

*Diane  
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Secret Lives

PAN BOOKS

Eden Swift Riley was good at pretending. That would get her through this interview, her first in many months. She stood at the edge of her Santa Monica living room, watching the television crew shove her sofa this way and that, and breathed slowly, deeply. She would feign calm. The viewers would marvel at her composure, her dignity. She was the master of make-believe. Ironic. It was for that very reason that Wayne had left her. “You’re always on,” he said. “Always acting. Always playing a role.”

Nina walked across the room to stand next to her. “God, you look good,” Nina said as she straightened the collar of Eden’s blouse. “I haven’t seen you look this terrific since . . . in a long time.”

“You look pretty cute yourself,” Eden said. Nina was wearing blue jeans—she was not your typical Hollywood agent—a red T-shirt, and a purple scarf tied at her throat which set off her gamin-cut, jet-black hair. She was only thirty-four, one year younger than Eden, and she did indeed look adorable.

“They’re trying to move your sofa so they’ll get a view of the ocean through the windows behind it,” Nina said.

“Uh huh.” What they were really trying to do, she thought, was to make this living room look as though it belonged to a star, someone worthy of a Monika Lane interview. Well, her house should

come as no surprise to anyone. She was not known for her pretensions.

Nina shook her head. “They’re making a mess of your rug.”

“I don’t care.” She didn’t. The crushed dents in the toast-colored carpet seemed insignificant. Since Wayne left, this house had no pull on her. The thought of moving had been slipping in and out of her mind the past few weeks. Someplace where there’d be more kids Cassie’s age; someplace quieter, away from the beach. Lately she’d found herself longing for trees, for something undeniably green.

Finally the crew was satisfied with the room, and Monika Lane settled her elegant self onto one end of the steel-blue sofa and nodded for Eden to join her. Eden sat down at the other end. She pictured the scene through the camera’s lens, the way she and Monika would balance each other. Monika with her dark, dark hair. Eden with her blond. But they were more alike than different, she knew—two self-made women who’d worked their way to the top with ambition and integrity.

Eden curled her legs beneath her. Her feet were bare. She wore white silk pants, a soft, full white blouse open at the throat. It was her favorite outfit for difficult situations. It comforted her. It was like being wrapped in a cloud. Her hair was down today, although lately she’d taken to pinning it up. And there was a single braided gold chain at her throat. She wore very little makeup. No one would expect her to.

Someone handed her a mug of coffee, which she cradled on her lap between her palms.

As soon as the interview started Eden knew Monika was going to be gentle with her, at least more gentle than usual. Monika knew her audience would not appreciate her ripping apart the beloved and betrayed Eden Riley.

“This is one of the best periods for you professionally, Eden,” Monika said, “but one of the worst for you personally.”

“It’s been difficult,” Eden agreed. “But I’m surviving.” She should say more. Take control of the interview, as Nina would say. She imagined Nina standing against the wall, muttering to herself, and the thought gave Eden some pleasure.

“Your marriage survived a long time by Hollywood standards.”

“Fifteen years.”

“It was thought to be one of the most stable marriages around.”

Eden sat up straighter. Monika wasn't going to let her off as easily as she'd thought. “Well, a marriage can look healthy on the outside and be loaded with problems inside.”

“Was yours loaded with problems?”

Eden looked down at her mug to think her answer through. She hadn't known there were problems. She had been as shocked as anyone when Wayne walked out.

“I think there were problems I was unaware of. I worked long hours, he traveled a lot, and I guess our communication suffered along the way. Wayne's been made to look like the bad guy, but a marriage is a two-way street.”

“You don't blame him?”

“He no longer wanted to be married to an actress. I can't blame him for that.” For other things, yes. But not for that.

“He's remarrying soon, is that right?”

Eden nodded. “Next month. A woman in Pennsylvania.” As if Monika didn't know. As if the world didn't know she'd been traded in. A schoolteacher, Wayne had crowed. You can't get much more down-to-earth than that.

“And your daughter. Cassie. You'll have joint custody?”

Eden felt a jab of pain behind her eyes, so quick and sharp she'd had no time to prepare for it. Cassie was the one topic that could throw this interview, turn her into a wailing fool. But she caught herself, smiled broadly. “Yeah. She'll be a bicoastal kid.”

“How old is she now?”

“Four. This year's actually been good for me in a way. I haven't been working much and it's given me time to be just a mom.”

“You've also been hard at work on your pet project.”

“The Handicapped Children's Fund. Yes.”

“You were so wonderful as Lily Wolfe in *Heart of Winter*.” Monika changed the subject abruptly. She probably thought talk about the Children's Fund would put the audience to sleep.

“Thank you.”

“What was it like for you, after years of making films that appeal to the under-thirteen crowd?”

“Freeing. And frightening. I wasn’t certain how seriously I’d be taken in that type of film.”

“Your Oscar should put that concern to rest. Did it surprise you to win?”

Eden uttered something modest—humble words that poured from her mechanically and that she would forget moments later. The truth was, she had not been surprised by the Oscar. She’d gone to the premiere of *Heart of Winter*, more anxious about what she would see on the screen than she’d ever been before. But once the film began, once she saw how thoroughly she’d become Lily Wolfe, she knew she’d done something extraordinary. When it was over and the audience sat hushed and limp for a few seconds before breaking into wild applause, she knew that they knew it too.

“Why were you so adamant about not doing a nude scene?” Monika asked.

Eden shifted on the sofa, wishing she had a place to set the mug of now cold coffee. “It seemed too great a leap,” she said. “You know, one minute I’m playing the heroine of ten-year-olds, the next I’m rolling around naked in bed with a guy.”

“And that guy was Michael Carey.”

Eden felt the color rise in her cheeks.

“You’re blushing, Eden.” Monika grinned, delighted.

“Everyone’s blown our friendship way out of proportion.”

“Is that all it is? Friendship?”

“Absolutely.” She thought of Michael watching this interview. He’d heard these words from her dozens of times. Maybe he’d finally believe her if she said them in public. “I like his company, but I’m not rushing into a serious relationship with anyone.”

Monika shook her head in disappointment. “You two seem so very right for each other. I don’t think I’ve ever, despite the fact that you were clothed the entire time, seen a more erotic love scene in a movie than that hotel room scene between the two of you.”

Eden smiled, felt the color rise again. “There was chemistry between the two characters. That doesn’t mean there’s chemistry

between the two actors.” Oh, God, did she really say that? Sorry, Michael.

“Your childhood, Eden. It’s the one topic you steadfastly refuse to discuss in an interview.”

Eden kept her smile in place. “And I’m not about to change my policy on that now, Monika.” She discussed her childhood with no one, not even herself. She felt as though someone else had lived her life before she moved to California.

“Well, let me just summarize a little. You’re the daughter of the extremely successful children’s author, Katherine Swift, who died when you were quite young. Do you think being Katherine Swift’s daughter had anything to do with your success as an actress?”

Eden nodded. “It got my foot in the door. It helped me get parts in the films that were based on her stories. But after that I was on my own.”

