fact, I was often so aware of unspoken standards in her presence that I couldn't deny a certain freedom, much as I hated to admit it. What I had lost was a sense of what to do next. She always knew, even when I didn't want to follow. She provided distractions for me when pieces of the future I had planned with Ray Kelsey kept coming back like demonic homing pigeons. A brisk walk — make that a brutal march — around Stanley Park, a movie, lunch in Kitsilano. She was always upbeat, and as annoying as that could be when I wanted to feel sorry for myself, her mood eventually dominated mine. She even died on Valentine's Day to make sure I was surrounded by flowers when there would be no more from Ray. This house was hollow without her.

To prolong my visit with Dad, I made up my mind to look for the picture of Sara and her sister. I got as far as the walk-in closet in Mom and Dad's bedroom, where boxes of overflow photos, letters, and year-books had been stored since I was a kid. I opened one and saw two or three alternate poses — the best photos had gone in an album — of Mom looking radiant holding me as a big bald baby. I had to get out of there right away, so I deserted Dad again and went back to my apartment.

The next time I saw him was registration night. After supper at Wendy's, he decided to accompany me to the college, so he would have a new sidewalk to pace while he smoked his cigar. As I was experiencing a sudden case of jitters walking into the building, he remained cheery outside. I felt conspicuous in a skirt worn for the occasion, a long batik wraparound that brushed the top of my sandals. As if I were taking this too seriously, the other registrants, all ages and sizes, hurried in and out in shorts, accustomed to the procedure. I suspected they were all more studious than I was. Other than the RCMP depot, the last exams I had taken were Grade Twelve departmentals. But I had been accumulating black book time for these classes, so I was not about to

throw my bonus hours away. My B.C. history prospectus covered three single-spaced pages of reference material and I suddenly wished I had signed up for English as a second language. When I came out, Dad was irritating. He was singing “Up a Lazy River” and held out his hand to see my book list.

“I guess courses don’t change that much. You might have to buy one history book. I think we’ve got most of the others.”

“Show-off. I know what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t even know what I’m thinking.”

“You’re thinking I should have taken a course like this a long time ago.”

“Why would I think that?”

“Because it’s true.”

He lit another cigar and we set off into the soft evening air. When he continued singing, I decided not to hold my own insecurities against him. He hadn’t sung like this for a long time.

The following Wednesday I sped straight from work to my history class. The enrollment was small, composed mainly of visible minorities. At work we had to classify people according to race, and my mental pen noted them automatically. I ended up sitting next to a young guy probably in his early twenties, a mixture of Caucasian and Black, who smiled as if he knew me. I wondered if I had ever picked him up. No, he appeared too genuinely friendly to be a shit rat — you get to know their type.

“This your first course?”

That’s getting personal, I thought as I answered: “For a while, anyway.”

“I mean with Barnwell. You ever had him before?”

I shook my head just as Barnwell walked in and introduced himself. Early fifties, small and slight, with long curly hair like Howard Stern. As soon as he opened his mouth, all heads straightened to attention. For the next hour and a half his booming voice brought the Haidas, Captains Drake, Cook, and Vancouver to life. His lecture made me think of the Disney films I saw as a kid where a paintbrush creates an entire scene with a few brushstrokes. I noticed my neighbour taking detailed notes. At the end, he turned to me with a “So how did

you like him?” grin and I spoke without thinking: “Will you be coming to all these classes?”

“I never miss Barnwell.”

“Would you mind doing me a favour? I work shifts and might have to miss a class. Would you share your notes with me if I do?”

“You a nurse?”

I nodded because I could see this guy putting up his hands and joking, “Anything you say, officer,” if I told the truth.

“Sure, any time.” He stood up from the desk and towered a good four inches over me. I was not expecting that.

I thanked him and walked ahead since he seemed to be waiting for me to go first. At the door I turned back to say: “You’re right. He really is good.”

Next day I was off to a bad start at work. Walking from the locker room to the cars, I came face to face with Ray Kelsey. He was at the main desk getting some information about one of his clients in cells. I had not seen him since he showed up uninvited at Mom’s funeral.

“Hello,” I said, rushing past him. I tried to keep the sound of my heart drumming against my bulletproof vest as background accompaniment instead of a solo.

“Hi, Bella.” He gave me a big crocodile grin showing all his treacherous capped teeth. He was tanned, and handsome as ever in his lawyer’s suit. “How ya doin’?”

Cut the street talk, I said to myself. “Very well.”

