

Her marriage had begun on the rebound and now it would end over a Caesar salad. It wasn't how Nora McKee had envisioned her life five years ago when she and Jake had stood barefoot on Marconi Beach and traded vows and rings. But there you had it.

She pushed her way through the lunch crowd of tourists that spread through downtown Blue River like some sort of colorful, toxic spill. They were everywhere, these tourists, as ubiquitous as gods. They bolstered the local coffers and the town probably would die without them. But they were in her way, flooding the sidewalk and side streets, illegally parking wherever there was space, their numbers so great that the good tables at the Lighthouse Pub would be gone before she arrived. And it wasn't even noon yet.

Maybe that was just as well. She could forego lunch with Jake altogether and just drive home, move her stuff out of the apartment, and leave him a note. *I'm outta here.* An appealing possibility, but that was his MO, not hers.

Quite often during their marriage, he had accused her of being too confrontational, too blunt, too in-your-face. But when she countered that he was duplicitous, deceptive, and avoided any discussion about feelings, he invariably stormed out of the room. So there was something very right about a restaurant as the period at the end of their marriage, a public place where neither of them was likely to shout or to leave in a huff of self-righteousness.

She squeezed the bridge of her nose and struggled to shake off the feeling that she stood at the edge of some wide, steep abyss from which she would be required to leap, with her eyes shut, acting on nothing more than faith that she would land safely at the bottom. A Carlos Castaneda moment. Sure. Like she had whatever that took.

*What does your life lack?*

Thirty minutes ago, she had assigned this topic as an essay to her senior psyche class. The lack, she had told them, couldn't be a material thing like money, a new car, the dream job, the Dean's list. The lack had to be emotional, even spiritual. The irony was that her initial personal response to this question was material. *My life lacks tenure, health insurance, better pay.* But her bottom line response, the deeper issue, the only one that counted, was that for twenty-three years, her life had lacked *closure*. And today she would begin to reverse that pattern by telling Jake she intended to file for divorce.

They didn't have kids or own joint property, just two cars and personal belongings. Divide the goods, one or the other would file and that would be it.

Nora picked up her pace. The light breeze coming in off the ocean blew strands of her black hair across her eyes. It had an autumn bite to it, this breeze. She buttoned up her blazer and dug her hands in the pockets, glad she'd worn it and slacks. She wondered if, forevermore, she would associate these clothes with the end of her marriage. Wondered if, when she was eighty, she would conjure up these mental snapshots of herself moving through the crowd in a brown and black speckled wool jacket, a soft pumpkin colored blouse, in dark slacks, her purse slung over her shoulder, lapis lazuli earrings swinging at the side of her face like miniature pendulums. Would she see it all as a bird's eye view, the Lighthouse Pub at the end of the block, the lighthouse itself rising in the distance, a monolith of simpler times?

Jake had suggested the pub for lunch. Yet, he rarely suggested lunch away from campus and she didn't have any idea why he'd done so today. Maybe *he* intended to tell *her* that he wanted a divorce. She could almost see it, Jake leaning across the table, his handsome face skewed with his earnest intentions. *I think we both would be happier if we separated, Nora.*

That she could be so lucky.

"Hey, lady, what an amazing body you've got," said a husky voice behind her. Jake trotted up alongside her and hooked his arm through hers, grinning like a two-year-old who thought he'd done something clever. He kissed her on the cheek.

As if the last several months of problems hadn't happened. Jake, the great pretender. "I thought you'd be in the restaurant already," she said.

"Couldn't find a parking spot. I had to park along the river. Looks like Autumn Fest has started already." He referred to a tradition that had begun in the fall of 1695, a celebration of a newly enacted law that made witch trials illegal. It had grown out of the execution that winter of several people accused of witchcraft, the darkest period of Blue River's past, an era about which she taught in her advanced psyche courses. The festival drew tourists from all over the northeast.

"People have been arriving all week," she pointed out.

"They ought to give residents one side of every street for parking. And herd tourists into the municipal lots. And why didn't the college just cancel classes yesterday for the rest of the week? I had more absentees today than I've had on any single day this year."

"Yeah, me, too."

She taught two classes on Wednesday and Fridays, an introductory psyche course for freshmen and a course on Jungian theory for juniors and seniors. Both classes were practically empty today. Except for her courses on the witch trials in Salem in 1692 and in Blue River in 1695, her classes rarely were well attended. She wasn't as popular an instructor as Jake. As the maverick chairman of the English department at Blue River College, his classes were unconventional, his grading system too easy, yet he made language and

literature an intriguing adventure. In fact, the adventure was so intriguing for some of the sweet young things in his classes that it had broken the marriage irreparably.