“You coauthored the wonderful screenplay for *Heart of Winter*. Did you inherit some of your mother’s writing talent?”

“I hope so. That was new for me and something I’d like to do again.”

“Are you at all like her in other ways? I mean, she earned the reputation of being an eccentric of a sort—an odd, reclusive woman who kept people at a distance.”

Eden ignored the urge to come to her mother’s defense. She laughed. “Do you think I’m odd and eccentric?”

“Certainly not on the surface.”

“Not below the surface either,” she said, with a hint of bravado, but she heard Wayne’s voice in the back of her mind. “Who the hell is the real Eden Riley? I don’t think I’ve ever met her. I don’t think you’ve met her either.”

“What’s next for you, Eden?”

She knew Nina’s ears would prick up at that question. Nina was fed up with her. She’d turned down one offer after another. She told Nina none of them were right for her. The roles were too earthy, they would cost her her fans. But the truth was that since Wayne left she’d had no motivation. No steam. No energy.

She looked at Monika’s carefully made-up eyes. “I don’t want to

dive into something I'm not sure of," she said. "The next thing I work on will have to be a project I can throw myself into whole . . ." The image of her mother slipped into her mind: Katherine Swift sitting at her desk, bending over her typewriter in the candlelit blackness of the Lynch Hollow cavern.

"Eden?" Monika raised her eyebrows.

Eden leaned forward. "You mentioned my mother. I've been thinking of doing something on her life, perhaps." She sounded as though the idea had been percolating in her mind for months rather than seconds. She could actually sense Nina at the side of the room, standing straighter, tilting forward. What the hell? Nina would be thinking. "I could make her more understandable," Eden said. Her palms pressed against the mug in her hands. "More sympathetic."

"You mean you would make a movie about your mother?"

"Yes. I'd like to write the script myself. And play her as well." The words were flowing and she had no idea of their source. She felt a dampness under her arms, a prickling at the nape of her neck.

Monika grinned. "What a terrific idea!" She continued her questioning with new enthusiasm, and Eden offered answers, but her brain burned now with the images—the cave, the lush green valley of the Shenandoah, the clapboard house of her childhood in Lynch Hollow. Her aunt and uncle lived in that house now. Lou and Kyle. Would they see this interview? What on earth would they think? She imagined them turning to each other with incredulous eyes.

She would have to film in summer, when the heavy, breath-stealing greenness would fill the screen. But she knew next to nothing about her mother. It would take an enormous amount of research, and she would have to spend time in Lynch Hollow. Could she do it? Her heartbeat pounded in her ears with excitement. And with fear. Because Lynch Hollow was real; as real as the cave, as real as the river. She would not be able to pretend there. She would not be able to make believe.

Eden parked the car on the shoulder of the road and set out on foot through the woods. Although more than two decades had passed since she last walked through this forest, and although it was dusk and the woods were thick with shadow, she knew the way.

Fireflies hovered in the damp June air, and her blouse was stuck to her back by the time she reached the cavern. It looked just as it had the last time she saw it, when she was eleven years old and knew no home other than this hollow in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The mouth of the cave was still blocked by the two enormous boulders Uncle Kyle and some of the neighbor men had rolled into place. But above the pale gray boulders was a black triangular opening. Eden stepped closer. She didn't remember that opening. Perhaps a rock had broken loose from it sometime in the last twenty-four years. She wondered if Kyle knew the cave was open to bats and field mice. She wondered if children ever tried to squeeze through that space, if they dared each other.

"This is the cave where Katherine Swift wrote her stories," they'd say. "This is the cave where she died."

And perhaps they heard the staccato clicking of the typewriter keys on the cool draft of air that slipped through the opening, just as Eden



heard it now, as if her mother were still inside, writing, oblivious to the darkness.

Eden walked back to the car, slowly, arms crossed in front of her. One month had passed since the Monika Lane interview and in that month the idea of making a film about her mother had consumed her. Two studios were interested, but she was holding everyone off, much to Nina's chagrin. She could not be rushed in this. She needed to be in complete control.

"This is fantastic," Nina had said when she saw the enthusiasm Eden's idea had generated. "Who could make a better film about Katherine Swift than you?"

But Eden had been barely four years old when her mother died. Her memories were wispy and thin. The sketchy biographical material that existed on Katherine Swift portrayed her eccentricities as something close to insanity and perpetuated the myth that she was a cold woman who chose to live the life of a hermit.

The articles on her mother always began with "the peculiar Katherine Swift" or "the eccentric Katherine Swift," or, as in the review of her latest rerelease: "It is remarkable that Katherine Swift wrote of her young characters with such warmth when it is well known she scorned the company of others throughout much of her short life."

Maybe Eden could alter the tiresome view the public held of her mother. She herself was living proof that her mother had had at least one loving relationship. Eden's father, Matthew Riley, died shortly before she was born. Yet Eden liked to imagine his brief marriage to her mother as vibrant and passionate. It would have taken a special sort of man to pull Katherine from her shell.

On the flight from Los Angeles to Philadelphia that morning, Eden had come up with a title for the film: *A Solitary Life*. The word "solitary" had no particular negative connotation attached to it. It didn't indict her mother for the choices she'd made. That would be her theme for the movie—that the world was wrong in its analysis of this woman who was both writer and archaeologist. She was not cold. She was not crazy.

Eden had rented a car in Philadelphia and driven with Cassie the thirty miles to Wayne and Pam's house. Cassie still did not seem

to understand, despite lengthy discussions on the subject, that she would be spending a month with her daddy and his new wife—and without Eden. Eden had been relieved to find Wayne alone at his new suburban home when she and Cassie pulled up. She knew immediately that he was in his element. He was pruning the rosebushes, dirty-kneed, his hands callused from the clippers. There were tears in his eyes when he bent down to embrace his daughter. Then he squeezed Eden's hand.

"Two months with Lou and Kyle, huh?" He smiled. "I can't believe you're doing this, Eden. But I think it's good. And we'll be fine here." He looked down at Cassie, who was still clutching Eden's hand.

As she pulled out of Wayne's long driveway, she allowed herself just one look back at her daughter. That was a mistake. Cassie stared after the car, her eyes wide and glassy with disbelief, and Eden felt a fresh pulse of guilt surface in her chest.

The drive from Philadelphia to Washington was a blur, but then Virginia's rolling wooded hills cradled the road and brought her back to the purpose of this trip. Maybe the film should open with an aerial view of these hills. Or, she thought now as she stepped from the forest onto the road, maybe the camera should slip through the woods during the opening credits, smoothly, silently, until it reached the mouth of the cave. Relax, she told herself. She would come up with hundreds of ideas for the opening of the film over the next few weeks. She didn't need to make any decisions now.

She got back into the car and drove carefully along the narrow road, hunting in the darkness for the turn that would take her through the forest to Lynch Hollow and the house of her childhood, the house where Kyle, Katherine's brother, had retired after leaving New York. She had initially recoiled at Kyle's suggestion that she spend the summer with him and Lou while she did her research. She had seen them as little as she could get away with since leaving home at the age of nineteen, and those visits were always strained and awkward. The thought of spending an entire summer with them overwhelmed her, but she felt as though she had no choice. Kyle knew more than anyone about Katherine. So for the next couple of months she would

live in the house of her early childhood, awakening memories buried deep and wisely.