“Your dad? He’s okay?”

“Fine.” I was not about to share Dad’s welfare with Ray, so I left it at that.

It was clear Ray wanted to chat, but his phone rang from his pocket, rescuing me. I fluttered my fingers at him and hurried on. His eyes followed me with a confused look. I heard him speaking sharply as I walked away — probably Blondie wanting him to pick up some nail polish on his way back to the office. I found my cruiser as fast as I could and exited the parking lot as if I’d been called out on a high-speed chase.

In sight, in mind. Thanks a lot, Ray, thanks a lot, Retha. You’ve

joined forces to ruin my life. For a second I saw my mother as the little blonde co-conspirator sitting in Ray's office. I had counted on them cherishing me forever, and they both dumped me. I held back the tears until I was alone in the car writing up the file from my first B&E of the day. When I left, the female whose house had been burglarized was still wailing over her stolen jewels. *Get a grip, woman*, I felt like saying. *You can get more of those gold bangles when your sister goes to India next month, just as your husband said.* I had to get used to losing an engagement ring myself. Instead of the one Ray Kelsey almost bought me, I ended up with my mother's.

I put the plastic bag containing the woman's cheap jewel case in the trunk. I had taken it simply to give the woman some hope, though I knew no clues would result from it. People felt better when you mentioned the word "fingerprints," but they didn't realize how difficult it is to get a good print from a crime scene; you must get the points to connect on six or seven circles of the print and the clearest surface is glass or metal. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if this case was a set-up. The suspect had left an upturned crate under the open window of the Hindu prayer room, where, for security reasons, the woman had moved the jewels from the master bedroom just the night before. She had no insurance, so she probably did not stage it herself, but I didn't rule out the husband. He seemed like the moocher type who might come up with the idea of fencing his wife's jewellery. No proof, of course.

As I wrote up the file in the car, tears plopped like summer raindrops. I blotted my eyes and the paper with a tissue. I don't know how long I sat there with my chin bobbing uncontrollably, but I pulled myself together when I saw a P.C. approaching from the other direction. Dave drove up, rolled down his window and said "Denny's?"

I nodded and he cruised on. Usually I looked forward to breakfast with the guys. I enjoyed being the only female on our watch. Not that I wasn't comfortable with female members, but I liked knowing what men thought when they were together — I didn't always like what they thought, but I liked knowing. This morning I did not have much of an appetite when Dave, Jake, Sukhi, and Emile squeezed further into the booth to make room for me. Dave had hot chocolate, the other three

ordered coffee, and as soon as I sat down, the waitress arrived with platters of eggs and pancakes. She looked to me for my order.

“Toast and coffee, please.”

“You okay?” Dave asked. “You seemed a bit shaky back there.” Dave was a big guy, a Mormon. We called him Rudder because he insisted on taking the steering wheel if anyone drove with him. He also believed he was ordained to steer everyone in the right direction, including his wife and four kids, and all the lawbreakers he picked up. I pitied anyone who had to listen to one of his sermons from the back seat.

Emile was the brains of our group. We called him Mr. Know-It-All because he did. Ask him a simple question like the difference between condominiums and co-op housing, and he would go on for fifteen minutes. We learned to ask him things at the beginning of a meal and not when we were running out of time. He had an anthropology degree from Concordia and, as a native French speaker, he delighted in correcting our English. He was the one we consulted about the Criminal Code whenever doubts arose. At least I did. Dave and Jake believed they knew it all too.

Sukhi was my favourite partner. His full name was Sukhwinder Ahluwalia. He was slight, strong, quiet, and alert with the best sense of humour of all of us. If we took calls together, we often burst out laughing before we got back to the car. It could be anything that got us going — the person’s hair, something that was said, even the wallpaper. I remember the first time it happened. We were called to a Sikh household and I commented later about how rambunctious the little girl was.

“That was a boy,” he smiled.

“No, the little one, the one in white pyjamas with the bun in her hair tied back with lace.”

“That was a boy,” he insisted. “I had one of those myself.”

I had cracked up, as much with embarrassment as anything, and when Sukhi joined in, it started a long series of laugh attacks. Last year he got engaged to a girl his parents had picked out for him. Conveniently, he was madly in love with her.

In spite of their quirks, these guys felt like the brothers I never had. They knew something was bothering me and each comforted me in his own way.

“You should eat more than that, Arabella,” Dave said, “or you’re going to get a headache. Have a bowl of porridge.”

“Porridge would just make her hungrier an hour later,” said Jake.