“We may not get a table, you know,” she remarked.

“I called from campus and made a reservation.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion.” He flashed that impish smile and combed his fingers back through his hair, a boyish gesture that made him seem younger than his forty-three years.

But Jake had never looked his age and maybe that was part of the problem. He had a compact, sinewy body honed over decades as a runner, a quick, winning smile that made you feel you were special just because he had noticed you, and a full head of salt and pepper hair. He moved and spoke with the practiced impatience of a salesman pressed to make the day’s quota and did it all with such charm that it had taken her years to accept that it was mostly smoke and mirrors.

People who knew them well – and there weren’t many – remarked that they were like the sun and the moon. His hair was light and curly, hers was straight and dark. He was blue-eyed, her eyes were the dark of freshly poured asphalt. But deeper than that, he was sociable, the life of any party, and she was very much a loner.

"We should go away this weekend," he said, which had nothing at all to do with their table reservation or anything else.

"We can't afford to go anywhere, Jake." *Divorce is expensive.* Why couldn't she just say it? Now, immediately, get it over with. "We can't afford this lunch, either."

"I found some cheap airfares south."

As if she hadn't spoken. *I want a divorce, Jake.* The words, perched at the tip of her tongue, tumbled into the air. "Jake, I want ..."

She suddenly collided with a tall cop and immediately realized he wasn't just a cop. He wore a uniform the color of rich, bitter chocolate that identified him as a fed with the Department of Freedom and Security – *Freeze*, to the ordinary guy on the street. She murmured an apology, but his gaze locked with hers – strange, dark, intense eyes that scared her. Even though she was six feet tall, he made her feel like a midget.

"Watch where you're going," he snapped.

Then they were past him, Nora nearly tripping over her own feet to put even more distance between them. The sight of him brought back all the horrifying memories of that evening twenty-three years ago, when she was ten. An ordinary evening on Valentine's Day, the TV news on in the background, her mother opening her gifts, bits of colorful wrapping paper strewn across the table like fallen stars. And suddenly, two *Freeze* officers, a man and a woman, burst

in with a warrant for her mother's arrest – supposedly for funding terrorist groups – and hauled her off into the winter darkness.

Just like that, her mother was gone. Nora never saw her again.

Her father had hired attorneys, private investigators, people with connections. He'd had the money to do it. But within several years, his money had run out, he was forced to sell the house, the catering business, everything that had represented stability to her. Her brother, Tyler, had been in college when it had happened. He'd dropped out of school and worked for a year to finance his education. Eventually, his life and her father's had moved on. Her dad met another woman and married her when Nora was fourteen, pushing her into the land of fairytales – wicked stepmother, nightmarish teen years, all the rest of it.

At least there had been no wicked stepsisters. She was grateful for that. But a part of her had gotten stuck back there in that winter evening more than two decades ago. She still didn't know what had happened to her mother, where she was, or the real reason for her arrest. Open-ended. No closure.

The only time she and her father had discussed it at any length, Nora was home from college for Christmas and demanded to know everything he knew about it. *It's like she fell off the face of the goddamn earth, dad. I need more than that.*

Shadows seized his face, he looked utterly miserable. *I've told you all I know*, he'd whispered. *I pushed and searched for answers and got nowhere. Four years, Nora, and by then I'd lost everything and I was tired.*

Tired. Nope, sorry, *tired* didn't cut it.

It was like the stories of the disappeared in South America, parents and grandparents who vanished in the middle of the night and were never heard from again. Dissidents. Undesirables. Hauled off to torture chambers.

"Stop thinking like that," Jake said suddenly.

"Like what?"

"About your mom. It was a long time ago."

"And that means it's not worth thinking about?"

"I'm just saying to let it go, Nora. It's been twenty-three years."

"I can't. You can't just let something like that go."

"You have to."

"Don't tell me what I *have* to do, Jake," she snapped.

He started to say something, but by then the hostess was leading them to their table out on the balcony. The waitress came over shortly afterward, a chirpy little thing who was all smiles and dimples, with curves in the right places. Jake turned on the charm, the distinguished professor asking the sweet young thing for her opinion on the wines, everything in his body language suggesting that he found her attractive, desirable. Had he been like this when they'd met? She couldn't remember, probably because back then *she* had been the sweet

young thing. Months ago, such a display would have humiliated Nora, left her feeling that she was somehow at fault, flawed. Now it just irritated her, increased her restlessness, her urgency to end the relationship.