She spotted the boulder marking the driveway to the house and the little carved wooden sign above it. Lynch Hollow. She turned onto the driveway and was surprised to see it was now macadam. The last time she'd been on this driveway she'd been eleven years old, riding in the back of a black car with her step-grandmother, Susanna. She remembered how her eyes burned as the orange dust from the driveway seeped through the car windows. Who was driving that car? She couldn't remember. A relative of Susanna's, most likely. She'd had no idea as they drove away from the small white house that day that she would not see it again for twenty-four years. "Just a ride," Susanna had said. "We're just going for a little ride." That had struck Eden as odd. Spontaneity was not in Susanna's nature, and Susanna was still coughing badly, her face pale from weeks in bed. The ride dragged on and on and Eden grew bored. When they pulled up in front of the square brick building that stood alone in a field, she was relieved that they had finally arrived someplace. It was another hour before she realized Susanna intended to leave her there, with the black-cloaked nuns and children she didn't know. And it was days before she realized that Susanna meant to leave her there forever.

The two years Eden lived at the orphanage did indeed seem like forever. But when she was thirteen Kyle and Lou tracked her down and took her home with them to New York City, where she spent the rest of her teenage years. Since then she had avoided New York as resolutely as she avoided Lynch Hollow.

The little house looked different in the darkness. The woods surrounding it seemed thicker, the trees taller, bending to shelter the roof. The edges of the house were more sharply defined than in the fuzzy one-dimensional image in her memory.

The house was not the same and that filled her with courage, but when she stepped from the car she flinched at the overwhelmingly familiar scent of honeysuckle and boxwood, sweetness and musk.

The front door opened and light streamed onto the porch. The tall frame of her uncle filled the doorway and sent a shadow that touched her toes.

“Eden!” Kyle stepped onto the porch, letting the screen door slam shut behind him. He walked across the yard and she worked at returning his smile. It had been a year and a half since she’d last seen him, when he and Lou flew out to California at Christmas to fuss over Cassie.

Kyle gave her a quick hug. “Luggage?”

She opened her trunk to expose two suitcases and a portable word processor.

“Lou inside?” She heaved one of the suitcases out of the trunk.

Kyle nodded, smiling as he set her word processor on the ground. She thought as she had many times before how warm this man was, how she wished she could return his warmth.

Inside the house everything had been transformed. Urbanized. The front door still opened awkwardly into the kitchen, but that room had been gutted and updated. Eden would never have recognized it. The counters and appliances were set low to accommodate Lou’s wheelchair, and a skylight was carved into the ceiling above the table. The choppy little hallway between the kitchen and the living room was gone, and the north wall of the living room was now entirely made of glass.

Lou’s easel stood in front of the glass wall, and a Prokofiev piano concerto poured from the huge stereo speakers standing in the corners of the living room.

“You’ve done wonderful things with the house,” Eden said. She stood in the middle of the living room, hands on hips, and looked around her. “You’ve brought New York to Lynch Hollow.”

Lou wheeled toward her to hand her a glass of iced tea. “Kyle had to make a few concessions to get me to move down here,” she said. “I hope we haven’t ruined it for your research.”

“No.” Eden leaned down to kiss her aunt’s cheek. “I love it.” She watched as Lou slipped easily from her wheelchair to the couch, making the fact that she had only one leg look inconsequential. Lou was close to seventy and beautiful, her skin dewy and smooth on her high cheekbones and across the sharp line of her jaw. Her eyes were blue, huge and heavy-lidded under expressive brows. She wore her hair, a dramatic blend of black and white, pulled back in a bun,

a style that on another woman might be deadly, but that made Lou look aristocratic and proud. Wearing a black scoop-neck jersey and a long green skirt, she could pass as a retired ballerina, and it was true she had once loved to dance. Every Saturday night when Eden was a teenager, Kyle took Lou dancing. But thank God it had not been her profession. Eden remembered Kyle's relief when, just weeks after losing her leg, Lou was back at the easel.

Kyle set a chocolate cake down on the coffee table, one burning pink candle jutting from the icing. "Happy birthday, Eden. A few days late."

"Thank you." Eden sat down on the love seat. She turned to Lou. "Did you make the cake? It's beautiful."

Lou shook her head. "I don't do much baking anymore, dear. There's a good bakery in Coolbrook. Go ahead." She motioned toward the cake. "Make a wish."

Eden blew out the candle, guilty because the first wish that came into her head was that her work here would go quickly and she could escape from her aunt and uncle sooner than planned.

Lou cut the cake and handed her a piece.

"We put you in your mother's old room upstairs," Kyle said. "It's barely been touched by the remodeling, so hopefully you can still get a feel for her in there."

Eden nodded. That was the most logical room for her to have. The first floor had only the master bedroom and one smaller bedroom which had originally belonged to her mother and Kyle, and later to her. The second story, added on shortly before Eden's birth, held one large bedroom and a smaller room across the hall, where Katherine wrote when it was too cold in the cavern. After Katherine died no one used the upstairs. There were no boulders in front of the stairway, but Katherine's room had become as sealed from the rest of the world as her cave.

"These came for you today." Kyle carried a vase filled with two dozen red roses into the living room and set them next to the cake.

Eden plucked the card from its holder, although she was certain who had sent them. I miss you already, Michael had written.

"Michael Carey?" Lou asked.

“Yes.” Obviously Kyle and Lou were up on the latest Hollywood gossip. Eden set the card on the table and picked up her plate again.

“He’s very handsome,” Lou said.

“Yes, he is.”

“Has quite a reputation, though,” Kyle said. “You don’t have to rush into anything.”

Lou laughed. “Ky, she’s a grown-up.”

“Okay, okay.” Kyle smiled. “Old habits die hard.”

“Michael’s cleaned up his act, Kyle. He’s being very solicitous because he hopes to play Matthew Riley in the movie. But we’re really just friends, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Two dozen roses to a friend?” Kyle asked as he ducked back into the kitchen.

Eden sighed and looked at her aunt. “How come I feel like I’m eighteen again?”

“You never stop worrying, Eden. So how’s Cassie? We can’t wait to see her.”

“She’s just fine.”

“I bet you’ll miss her this month.”

Eden shrugged. “She’ll have a great time with Wayne and Pam and Pam’s kids.” She felt the tears threaten and took a long swallow of iced tea to stop them. Why do you have to go, Mommy?

“We saw *Heart of Winter* three times, Eden.” Kyle stood in the doorway of the kitchen, sipping his iced tea. “We’re real proud of you, honey.”