“It’s a good start to a day. I make sure my kids have it before they leave for school.”

“Yeah, and I bet they have pop tarts on the days you’re working.”

Emile explained: “Porridge is the perfect breakfast. Especially eaten with plain yogurt. You get your fibre, vitamins, and minerals.”

“If she gets hungry before lunch, she could take a bagel with her,” said Dave, finishing the last of his pancakes and syrup.

“As long as it’s a multi-grain spread with peanut butter instead of cream cheese,” smiled Emile, taunting us now.

“Anything would be better than these sausages today,” said Jake, pushing his plate away. “They taste as if they’ve been cooked in axle grease.”

“Hope it’s a Volvo axle,” said Sukhi.

I caught his eye and we exploded. Everyone did, including Jake. By then, breakfast was over and the waitress arrived with our bills. When Jake explained about the sausages, she tore his up.

“Thanks, guys,” I said. They knew what I meant.

Back in my car I cleared for a file with Sally the dispatcher.

“Two bravo fourteen stand by to copy a priority. Son attacking mother with knife.” She gave me an address in the Edmonds area. “Complainant’s surname, spelled Delta Echo Alpha November; Given name Wanda, common spelling.”

“Copy. I’ll be responding Code Three.”

“I’ll be sending two bravo six for cover.”

“Copy.” I turned the siren to wail and wheeled out of the parking lot. The address was in a slummy neighbourhood I knew all too well. In fact, I’d attended a call last year at this very address. Wanda Dean and her son had hysterical fights regularly; her first reaction was to call the cops. Last time the boy said he would only talk to me alone,

and since he didn't pose a threat, Sukhi went and sat in the cruiser. I started writing up the file in my mind as a woman stood waiting at the door for me. *Complainant greeted me in state of agitation. Race: Aboriginal/Caucasian.* Emile pulled up just as I was entering the house.

"He threw down the knife and now won't come out of his room. He don't listen to nothing I say." Wanda was probably in her thirties and still pretty despite the alcoholic's puffiness that generally precedes skin and bones. Her hands were shaking as she took a drag on her cigarette. I sensed Wanda was overreacting as usual, and waved Emile away.

I stepped inside to a thick, stale, sour smell — years of dirt and smoke layered on every surface. Something like a cheap motel, only worse, because cooking odours were mixed in. Piles of newspapers lined the entry and corridor down to a closet whose doors were held permanently open by an avalanche of old clothes, shoes, and broken toys. A thought struck me: a leaky ceiling could turn this passageway into a papier mâché tunnel — the kind you see on model train sets. I reminded myself to e-mail Gail and Monty and tell them the novelty of being in other people's homes had definitely worn off. "Where's the bedroom?"

She led me through the living room, the sofa's back and arms stained from greasy heads, its cushions littered with potato chip crumbs and torn bags. Across the partition to the kitchen another woman and young boy were standing among the ruins of a week's meals.

"They'll tell you what he done," Wanda said, waving her arms in their direction. "He took that knife and started swinging it around and said he was going to use it on me." She picked up a bread knife from the top of the partition; it too was caked with some kind of matter. The two witnesses nodded enthusiastically.

Wanda tried the knob of the bedroom door, then banged. "The police want to talk to you, Terry. It's the lady again."

"Terry?" I said, knocking. "May I come in?"

Wanda lit another cigarette and banged again. "Terry, get out here. You're embarrassing me." After the next silence she turned to me: "You gonna break it down?"

I ignored her question and said softly: “Terry, I’d like to talk to you. Will you please let me in?” I tried the knob again and it was unlocked. I stepped into the room. Terry’s eyes took me in, but he did not raise his head. He was a stocky boy with brown hair and a pasty complexion, much lighter than his mother’s. He was sitting on his bed among rumpled, discoloured sheets. He had been crying.

“What’s the problem, Terry? Why did you take the knife to your mother?” I spoke slowly.

“She keeps after me is what.”

“That’s because you won’t listen to me. You keep doing wrong.” She stepped closer to the bed, but I blocked her off.

“How old are you now, Terry?”

“Thirteen.”

“You know you can’t go threatening people with knives without getting into trouble?”

He wiped his tears with a dirty hand and stared straight ahead.

“That’s not all he does,” wheezed Wanda, taking a drag. “The neighbour behind us say he steal his hose.” The two witnesses had joined us in the bedroom, both speaking at once. “That’s true,” said the mother. “He try to get Freddy to go with him and steal some drinks and pretzels from the 7-Eleven, but Freddy’s a good boy, he won’t do it. He come and tell me.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” Freddy repeated like a parrot.