Nora already knew what she wanted and ordered the Caesar salad. Jake said he hadn't made up his mind yet and seemed annoyed that Nora had violated etiquette protocol by ordering before they'd gotten their wine.

As soon as the woman hurried off, Nora leaned toward him. "Is that how it starts with your students, Jake? Seemingly harmless flirtations?"

A flush swept up his neck and through his face. "Jesus, Nora, you're so fixated on the past."

This was how he fought back, by turning things around, making it seem that *she* was the problem, that *she* had the issues. "Look, Jake. I've been thinking things over and I..."

"I'm resigning," he interrupted. "That means I can withdraw my pension contributions."

*Resigning?* That was why he'd asked her to meet him for lunch? What she felt apparently showed in her expression because he rushed on, not giving her an opportunity to respond.

"They've been after me. For a year. Or longer."

*Here we go again.* For months now, Jake had been convinced that he was being watched, followed, that his online activities were being tracked. At first, she'd thought he was going through a midlife crisis or, worse, that he was

bipolar. Eventually she got tired of listening to his paranoid litany and fired back with the obvious questions. *Who* was following him? Watching him? Tracking his online activities? *Who* would give a damn about a college professor?

*The shadow government. A cabal. A brotherhood. Call it what you want.*

*They may be the same people who arrested your mother.*

And right then, she'd shut down. Her mother, like the disappeared in South America, hadn't disappeared because of some insidious conspiracy. It was the system – corrupt, cruel, wrapped in secrecy. Jake sounded like one of those Internet fruitcakes whose conspiracy blogs choked up the information highway - Roswell, UFOs, end times, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, MLK. Nearly every conspiracy seemed to share her bottom line – lack of closure due to secrecy, misinformation or not enough information, or flat out lies. When she'd compared him to the conspiracy nuts, Jake had distanced himself from her, had found solace elsewhere, and had stopped talking about it.

"C'mon, Jake, we went through all this months ago."

"It got worse. I just stopped mentioning it. I think our phone is tapped, too."

The chirpy waitress returned with their wine, glasses, and asked Jake if he would like to taste it first. "No," he said curtly, all his charm gone. "I'd like the lobster bisque."

The bisque. With that and the wine, their lunch tab was soaring. Well, guess what. Instead of them splitting the tab as they often did, he could pay. The waitress quickly set the wine bottle and glasses on the table and left.

"Our home phone is tapped?" Nora asked.

"Yes. And maybe the work phones, too. They don't like me, Nora. They don't like *what* I teach, *how* I teach."

"Who? The shadow government?"

"Them and the other department heads and the chancellor."

"Right. That's why you have tenure."

"Tenure may be a big part of it." Whispering again, he leaned in closer to her. "Why should they pay my salary when they can hire someone new for half the price? If they fire me, I lose my pension. I can appeal the firing, but during the appeal process I don't get paid and I don't have access to my pension. But if I resign, I get everything in the pension plus a month's wages."

*Me, me, me.* It was all about Jake. It always had been all about Jake. She had no idea what she'd ever seen in him.

No, that wasn't correct. She knew exactly what she had seen in him – whispered sweet nothings on a windblown beach, a charm that she had mistaken for the genuine person, a man who had said and done all the right things at a time in her life when she was vulnerable. She'd been in her late twenties, still licking her wounds over a relationship that had gone south. She, too, was at fault. But five years of trying to make this work was long enough. "Frankly, I

don't give a shit what you do. I'm filing for divorce, Jake. I'll move my things out as soon as I find my own place."

She couldn't tell if he was stunned, shocked or simply incredulous that *she* would want to divorce *him*. "But...I...I thought we were doing better, Nora."

"Better than *what?* Better than when you were screwing the cute chiquita in your junior English class? We haven't slept together in months, we don't really have a relationship anymore, so let's just end the charade and call it quits, Jake."

His jaw tightened. "You're doing this because I'm resigning."

"Excuse me, but I'm doing this because fidelity is a foreign concept for you and I'm tired of pretending."

"My God, Nora, I can't believe you're..."

The sudden shriek of tires against the pavement interrupted them. She glanced quickly toward the street, but the dozens of customers waiting along the patio wall for seats blocked her view. Then two *Freeze* officers marched onto the patio as though they owned the restaurant, the man moving with a macho swagger, the woman a few brisk steps ahead of him. Waiters and waitresses hurriedly stepped aside, customers slid their chairs out of the way, Nora's body went stiff, her eyes flashed dry, a pulse beat at her throat.