Kyle was, how old now? Sixty-four? His neatly trimmed white and gray beard lent him dignity, but the laugh lines carved into the skin around his clear blue eyes were evidence of his good humor. He was wearing jeans and a blue plaid shirt, and he was lean without being gaunt. When he spoke, the remnants of his Shenandoah Valley accent still softened his words, although he’d spent most of his adult life far from Lynch Hollow. He was still a handsome man, quite remarkably so for his age. She’d noticed that for the first time just a few years ago. He’d been in L.A. at an archaeology conference and wanted to take her out to dinner. Spending an evening alone with Kyle had been unthinkable, so Eden asked Nina to join them. At the

restaurant Eden had barely gotten seated before Nina dragged her into the ladies' room.

"Your uncle's gorgeous," she'd said. "Is he married?"

Eden had stared at her in disbelief. "He's nearly old enough to be your grandfather, Nina."

Nina leaned toward the mirror to apply a fresh layer of mascara to her already thick lashes. "He's old like Paul Newman's old, like Sean Connery's old. Know what I mean?" She leaned back, blinked her lashes at her reflection. "So, is he married?"

Eden spent the rest of that evening observing Kyle's deft, effortless evasion of Nina's seduction, and she realized with a jolt that this was something he was accustomed to doing, something he had most likely done all his life.

Here at Lynch Hollow she could see the signs of age creeping in. He was moving a little more slowly and Eden watched him grimace as he sat next to Lou on the sofa.

"Arthritis," he said. "Finally catching up to me." The wheelchair had been a part of Lou's countenance for a long time, but Eden hadn't expected this change in Kyle. It sent a quick, unexpected sliver of fear through her.

Conversation sagged as it always did between the three of them. Not once during the years she'd lived with them as a teenager had a conversation between them taken flight. She knew it was her fault, as it was most likely her fault now. With most people she could keep up an easy superficial chatter from behind her Eden Riley mask. But she could only play herself with Kyle and Lou, and that was the one role for which she could never memorize the lines.

Kyle suddenly set his tea on the coffee table and stood up. "I have something for you." He left the room and reappeared a few minutes later with a thin gift-wrapped package about the size of a magazine. He put it on the table and took his seat again next to Lou, who edged closer to him. "Birthday present," he said. There was reluctance in his voice, as if this was a gift he was not certain he wanted her to have.

Eden opened the wrapping to discover a dark clothbound notebook. She looked up at Kyle.

"Part of your mother's journal."

“What?” She set her hand on the notebook. “She kept a journal?”

Kyle nodded. “I meant to give it to you long ago, but . . .” He shrugged. “Your mother was so misunderstood. I didn’t want you to misunderstand her too.”

Lou set her hand on Kyle’s arm.

“Even now, I’m hesitant,” he said. “Selfish, I guess. I was the only one who knew about it.”

“My father didn’t know?”

Kyle hesitated, his eyes on Lou’s hand where it rested on his wrist. “Matt knew. But he never read it.” He straightened his spine with a great sigh. “So. I’ll give them to you—there are more notebooks, about a dozen, and I know Kate wanted you to have them. But I plan to mete them out to you, one by one, because I don’t want you to skip ahead. She was a complex person, your mother. A complex woman. And if you don’t understand her at age thirteen”—he leaned forward and held up the notebook—“you’ll never understand her at thirty-one.”

Eden sat back. Thirteen to thirty-one! The journal would make her research a snap. She probably would not need the whole summer here after all. Still, she felt more trepidation than delight at the thought of reading her mother’s words about her life. There would be little room for interpretation, for bending the facts to fit her theme. And it was too close. She would have to read with a distanced eye.

“You don’t need to worry,” she said. “I’ve always felt she was misrepresented. I’m tired of seeing her portrayed as cold and detached.”

Kyle stood up and turned to face the wall of glass, hands in his pockets, shoulders tensed, and Eden wondered if she’d said the wrong thing.

“Kate wasn’t cold,” he said. “She chose isolation because it was safer for her.” He turned to face her. “I’ll help you in any way I can, Eden. But I don’t want any filming in the cavern. The cavern stays sealed up.”

“That’s fine.” She had expected that, and in a way it relieved her. She was a little frightened of the cave. “We can find another cave or re-create that one.”



“I hope you’re not going to be disappointed,” Kyle said. “A story about a woman who spent ninety-five percent of her time in a cave could be pretty dull.”

“Well, it probably won’t be for everyone, but I don’t plan on it being boring.”

“You must be exhausted after your drive, dear,” Lou said.

Eden set her plate down on the table and stood up with a false weariness. She’d lost three hours of the day flying east and she was not actually tired, but it would be a relief to be alone again. “Yes, I really am. I guess I’ll go to bed early.”

Kyle picked up the notebook and held it out to her, like a dare. “Maybe you’d like to do a little reading before you go to sleep?”

She took the book from him.

“I’ll speak to my partner, Ben Alexander, about showing you the archaeological site tomorrow.” Kyle walked with her toward the stairs. “You should get a feel for it so you can understand why Kate was so fascinated by it.”

Eden nodded. Kyle had her research well planned out for her.

Her mother’s room was spacious and welcoming with its old pine furniture and double bed. A blue wicker rocker faced the north window, a small pine desk sat in front of the south. She viewed it all with a practiced eye, picturing the way the room would look on the screen. She imagined Katherine rocking in the rocker, sitting at the desk.

She began emptying her suitcase, setting the picture of Cassie on the dresser. Cassie was on a swing at the park, her brown hair flying straight out behind her. She wore her usual devilish grin. Eden looked around the room for a phone, but there was none. Good. It would make it easier to resist constant calls to Pennsylvania. She was not used to this, having no one to tuck in, no one badgering her for another story, a glass of water, an extra good-night kiss. She’d never been this far from her daughter. Even when she had to travel to a film location, she’d taken Cassie with her. The separation this summer was the product of the liberal visitation the judge had ordered for

Wayne after the hideous court battle. She would never forgive Wayne for his attempt to disparage her as a mother. He and Pam could offer Cassie a normal life, he'd told the judge. "My daughter's been in the public eye since her conception," he said truthfully. "I don't want her to grow up thinking Hollywood is the real world."

Eden had brought one other picture with her. This photograph was unframed, dog-eared and yellowed. The woman in the picture knelt in a corner of a rectangular archaeological pit, smiling up at the photographer. She had beautiful straight white teeth. Her thick honey-colored hair, the same color as Eden's, hung over her shoulder in a long braid. She wore khaki shorts, a white shirt open at the neck. She looked about twenty-five or—six. It was one of Eden's few pictures of her mother, one she shared with the rest of the world since it was the publicity photo most often used on the dust jackets of Katherine's children's books.

Eden propped the picture up against the lamp on her night table. She pulled a pendant from her makeup case and set it next to the picture. The pendant was an oval of white porcelain with a delicate lavender flower painted in the center. It had been her mother's. Kyle had given it to Eden for her sixteenth birthday, but she had never felt comfortable wearing it. She wasn't certain even now why she had brought it with her.

She changed into her short white satin nightgown and got under the covers, looking over at the journal on the night-stand. The cover, probably once a dark green, was now nearly black with age. The book didn't close flat because the edges of the pages were wavy, as though they'd spent too many years in the damp. Eden opened the cover and saw her mother's neat handwriting, blue ink on yellowed, lined paper. She closed the book again. No, not tonight. Not yet.