“How old are you, Freddy?” I asked.

“Twelve,” he and his mother said in unison.

I thought of Sukhi and what we would have made of this pair later. “Why aren’t you and Terry in school today?”

“The principal committed suicide at Terry’s school so they took a holiday,” said Wanda.

“Where do you go to school, Freddy?” I bit my tongue before adding “Tattler’s Elementary?”

“He got a doctor’s appointment today,” said his mother, while he nodded on cue.

“So you decided to take the whole day off.” I spoke more harshly than any of us was expecting.

“He steal all the time,” Wanda continued, bringing the focus back to her son. “Last week he bring me flowers for my birthday and I find out he steal them from the flower shop. Look at this room.” She gestured toward some old crayon drawings on the walls that might have been done by a five-year-old. She picked up a dirty sock from the floor. One sock. From a floor covered with clutter. “How can I keep the place nice when he throw his socks around?”

Terry began to cry. “I come home last night and she’s passed out again. I thought she was dead. How you think I feel?” He sobbed noisily. “I had to call my dad to come and take her to the hospital but then she woke up. My sisters do anything they want and she loves them to death. She want to put me in jail.”

When his shoulders stopped heaving, I spoke quietly but firmly above Wanda nattering “They’re good girls.”

“Terry, you can’t keep stealing or threatening people with knives or you will end up in jail. I don’t want to see that happen, because I know you’re really a good boy at heart. And I believe you’ll try your best to prove it. Because you know it too, no matter what anyone says about you.”

Terry stared at me and the other three looked disappointed as I turned to go. Wanda followed me through the house, pointing out Terry’s caked soup bowl that would otherwise not have been noticed on the coffee table among empty beer bottles and overflowing ashtrays. In the paper passage she stopped me and whispered: “I know he’s doing drugs too.”

“Wanda, you’ll have to try to sort things out with Terry. Maybe give him some praise when he does something right.” Our job was not to play psychologist, so I handed her a card. “Here’s the name and number of a counsellor you might want to talk to. I don’t think it’s the police you need.”

“Oh, thank you, officer. I write down everything he does wrong so I can take that sheet along with me.” She smiled, as if we really did understand each other.

It was drizzling when I finally escaped. I gulped a breath of fresh wet air to cleanse my lungs of the stench. Just before I reached the

car, Wanda came running after me. “He’s swearing at me again. What should I do?”

“Call the counsellor.” I got inside as fast as I could. My hands were shaking more than Wanda’s. The rain was pouring down now, and I knew I had to drive somewhere or she would come running out again. I turned the corner and parked in front of another house that probably had the same things or worse going on inside it. I had gone to hundreds of domestics in this area, seen a hundred Wandas and Terrys. Why was this different?

Seeing Ray this morning proved how vulnerable I was myself. I had attended the former calls as if they were part of a world to which I never could belong. Today the connection triggered a thunderstorm in my head. I felt as if I had skidded to a halt at the edge of a dangerous precipice. Retha and Ray could easily become my Terry. If you took away my security on all other fronts — financial, professional, family — I might be seeing Wanda when I looked in the mirror. It was not only her addictions, her squalor, or her poverty that made her helpless. It was her need for a scapegoat.

A counsellor would never untangle what was happening in that house, because Wanda needed her son to be the obstacle to her happiness. As if removing one dirty sock from a trash heap would make the trash heap fade into the background. The comfort of blame right there for the taking. For Wanda, for the witnesses, for Terry. And for me.

I was not sure if my limited visibility was due to the pounding rain on the windshield or the pounding now going on in my head. I told Sally I was coming in. As I crept along the streets to the detachment, I muttered, *Thank you, Wanda, for leading me where you will probably never go yourself.* One look at me, and my corporal advised me to take the rest of the day off.

When I got to my apartment, there was a message from Dad. When I called, he said he had been going through boxes and found the picture of Sara and her sister I was looking for.

“I wondered if you wanted to meet for supper at Wendy’s and I could bring it. But you don’t sound too well.”

“Headache,” I said, fighting the nausea mixing in with the

painkillers. “I’m going to lie down now and should be all right by supper time.”

“We can make it another time.”

“No. I’ll see you tonight. But let’s not go to Wendy’s. Let’s eat at home. We can fix something together. In Mom’s kitchen. Hot dogs, eggs, anything. I’m ready to go through those pictures.”