*Like when they took mom.*

The male officer was the same guy with whom she had collided on the street and he looked much taller now, at least six feet four, with thick, muscular arms. She stole a look at Jake, to see if he recognized the man as well, but he

was huddled in on himself, as if he hoped to vanish, his eyes glued to the menu, hands gripping it. He looked terrified.

The feds moved slowly and deliberately among the tables, scanning the faces around them. The woman wasn't close enough for Nora to read the name and numbers on the shoulder of her jacket, but she could clearly see the identifying information on the man's jacket: *T6747, Agent Ryan Curtis, DFS*, for Department of Freedom and Security. For the briefest moment, his eyes caught Nora's, then darted to Jake.

"Mr. McKee?" the fed said. "Professor Jake McKee?"

Distantly, the sounds of traffic punctuated the silence that now gripped the balcony. Everyone watched them.

"Mr. McKee?" the fed repeated.

Jake suddenly shot to his feet, his chair crashed to the floor, and he grabbed the edge of the table, overturning it. The bottle of wine, ice, glasses, silverware, plates, everything crashed to the floor. Bedlam erupted on the balcony, the two feds lunged for Jake, but he was gone, racing between tables, knocking over empty chairs, leaving an obstacle course behind him. Then he leaped over the low wall that separated the patio from the street and the feds took off after him.

Nora jumped up and tried to shove her way through the crowd that had gathered like a flock of vultures circling road kill. She finally found an opening, vaulted the wall, and followed them.

Her shoes pounded the sidewalk, her breath exploded from her mouth. Despite the chill in the air, sweat poured down the sides of her face. Young, she thought, but not in very good shape, not like Jake who ripped a ragged path through the shoppers and tourists on the other side of the street. Pedestrians scrambled out of Jake's way as soon as they saw the *Freeze* officers, as if the chocolate-colored uniforms were an archetype synonymous with bogeymen, then gawked or turned away, pretending they hadn't seen anything.

Nora raced after the feds and Jake. As the tall guy – *Curtis, Agent Ryan Curtis, T6747, remember that name, those numbers* - closed in on Jake, she spotted a possible escape route off to the left. But she didn't think that Jake saw it. Adrenaline poured through her, she drew on reserves she didn't know she had, and sprinted toward Jake and the fed. A heartbeat after the bastard tackled Jake, Nora slammed into him from behind, knocking him forward. His arms flew out to break his fall, his knees struck the sidewalk, she could hear it, bone smacking concrete.

Nora grasped Jake by the shoulders, tried to pull him up. "*C'mon, Jake, get up, run, fast...*"

Blood streamed from the corner of his mouth, his eyes looked dazed. "*Leave,*" he said hoarsely. "*While you can. Glove compartment. Leather case. Parked five blocks south.*"

The female fed – *Agent Katherine Sargent, T7960* - shoved Nora roughly to the side and swung, punching Jake in the face. He fell back, grunting with

pain, blood pouring from his nose, and the woman handcuffed him. Nora scrambled to her feet, shocked that the street had become her parents' living room twenty-three years ago, as though her life were caught within a loop that played and replayed, endlessly. But she was an adult now, not afraid to demand answers.

"Where's your warrant?" she shouted. "What're you charging him with?"

"Section fourteen, code three," Curtis barked, waving a document that he pulled from his jacket pocket. "Now back off, Mrs. McKee, before I arrest you for assaulting a federal officer and interfering with an arrest."

"What's section fourteen, code three? What's that mean in plain English? I have a right to know that, to know what the charge against him is."

He looked – bored? Pissed off? "You don't have any rights, ma'am. And since you're guilty by association, my advice it to go home and call your attorney."

*Guilty by association?* "Where're you taking him?"

"Call your attorney."

He pushed past her, but Nora shouted, "Hey, you jerk, that isn't good enough." She grabbed his arm. "I'm entitled to an answer."

He wrenched free and spun around, his face seized up with a kind of primal rage, as if no one had challenged his authority before now. He stabbed his index finger so close to her face that she leaned back, breathless, terrified.

“I’ll say this only once, Mrs. McKee. If you touch me again, if you continue to interfere, I’ll charge you with assault and handcuff you and haul your ass off this street and out of this town and you won’t be able to help your husband.”

With that, Agent Ryan Curtis, T6747, turned away and pushed Jake into a car that had pulled up to the curb. He slammed the back door and slid into the passenger seat. As the car sped away, Nora just stood there, powerless, arms clutched against her body, tears coursing down her cheeks, an image burned into her mind of Jake’s bloody face pressed against the window as he mouthed, *Run.*