The squeal of brakes and the sound of metal grating against metal woke her. Eden sat up in the darkness, heart pounding. It took her a minute to figure out where she was. Lynch Hollow. And it had only been a nightmare. The nightmare. It had been a long time since she'd had it, but every detail was the same. The darkness, the sickening

grating, crunching sound that went on forever. She'd turn around in slow motion to see the white sedan and black station wagon fused together under the surreal glow of a streetlamp. At least this time she'd awakened before the screaming began.

She got out of bed and walked to the window. The thin moon was the only light and she could barely make out the place where the yard turned from grass to forest.

Only a dream, she told herself. You're awake. You're okay.

She'd known this would happen, hadn't she? She couldn't be in the same house with Lou and Kyle and not have that nightmare.

God, Lou, I would give anything if I could change what happened.

She turned on the night table lamp to chase the shadows from the room and sat in the rocker next to the window. She wouldn't go back to bed until her head was clear of the dream. She rocked, and the motion soothed her. Her eyes rested on the old green notebook. She sighed, turned her chair so the light was over her shoulder, and reached for her mother's journal.

April 4, 1941

*I'm in trouble again. Ma found the dictionary Mrs. Renfrew gave me and burned it. I saw her take it out in the yard and light a match to it. And when she finds me I'll get the strap again for sure.*

*My hand is shaking as I write this, so excuse the wobbly letters. I always get scared when I know a beating's coming because I'm never sure how far she'll take it. I practically have calluses on my legs and backside from the razer strap, so I guess I should be used to it by now, but I can't stop shaking. I'll lie about the dictionary and tell her I found it so I don't get Mrs. Renfrew in trouble.*

*I didn't think Mrs. Renfrew liked me, but besides the dictionary she gave me this notebook. She said I should write in it like a diary, only not just what happens each day, but what I think about what happens too. I laughed when she said that because I'd get in worst trouble than usual if she knew what I was thinking. She must of read my mind, because she said, "Kate, this journal is only for your eyes. You don't have to show it to me or anyone else."*

*That stopped my laughing and gave me a good feeling, like I have a secret friend I can tell anything to. I have to hide this book good though, because if Ma ever found it she'd kill me and Mrs. Renfrew, too. I might let*

*Kyle read it though, specially as he suggested where to hide it. (Under the loose floorboards beneath my bed.) Ma don't hold with writing or reading. When she watches us write, she says it looks like devil scratch and when Kyle read out loud from the bible the other night, she says he must have it memorized, that no boy of fourteen could read that good.*

*Daddy has some books hid for us in the spring house so Ma don't know about them. He pulls them out sometimes and lets us read instead of doing chores. Then he does the chores hisself so Ma don't know. He has done this since we was little, so Kyle and me read better than anybody round here.*

*Kyle says since Mrs. Renfrew is so nice to me I should stop doing the things I do in class that upset her, like pretending to pick imaginary bugs out of the air while she's trying to teach or playing like I got out of control hiccups. I told Kyle I can't help it. It's like something comes over me and the things just happen. Maybe Ma's right that I got the devil inside me. I wish one of her beatings would knock it out of me once and for all.*

*Kyle is sitting next to me as I write this, helping me spell. We are sitting on a wide branch of a giant old elm tree in our yard. From here we can see the house and a little ways into the woods, but nobody can see us.*

*Kyle says I should write about how crazy Mama is. We didn't know Mama was crazy til a few years ago when we heard the other children at school talking about her, saying things I guess they heard their Mamas say, like maybe she should be put away. She should be locked up, they said. Til then I thought all mothers talked to people who wasn't there and washed the sheets every day and the same clothes she washed out the day before. Once she got me out of my bed in the middle of the night to change my sheets though she done it already just that morning.*

*Mama is also afeard of indians and until Kyle convinced me that there wasn't any indians around here I was afeard myself. Some nights I wake up and hear the rocker going real slow on the porch. It creaks forward, then stops, creaks backward, then stops. I know if I tiptoe to my window, I'll see Mama in the rocker, her mouth part open like she's about to pray, her eyes wide and staring off, and acrost her chest the shotgun. She stays up like that all night sometime, watching for indians.*

*Mama cooks us dinner when she remembers but most often Kyle or I cook. Daddy gets angry if there ain't nothing to eat when he comes home from the mill and even though Daddy won't hit, his anger is worst than*

Mama's. Kyle says that's because it's real anger, not crazy anger. All I know is, when I'm in the back room where Kyle and me sleep and I hear the floorboards creak outside the door, my heart beats so hard it hurts and I hold my breath, waiting for Daddy to throw the door open and holler or Ma to race in with the strap.

*If Kyle didn't live here too I would run away.*

Last year Mrs. Renfrew had us write about a person we loved and most everybody wrote about their mother or father. Kyle and me wrote about each other. I said how when we was little he held my hand when I was learning to walk. (Mrs. Renfrew said that is unlikley—he was not even a year older than me and could barely walk hisself, but I remember this clearly.) I wrote he was a calm person and nice and he wrote I was fun but did things before I thought about what might come from them. Mrs. Renfrew said sometimes it's hard to believe we're from the same family.

We live out farther than most of the other children at school so Kyle and I mostly just stick with each other. That's fine with me since I don't like our classmates. I tell Kyle it's because they're stupid, but really I don't know what to say to them. Seems like when I finally say something, they just look at me like I'm as crazy as Mama. They like Kyle, though, and sometimes after chores he goes off with one of them, fishing or whatever. This is happening more and more lately and he always asks me to come along, but I don't want to. I just go home and sit in the tree, waiting for him. But once he gets there I pretend like I hardly notice he's come.

*I can't let Kyle read this journal after all.*

April 5, 1941

*Kyle told Mama the dictionary was his.*

We was in the kitchen eating the chicken I fried for dinner when Mama said as soon as dinner was over I would get my due. That's when Kyle said it was his, that he left it on my bed the day before. Kyle's eyes was hooked fast on Mama's face, his jaw was stiff like the day he told me Francie, our dog, died. I couldn't talk. The chicken felt catched in my chest.

Mama pushed her chair out with an awful scraping sound. Then she stood up and went to the pantry where she hangs the razer strap. Kyle looked right scared sitting there.

*Daddy coughed and pushed out his chair and though his chicken was only half ate he took the shotgun and went out the door, deserting us like he always does when Mama takes a fit.*

*Mama come back in the room with the strap held between her hands and stood next to Kyle's chair. She told him to stand up and he lifted his chair a little off the floor as he pushed it back so it didn't make that scraping sound.*

*"Drop your pants," Mama told him.*

*A red rash crept up Kyle's neck to the lobes of his ears. "Can we go in the other room?" he asked.*

*She hit the strap across his hands where they set on his belt buckle. "Now!" she hollered.*

*I tried to say, "Mama, it was mine," but the words came out only like a moan.*

*Kyle's hands was shaking as he undone his pants and lowered them to his knees. Mama pushed on his back til his elbows set on the table and his white backside stuck out and I hated her for embarussing him that way. I stood up and grabbed her hands.*

*"Mama, it was mine. The dictionary was mine!" I said.*

*She pushed me away and hit Kyle with the strap. His body jerked and I could already see the red squares on the back of his legs from the strap. I ran at her again, trying to pull the strap out of her hands but she took ahold of my shoulder and pushed me and I fell into the corner.*

*Tears was already starting down Kyle's cheeks. "You're making her angrier, Kate," he said.*

*I looked at Mama's eyes and they was hot and firey, like a crazy dragon's eyes. He was right. I was making it worst for him, so I ran outside and knelt in the garden with my hands over my ears. But I could still hear the strap and I counted to eleven before I vomited up the chicken. And she was still hitting him and he was screaming. I wanted her to die, just to drop dead right there in the kitchen. I hate her so much.*

*After Ma and Daddy was in bed, I fetched some aspirin for Kyle. He was lying on his stomach and though he was in bed since supper I knew he hadn't slept a wink. I knelt next to him while he arched his back to drink the water. It was cool in our room, but he was covered only by his sheet because he said the blanket hurt too much.*

*I thought I should look at his legs, maybe paint them with iodine, but he said no. He didn't want me to see what she done to him in the whipping that was sposed to be mine.*

*I sat on the floor watching his face in the moonlight coming through the window. He looks like me, only people say he's handsome and they don't say much about me, cept for how beautiful my hair is. Our hair is the same color, like wheat, and its real thick. But mine is very, very long, way past my waist. Mama trims just a little off it each time the moon is full to make it grow faster. People touch it sometimes like they can't help themselves, but they never say much about my face. Kyle and I both have blue eyes and too many freckles that look better on a boy than a girl, and we both have real long eyelashes. I sat there on the floor of our room, staring at Kyle's eyelashes while he fell asleep. They was wet and clumped together into four or five little points that made me cry. I stayed there next to him, my bead resting against the edge of his mattress til I saw the first little glimpse of dawn out the window, and I knew I better get back in my own bed before Mama come for the sheets.*

*May 1, 1941*

*Today Mrs. Renfrew read one of my stories out loud and then she said, in front of everybody, that I was one of the most intelligent students and the best writer she ever taught. Everybody stared at me and my face got hot enough to set my hair aflame. At recess, Sara Jane called me teacher's pet and everyone started saying it til they got tired and went off without me, the boys to throw the ball around, the girls in their little circle to talk about whatever it is they talk about. I took one of the books Mrs. Renfrew keeps in the classroom and sat on the step, reading. This is the way it is every recess.*

*After school, I ran home, not wanting to hear them call me teacher's pet again. I clumb into the tree, where I'm writing this right now, waiting for Kyle to come home. He took his fishing pole today, though, so he's probly at the river with Getch.*

*May 7, 1941*

*Today Mrs. Renfrew talked to me after school to tell me she's not coming back next year. (There is a rumer she's having a baby.) She said we'll have*



*a new teacher, Miss Crisp, and that Miss Crisp will not put up with me. "She will not tolerate your antics as I do, Katherine," she said. She told me I don't need to get in trouble to get the attention of other students, that I could get it in good ways, by writing my stories, by being a good student. I wanted to tell her she's too old to understand. I wanted to say that when she reads one of my stories to the class or says something nice about me, they hate me more. I hope the new teacher won't think I'm so good and will punish me when I'm evil. Mrs. Renfrew gave me another book, this one on grammar and punctuation. I thanked her and then took a deep breath and told her I lost the dictionary. She looked at me funny but didn't say anything, just got up and handed me her very own dictionary, the big one from her bookshelf. It has her name, Madeline Renfrew, written on the inside cover. I promised her that nothing would happen to this one. All the way home I worried that I couldn't fit both books plus my journal beneath the floorboards, but sure enough, they fit perfectly, like that space was just waiting for them to come fill it.*

*July 22, 1941*

*It is hard to describe how I feel tonight. I am writing this by lantern light in a cavern I found this afternoon. No one knows where I am, not even Kyle, and I'm afraid to go home. Home is more scary to me than whatever might be hiding in this cave.*

*I woke up early this morning with a strange ticklish warm feeling between my legs and when I touched down there my fingers come up covered with blood! I jumped out of bed and saw a round red stain on my sheet that had gone clear through to the mattress. A large red stain was across the back of my nightdress. I thought I was dying, that maybe I had a tumor.*

*I shook Kyle to wake him up and told him about the blood and showed him the stain on my nightdress and by then I was crying. I always thought that if I died, I died. But suddenly I thought about the dark nothingness of death and I was terrified. Kyle set me down and told me I wasn't dying. He said he knew what was happening to me and that it was normal. I still have trouble believing this as I sit here with blood soaking into the rag*

down there. I sure hope he's right. He said I am ministrating (I'm not sure of that word. He wasn't either and I can't find it in my dictionary). He said it happens to every girl once a month (!) so's she can have babies. He knows this from talking to Getch, who has three older sisters. I am sposed to wear a rag down there for a few days til the bleeding stops. Kyle said he thought I knew about this and I said how would I know? Mama would never talk to me about such a thing and I have no friends.

"You ought to have friends," Kyle said. "You deserve to have friends. But you have to try harder."

He's been saying this a lot lately and I wish he would quit and we could go back to the way things were before he started getting popular. I don't want to be bleeding! I don't want no babies. And every month! This is a life sentence as unjust as I've ever heard.

As Kyle was talking to me about friends, Mama come in our room for the sheets. We buttoned our lips and when she saw my sheet she let out a scream like she was bit by a snake. She quick pulled the sheet off the mattress and run out the door and we watched her from the window, running off the porch with the sheet bundled up against her chest. She carried it into the yard, set it in a crumpled heap near the tiger lilies and lit a match to it.

"If the blood's normal, why is Mama burning my sheet?" I asked, calm as ever.

But Kyle was at the dresser, pulling out my overalls and a shirt and stuffing them into my arms.

"Put these on and get out before she comes back," he said.

"I need a rag," I said. Blood was trickling down the inside of my leg and two small red circles of it was on the floorboards where I stood. Kyle stopped what he was doing and looked at the floor.

"Lord, Kate, I didn't think it would just pour out of you."

I started to cry again but he was ripping up one of his old shirts, pressing the pieces of cloth into my hands. I folded the cloth between my legs and leaned my hand on Kyle's shoulder as I stepped into one leg of my drawers, then the other. I pulled my nightdress over my head without thinking that it's been a long time since Kyle has seen me undressed, that my body has changed, the changes so slow that I had to look down at my own chest to

*see what he was staring at. He blushed and I come near to laughing at his embarrassment but I knew I had no time to waste laughing.*

*Mama bust in the room again afore I could get out but she didn't seem to notice me and Kyle was even there. She caught ahold of one corner of the mattress and drug it off the bed and out of the room. We heard it thumping down the porch steps and when I looked out the window she was dragging it out in the yard, with the round bloodstain already darkening in the sun. Daddy ran out of the house and grabbed ahold of her hands when she tried to set a match to the mattress. I was shamed that Daddy would know what was happening in my body. He took the matches from Mama and went back into the house while Mama sat on the ground and cried into her hands.*

*By this time Kyle was helping me climb out the window. "I'll meet you at the mill," he said. (Kyle and I are working at the mill this summer.)*

*I walked into the forest, looking for a path that would not hurt my bare feet because I left so fast I forgot my shoes! I knew I could not go to the mill today, not bleeding like this and in bare feet. I was in a part of the woods I knew well (the place where the woods drop down to the field by Ferry Creek), so I was surprised when I come acrost the cavern. All my life it's been here and I just now found it. I saw a squirrel disappear back of some bushes and when I got closer I saw that the bushes blocked the entrance to a cave. I pulled out one of the bushes with my bare hands and there it was, a hole stuck in the side of the hill. I walked inside as far as the sunshine would let me see and the air was wonderfully cool. I called "Hello!" and the sound echoed all around the walls.*

*After a bit, I went back home. Ma was gone, and Daddy and Kyle was at the mill so I took my time picking fruit from the bowl, from underneath so Ma wouldn't likely realize it was missing. I got my shoes and a lantern, the dictionary and grammar book and this journal and came back to the cave. My cave. When I first looked around the cave with my lantern, I felt rich. It is like the caverns the tourists visit at Luray though much littler. The first part is long and narrow with a pitched floor that takes you down to the main part, which is one enormous great room. I can see a little tunnel shooting off the back. This great rooms got reddish colored rocks coming out of the ceiling and floor. I know they are called stalactites and stalagmites because I learnt that when I been to Luray. In some places*

*the ceiling is real high and the stalactites that come from it is broad and the stalagmites that climb towards them just as great. In some places the stalactites and stalagmites (writing them words makes my hand tired) meet and make walls that look like fancy velvet curtains and there is also a pool that reflects about a million baby stalactites from the ceiling above it and the water is so still that I couldn't at first tell if it was a reflection or a million little stalagmites coming out of the ground. I don't think I ever seen a more beautiful place than this cavern. Some folks think of paradise as green and full of growing things, but today I found my own Garden of Eden.*

*I made two more trips back to the house and now I have here my mattress, turned over so the stain don't show and some candles, which I set all round the cave on rocky ledges. I also brung a blanket and some rags from the rag bag for my female problem. Kyle didn't say how long this ministrating will last. I wisht I understood it better. What part of me is bleeding? And what has the blood to do with babies? I could believe as easy some spirit has taken ahold of me as I can believe what Kyle's telling me.*

*I'm going to spend the night here in my garden, though I wish now I left a note for Kyle. He'll be worried since I didn't show up at the mill neither. I am a coward, afeard of going to my own home. The strap scares me worst than ever.*

*I'm going to turn out the lantern now and lie here in the darkness. I'm not scared here. Nothing in my garden can hurt me.*

*July 23, 1941*

*I went back to the house real early this morning and snuck into my window. I woke Kyle with my finger to his lips and when he opened his eyes I saw they was red and I felt terrible for the worry I caused him.*

*"Where you been?" he asked. He sounded angry but I knew it was really worry I heard.*

*"I had to stay away," I said.*

*"No you don't," he said. He looked excited. "Mama said yesterday you're a woman now, you're too growed for her to whip."*

*I knew Kyle wouldn't lie to me but it was hard to believe Mama would say that. Kyle swore she did, that she was real calm after her fit yesterday.*

*"Please stay, Katie," Kyle said. "I promise I won't let her whip you."*

*I was real nervous and I just set on the chair in our room waiting for breakfast time to come.*

*I showed up for breakfast like nothing was different. I was so scared I couldn't touch my eggs or grits and no one said a word til after Daddy left for the mill. Then Ma stood up and begun clearing the table and finally she spoke.*

*"I'm glad you had the decency to get rid of that wicked mattress, Katherine," she said.*

*I was afeard to turn around and look at her and I could hear her clattering the pans in the basin.*

*"You're growed now," she said. "Too old to whup."*

*Kyle smiled at me, but then I saw his eyes get big, his lips go flat. He leaned back in his chair and hollered, "Ma, no!" Before I could turn to look, Ma took ahold of my hair and snapped my head back and then I heard the sound of the scissors as she worked them right close to my scalp and in seconds my hair lay in a thick shiny yellow pile on the floor.*

*Ma set the scissors on the table, calm as you please, and walked out of the room. For a minute I stared at the hair on the floor and felt tears trying to push out my eyes. Then all of a sudden, I didn't care. I looked at the hair and didn't feel a thing. I touched the spikey, hacked off ends of my hair close to my scalp and felt nothing at all. Kyle jumped from his chair and grabbed up the hair from the floor. He held it to my head as though he could attach it back on some how.*

*"Leave it be," I said. "I want to show you something. A place I found."*

*"But, Kate, your hair." Kyle looked upset I wasn't crying or mad like he thought I ought to be.*

*I stood up. "Come with me," I said.*

*Before we reached the cavern I made him swear he would never tell nobody what I was about to show him. I pulled aside the brush I set against the entrance and led him inside and when I lit the lantern he let out his breath in a long whistle. I could see he was amazed and I felt proud.*

*"I can get away from her here," I said.*

*He walked around like I did the day before, touching the stalagmites, staring into the reflecting pool.*

*"You can't stay out here," he said.*

*“Just sometimes,” I said, though I had been thinking how good it would be to sleep here on hot summer nights.*

*“We have to get to the mill,” Kyle said.*

*I touched the back of my hair and the ends of it felt like broom bristles against my palm. “I’m staying here,” I said.*

*I spent the rest of the day turning the cavern into my hide-a-way. The Smiths’ house has been deserted since last year when they left for West Virginia, so I took a chair and a table from there and drug them back here. I found more candles there too and a lap desk filled with pencils and paper. There’s a long rock above the reflecting pool—sort of a ledge that makes a perfect bookshelf for my dictionary and grammar book. Now they can stand upright like they is sposed to be. High above the place where I lay my mattress there is a deep hole in the wall and this is where I’ll keep my journal.*

Ben Alexander sat on the bed in his cabin high above Lynch Hollow, a small battered address book on his knee. He took another swallow of whiskey from the bottle on the floor and stared at the name on the page in front of him. Valerie Collins. She was the last one. Over the past few months, he'd called everyone he'd ever known. Valerie was his last hope.

She used to send him cards at Christmas. She'd address them to both him and Sharon, but he knew they were directed to him alone. The cards were always a picture of Valerie with her salukis. As the years wore on she'd taken on the look of her dogs, sleek and long-limbed. Her nose grew thinner and more pointed, her hair longer, silkier, blacker. Sharon laughed as she followed Valerie's transformation from woman to canine, never catching the meaning behind the cryptic messages: Hope to see you soon, or Love you. He knew Valerie meant the singular you. She didn't know Sharon and didn't care to.

He took another taste of the whiskey and moved the phone from the apple crate he used as a nightstand to his bed. Surely Valerie would want to hear from him.

The phone was army green, cracked and held together with

masking tape that threatened to break with each turn of the rotary dial.

“Hello?” Her voice was soft. If a saluki could talk . . .

“Valerie?” He sat up straight.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Ben Alexander, Valerie.”

There was that heavy silence he was growing accustomed to. The name would register, the newspaper images of his face, bearded then and lined with fatigue, would race through Valerie’s head.

“It’s late, Ben. I’m on my way to bed.”

He shot ahead in desperation. “I was wondering if we could get together? I’m living in the Shenandoah Valley now, but I could drive up to D.C.—it’s been a long time—I’m divorced now. I don’t know if you knew that.”

Silence again. Then a sigh. A drawing in of breath and courage. “Ben, the honest truth is I don’t ever want to see you. You must have really changed over the years to do what you did. Please don’t call me again.”

He jumped when she slammed her phone down, and it was a moment before he set his own receiver back in its cradle.

He sat on the edge of the bed with his hands folded in his lap for many minutes. The light behind the open door of the bathroom pulled at him seductively, and he pictured the bottle of Valium on the edge of the sink. He’d gotten the prescription filled months ago, but he hadn’t taken a single pill. Twenty still in there. They would do the trick. How long would it take Kyle to find him? When he didn’t show up at the site in the morning, Kyle would assume he’d overslept or had some urgent errand. But by afternoon Kyle would start to wonder. And by evening maybe he’d take a drive up here and find him. Ben would leave him a note, thanking him for being the one person who believed him, for offering him the job at the digs when no one else would hire him, for being a friend. Ben shuddered. He couldn’t do that to Kyle.

He took another drink. Drinking too much these days. And alone. Little option there. The only people who would condescend to drink with him were not the kind of people he wanted as friends. People



who looked at him knowingly, who winked as though they understood how a man could do what he'd been accused of doing.

He'd hoped that here in the Valley he could escape the knowing eyes. But one or two people knew and they'd told others. Sometimes he felt as much a leper here as he'd been in Annapolis.

The phone rang and he had a brief flutter in his chest at the old fantasy: somehow Bliss had stumbled across his phone number, and when he picked up the receiver he would hear her five-year-old voice, perplexed, asking, "Daddy, aren't you ever coming home from this trip?"

He lifted the phone to his ear. It was Kyle. "Sorry to call you so late," he said, "but my niece arrived tonight."

Ben said nothing, still caught in the fantasy of his daughter.

"Ben? Remember? She's working on a film about her mother?"

"Yes. Right." Eden Riley.

"She'll need to get a feel for the site. It was so much a part of her mother's life, and you can use an extra pair of hands this summer, can't you?"

Ben pictured the Valium and turned his back on the gaping bathroom door. "Does she know anything about the site?" he asked.

"Nothing, but she'll learn fast. You have no objection, do you?"

"No, of course not." He wanted to ask, so he could steel himself for meeting her, "Does she know about me?" but he couldn't. He would know by the look in her eyes if Kyle had told her or not. "Sure, it's fine. Just send her over in the morning."

He hung up and carried the bottle over to the sofa. He turned on the TV, made a quick tour of the channels, and turned it off. He lay back on the sofa and stared at the brown water stain on the wood-plank ceiling.

He hated being alone. He'd managed to avoid it most of his life. He and his older brother, Sam, had been inseparable as kids and close to their parents. He'd never gone through the usual adolescent rebellion. His parents flowed too easily with the punches. But they'd been dead five years now, and he was glad they hadn't lived to see this past year and a half. He liked to think they would have been certain of his innocence, but he wasn't sure. It was better not to know, to

imagine they would have stuck by him as Sam and Jen had done. Sam and Jen had been his life support during the trial. They still saw Bliss, calling him after each visit to say how cute she looked, how unscarred she seemed to be. “She’s fine,” Jen would tell him. “And she asks about you.” He wondered if she still did, or if Sam and Jen just told him that. It had been a long time, and kids’ memories . . . well. Plus she had a new dad now. Jeff. Did she call him Daddy, with the dimple on the second syllable he always used to watch for?

Sam and Jen had begged him to stay in Annapolis after his stint in prison. “You need to be near us,” Sam said. Perhaps they knew what he hadn’t known then. The ostracism he would face. Shunned by expeditions, he applied for openings at half a dozen universities but was turned down by all of them. And then the call came from Kyle.

“Why didn’t you let me know?” Kyle admonished in the familiar soft voice Ben knew from the years as his student, the years as his friend. “I heard about it through the grapevine. But I wanted to hear it from you.”

So Ben told him as calmly as he could about the accusations, the trial, the tide of evidence he felt helpless to stem as it mounted against him, the prison term. Then he told Kyle about losing his job, not being able to find work anywhere.

“I know you like a son, Ben.” Kyle’s voice was sure, full of conviction. “I wouldn’t care what evidence they showed me, I could never believe you were guilty. I can offer you a job here—the arthritis doesn’t give me much time in the pits anymore. I know it’s a pathetic offer after what you’re used to. Please don’t be offended.”

“No, that’ll be great.” Just that day he’d been turned down to muck out stables.

At first he stayed close to Kyle and Lou. He was so relieved to feel trusted and he knew their sympathy was genuine. The three of them went to see *Heart of Winter* shortly after his arrival, when he was still numb from the months in prison. That movie changed his image of Eden Riley. She was known for her portrayal of angels and earth mothers and, Bliss’s personal favorite, the beautiful witch in *Child of the North Star*. But now he could picture Eden only in that hotel room scene with Michael Carey. One sexy scene in an otherwise

unsexy movie. One sexy departure from a tenaciously unsexy career. He couldn't scrape from his mind the image of Carey undressing her from the inside out. Expertly. Slip, stockings, panties, bra, leaving her in a silky black dress open just enough to tease the camera with a glimpse of her breasts.

Ben had been keenly aware of Kyle and Lou sitting next to him, watching the woman they'd raised through her teen years, the woman they adored and rarely saw, making love to the rakish Michael Carey. He heard Lou's muffled "Oh, my" and Kyle's chuckled response before he was swallowed up by the images on the screen. There was a hushed stillness in the theater, an electric tension that seemed rooted in his loins. After months of feeling nothing at all he was stunned by the aching in his body, by the yearning in his chest that went far beyond the sexual. And for a few brief moments he kidded himself into thinking that life might still hold something for him, that perhaps he had not lost everything in that Annapolis courtroom.

Then he'd returned to his cabin, to the silent telephone, the numbing emptiness. Kyle and Lou had their own lives to live and he could not spend every evening with them. He tried his old friends one by one and their rejection of him stung. No one bothered to feign politeness. He was not even worthy of common courtesy in their eyes. He'd become a vehicle for their disdain about everything that was wrong in the world.

He saw no way out of his loneliness. The whiskey had become an escape for him, but he took no pleasure in the taste or the burn or anything other than the temporary oblivion it offered. The pills could provide something more permanent.

But he'd promised Kyle a favor. He'd help Eden with the digs, show her what to look for, how to catalog what she found. It was the least he could do for Kyle.